Altery, Religion, and the Metaphysics of Postmodernism

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism privileges figures of negativity, figures defined under such terms as alterity, absence, aporia and the Other. The ostensible function of these tropes is the disruption of logocentrism through the introduction of the indeterminate. However, by arguing that the ‘metaphysics of presence’ is all that exists in social communication, alterity can be reinterpreted as a metanarrative trope whose language and function repeat attributes previously defined by theology. Much postmodern fiction, with its indeterminate style, acts like a negative theology by systematically negating other thematic presences in the text in order to present alterity itself as a dominant with final jurisdiction over all areas of language and being. Because of its dominance, this alterity comes to exercise conceptual powers akin to the metaphysical expressions of the divine: ineffability, infinity, omnipotence, atemporality, ethical force. The religious and mystical references that often crowd postmodern fiction, therefore, support alterity’s shift from the aporetic to the transcendent. By examining metaphysical alterity in postmodern treatments of character, death, allegory and history, I argue that postmodern literature is a limited theological discourse that questions postmodern pluralism and populism. The reified negative has such a privilege in postmodernism that it creates an aporetic politics that is only capable of representing otherness rather than others. I suggest that this is a ‘natural’ philosophy for late-capitalism in that it refuses broad social praxis in favour of a value-free market and anti-foundational argument. I set aside Salman Rushdie as someone whose fiction manages to use metaphysics and fragmentation in a non-transcendental manner. Rushdie locates meaning in the dialogue between the metaphysical and the material, rather than an abstracted absence and presence, and thus he is able to portray metanarratives without transcendence or dogmatism. As such, Rushdie shows that postmodernism’s insistence on alterity fails to engage meaningfully with social conditions.
Introduction
‘In the Country of the Last Things’: Postmodernity, Religion and Alterity.

Are we now living in the last days of postmodern ideas? Has the original postmodern desire for multiplicity crumbled in the face of nationalist politics, economic hegemonies and international conflicts? Just as Lyotard, Hassan and Meyer once heralded the death of the humanist logos, there are now resonant voices which write equally confident obituaries for the expressions and possibilities of postmodernism:

I think postmodernism is now dead as a theoretical concept and, more important, as a way of developing cultural frameworks influencing how we shape theoretical concepts. With its basic enabling arguments now sloganized and its efforts to escape binaries binarized, it is unlikely to generate much significant new work.¹

Here Charles Altieri envisages postmodernism’s aesthetic, theoretical and social terminus, where the language of multiplicity and difference becomes anachronistic and banal. His assured vision of the postmodern dead-end seems to reflect a growing caginess in many people about postmodernism’s ability to meet its original liberatory promise, especially in the need to transfer theory into meaningful cultural and political action. More particularly, postmodernism has unavoidably wandered into the standardisation and codification of its difference and contradiction. Indeed, it does seem to be the case that however much postmodernism has embraced the drive towards contradiction, it has also created identifiable metanarratives of its own in its modes of language and its codes of accessibility.
Formulating the metanarratives of postmodernity leads us to perhaps the most important dilemma in contemporary theory. Is it actually possible to express difference and absence without relying on a general return to totalisation and presence? This question is not simply answered by poststructuralism’s tenet that we can never escape the ‘metaphysics of presence’. What needs to be reconsidered is whether the metaphysics of presence is all there is within linguistic systems that have their telos in communication between social subjects. I will not go on to claim in this thesis that there is indeed an indelible bond between word and object. Yet by gravitating towards a Bakhtinian sociology, the basis of my argument will be that the ‘free play’ of language is always grounded within the communicative demands of a particular social body, be that community local, national, or international. By applying this perspective, I shall in turn contend that absence and alterity, arguably the enigmatic cornerstones of postmodern theory, are figures formed in the social tradition seemingly at the top of the anti-foundationalists’ hit-list — religion. Postmodern theory does not sever the roots of totalisation; it repeats totalisation while trying to spiritually set itself apart from critical engagement.

Perhaps at its source postmodernism requires a new honesty, where instead of focusing on the aporetic and differential, it questions what presences it actually creates in language and culture through its own theoretical voice. Universals are pervasive and necessary, and postmodernism has a peculiar and limited range of metanarratives. David Harvey argues that even in the midst of the most demonstrably pluralising discourse, a kind of aesthetic and philosophical purity filters back in and reconnects multiplicity with universal concepts:

The cracks in an intellectual edifice that open the way to the empowerment of aesthetics over ethics are important. Deconstructionism, like any system of thought and any definition of an overwhelming symbolic order, internalizes certain contradictions which at a certain point
become more and more self-evident. When Lyotard, for example, seeks to keep his radical hopes alive by appeal to some pristine and unsullied concept of justice, he proposes a truth statement that lies above the mêlée of interest groups and their cacophony of language games. When Hillis Miller is forced to appeal to liberal and positivist values to defend his mentor Paul de Man against what he considers the calumny of false accusations, then he, too, invokes universals.²

Harvey not only accuses postmodern theorists of being deaf to the full philosophical register of their convictions, but also perceives a latent transcendentalism in the sublimities often inscribed in postmodern language itself. Such sublimities, I shall argue, are usually the inhabitants of the concept of alterity. ‘Alterity’ (along with the synonymous terms ‘other’, ‘difference’, ‘absence’ etc.), is the central interest of this thesis because the term seems to have become the primary trope of a world ostensibly without totalisation or logos. Alterity is discursively offered as the nothing which is an absolute something, an absence perfectly within and beyond conception and description. Yet it is precisely this status of the ‘within’ and the ‘beyond’ which ultimately destabilises the entire concept of the absolute other or otherness. Alterity is not a background radiation of negativity lingering on from the postmodern big-bang that destroyed the logos. Instead, alterity seems to be a distinct presence within the postmodern sense of self-identity and also a theme which performs specific functions within postmodern negotiations of culture, society and art. More generally, I shall claim that in many ways alterity is a figure which acts as a kind of intellectual crisis-management by ineffectively trying to walk the line between social action and a discomfort with universals. Hans Bertens sees this ethical tightrope as a marked signature of the contemporary condition:

After an overlong period in which Enlightenment universalist representationalism dominated the scene, and a brief, but turbulent period in which its opposite, radical anti-representationalism, captured the imagination, we now find ourselves in the difficult position of trying to honor the claims of both, of seeing the values of both representation and anti-representation, of both consensus and dissensus.³

Alterity is one way in which postmodernism attempts to arbitrate this indecision, as
otherness is used to reclaim a particular mode of social identity while simultaneously appearing to defy rigid orders of conceptualisation. Claiming that alterity provides basic ontological ingredients is doubtless anathema to the postmodernists, for solid identity seems inherent within the metaphysical tradition from which postmodernism has tried to escape. Yet I will contend that alterity is squarely within ontological, metaphysical and even theological language in terms of both its description and, more importantly, its function. Alterity and its equivalent terms are ideas which anchor postmodern identity to major ontotheological traditions, traditions which supply the foundationalism generally denied by postmodernism. The spiritual allusions of alterity will lead me through a discussion of the theological heritage of otherness to claim that far from disrupting all logocentricities, alterity actually reactivates notions of the oldest logos in global thought.

A brief history of alterity

Before venturing into an overview of postmodern alterity, some definitions of the term might prove useful, though problematic. Defining alterity is awkward not so much for the claim that it is that which escapes representation (I do not believe this to be the case), but because it has co-opted such a variety of roles and capacities. However, for the time being, we can define alterity as that which eludes and unsettles the authority of totalising metanarratives, or, in Derridean terms, that which occludes any final confidence in a ‘transcendental signified’.

Alterity is always that which remains ‘other’ than presence, a continual silence and absence which prevents the closure of language, meaning and reference. As such, it is a useful concept for postmodernism, for it can act as a guarantor to the open-endedness of postmodern play and jouissance.
Negativity suggests itself as an alternative term for alterity, though it possesses the theological aura which alterity ambiguously attempts to resist. Bearing in mind Christian traditions of negative theology, which I shall consider in more depth later in this chapter, negativity suggests a process of negating certain presences in order to attain some comprehension of that which is ironically beyond comprehension. In a postmodern context, Wolfgang Iser and Sanford Budick see negativity as speaking for a radically present absence within language:

> In its undetermined proliferation, *negativity* speaks for something that is arguably as real as anything else we know, even if it can only be located by carving out a void within what is being said.\(^5\)

Iser and Budick have a strong regard for negativity as active influence, something which asserts itself as a functional quality within a text. Moreover, through a retrieval of absence from language, negativity becomes reified and determinable, an unusual presence in itself. This perspective speaks with all the mystical resonance of a negative theology, a perspective which Derrida initially resisted (though perhaps less so in recent work) when applied to poststructuralist textuality and *différence*.\(^6\) I shall suggest in this thesis that negativity and alterity, indeed all terms which allude to the aporiae within full presence, actually perform the same functions for the discourse of postmodernism.\(^7\) Briefly stated, these functions are:

1) to maintain the centrality of the subject;
2) to retain a belief in meaning that accords with radical individualism;
3) to replay theological themes as a way of protecting against nihilism and deriving ethical, social and psychological authority.

Points 2) and 3) are linked by the argument that the return to metaphysical origins is part of postmodern theory's general complicity with capitalist economic philosophy
and an attempt to hold onto an authority protected from genuine social debate.

Concentration on alterity and negativity is, of course, far from original to postmodernity. If we want to discover the roots of alterity, then it is to religion that we must look. Almost all religious traditions, be they oriental or occidental, mono-, poly- or non-theistic, have embraced or experimented with philosophies of negativity, or the via negativa. Veselin Kesick gives a sound working definition of the via negativa as a theology that 'refuses to identify God with any human concept or knowledge'.

Digging into this definition, we can see that the negative theology is radically aware of the incommensurability between God, and our ideas and words about God. The negative divinity resides in a total transcendence and absolute silence that denies the possibility of union between the human concept and divine presence. Probably the earliest exponent of this theology in the Western world was the sixth-century Syrian philosopher Dionysius the Areopagite. Building upon the Greek privileging of 'pure' spirit, Dionysius argued that as knowledge of God was always inadequate and partial, it was only through the 'silence of unknowing' that the divine could be intuited - though union always remained impossible. Dionysius proclaimed the trans-rational nature of a God that remained beyond the analogies of affirmative theology, but still paradoxically demanded the application of reason in worship and quest. Traditions of negative theology have been expressed by particular thinkers as Johannes Scotus Erigena (c.810-880), Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), yet entire faiths such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism have always demonstrated negative tendencies in their systems of worship and epistemology. Though I will consider these beliefs in more detail below, it is worth remembering that postmodernism has not exactly exploded onto the scene with
groundbreaking originality. If anything, postmodernism has to be read within the context of aporetic traditions that have been around as long as the existence of recorded history. Remembering this fact helps us to discern which metaphysical premises have been carried forward within the postmodern sense of indeterminacy and otherness.

However, to trace the theoretical particulars of postmodern alterity our starting points are far more proximate to our own age than the origins of the world's faiths. If we take our chronology back to the forefathers of postmodernism, Nietzsche and Heidegger, many of the mystical foundations of theories of absence and negativity are already laid. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger play with ideas of the loss of metaphysical certainty in such ontological mainstays as God and Self. With the death of these structures comes a consciousness of living under their absence, the logos being reduced to a ghost which haunts the way we construct meaning, but which can no longer assure that that meaning has an ultimate referent.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche's madman declares us all to be the murderers of God and unveils a vision of nihilism that prefigures the anxieties of the postmodern nomad and the ontologically disruptive confrontation with the other:

> Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?[^9]

Nietzsche's initial mood with regard to the disappearance of God is bleak and apocalyptic. The 'empty space' left after God's destruction is the absence of metaphysical security, though it is worth noting that such a void is described as a space in which we move and a 'breath' that we 'feel'. The important point, one which I shall develop as my analysis progresses, is that Nietzsche's theological absence,
though imaginative, possesses a cognitive tangibility to which we relate and respond in a newly defined ontological isolation. For in accord with Mark C. Taylor's definition of the 'philosophy of the subject', Nietzsche's 'creator God dies and is resurrected in the creative subject'. The alterity that remains after the death of God becomes the key presence in a new history of selfhood. For Nietzsche relies on the presence of that which somehow remains after death. Though the traditional God of Judaeo-Christian metaphysics may have been negated, the activity of the negation always remains as a surrogate for the metaphysical inscriptions that have apparently been lost. Extending this observation into poststructuralist theory, Derrida makes it clear that the grave is not necessarily the end of life and influence:

I do not at all believe in what today is so easily called the death of philosophy (nor, moreover, in the simple death of whatever - the book, man, or god, especially since, as we all know, what is dead wields a very specific power).

At the core of Derrida's project is the revelation of metaphysical afterlives. Deconstruction proceeds by not only demonstrating aporiae in the text, but also by illustrating how metaphysical foundations emerge even from those texts that attempt to banish them. Thus what both Nietzsche and Derrida prove, in their different ways, is that the divine is never lost, even when it is murdered.

Derrida's sensitivity to this issue led to his targeting of Heidegger as one whose entire philosophy is imprisoned within the ontotheological tradition it tries to escape. Heidegger is particularly important when tracing any history of postmodern alterity because of his explicit use of death and absence as that which reveals the singularity of the individual. Rather than positing some explicit presence as the distinguishing mark of the character or the self, for Heidegger it is the ultimate void of death which defines our Being. The Heideggerian individual lives in an 'anxiety' that
reveals the nothingness governing the encounter with Being:

The nothing that anxiety brings before us unveils the nullity that determines Dasein in its ground - which is its being thrown into death.¹⁴

Heidegger’s perspective on death is important because it advances non-presence as that which truly exposes the nature of selfhood, an idea which Derrida has expanded into an aporetic moral theory in *The Gift of Death*. For Heidegger, ‘nothing’ is ‘the complete negation of the totality of beings’ (Heidegger, *Writings*, p.100) and death seems to offer the physical expression of this negation and yet, ironically, a certain sense of possibility and location. Derrida has accused Heidegger of building his conception of the *dasein* on an ontotheological ground and of falling into transcendentalism.¹⁵ Such accusations do seem easily vindicated, especially when considering Heidegger’s intense religious involvement in ways of Buddhist spirituality and negative mysticism. The parallels between, for example, Heideggerian ‘authenticity’ and Mahayanan Buddhism’s practised ‘self-emptying’ are more than coincidental, so it is not surprising that Derrida has drawn a metaphysical subtext from Heidegger’s work.¹⁶ Yet Heidegger provides a model for the subsequent history of postmodern alterity. For I would argue that any discourse that focuses on alterity is intrinsically and overtly ontotheological. For once alterity is descriptively treated as a thing in itself, then it inhabits the transcendentalism of pure philosophy and theological purity. As we move on from Heidegger into the postmodern period proper, we shall see how alterity, otherness and absence act as figures of theological activity that ground meaning in a perfectly ancient mode of expression.

Before launching into a description of postmodernism’s ‘theology of alterity’, a note on periodisation is necessary. Defining the launch date of postmodernism is notoriously problematic, and my definition may appear as insecure as any other.
However, as I claim that postmodernism is founded upon theories of negativity, I resist drawing my start line across the industrial reflections of Toynbee and Hudnut in the 1930s and 1940s. Postmodernism, as we shall see, does ride on the back of a particular capitalist economy, but its theoretical perspective is defined by moments when alterity is judged as the telos not only of this economy, but also of all thought, action and presence. Thus my periodisation begins with the growing theories of indeterminacy and anti-humanism in the 1960s and 70s, theories marked by such voices as Hassan, Meyer, Olson, Lyotard and Derrida. Though these names cover an impressive diversity of styles and foci, they appear united through a common attempt to negotiate a world without the presences of metaphysical humanism. The dominant by-product of this negotiation is that concepts of absence become absolute: all thought must redesign itself under the realisation of a total ontological void.

So postmodernism begins when alterity takes precedence over philosophical activity. Lyotard in particular makes alterity a cornerstone in his vision of a new socio-cultural praxis. From the anti-rational ‘energetics’ of Discours, figure and Economie libidinale to the postmodern sublime and the linguistic differend, Lyotard’s theoretical trajectory is linked to a radical exposition of the ‘unpresentable’. His concept of the postmodern sublime advocates the aesthetic representation of that which now exists beyond the structures of the metanarrative. So, for Lyotard:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies the solace of good forms ... that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable.17

Lyotard’s famous association of the postmodern with the ‘unpresentable’ signals a general empathy between postmodernism and a visualised sense of the other. Lyotard does not see the recognition of the unpresentable as something to be feared but
something to be focused upon and explored. His paradoxical eulogy of that which is beyond presentation discovers a willingness to co-operate with the implications of absence and draw such absence out from within artistic form. Perhaps the significant shift from Heidegger and Nietzsche to postmodernism is that in postmodernism alterity is less about the absences beneath identity and more about playing within the void left by the disappearance of identity itself. This leads to the 'schizophrenic' and 'nomadic' personality advocated by Deleuze and Guattari, a personality based on the complete fragmentation of being:

There is no being beyond becoming, nothing beyond multiplicity, neither multiplicity nor becoming are appearances or illusion. Deleuze’s alterity is the temporality underlying all things which prohibits a solid identity or foundational concept. Alterity becomes that which denies permanence, though in the cases of Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari this is not a cause for despair but an euphoric turn to play, jouissance and the sublime. Their celebratory affirmations of absence are shared with a whole community of postmodern theorists including Hassan, Meyer and Fiedler. The space left by the death of the metanarrative becomes a space of political and social, even psychological, exploration as the now nomadic subject attempts to examine what is beyond conceptual 'territorialisation'. Of course, not all have seen joy and light in this shift. Balanced against utopian postmodern impulses are those voices who regard the arrival of the 'depthless' society (to use Fredric Jameson's term) as threat rather than liberation. Baudrillard's attention to the significance of surfaces leads through to such a darker perspective. Baudrillard's vision of the 'hyperreal' — 'models of a real without origins or reality' — positions the postmodern individual as a victim of representation, a subject dissolved into the new reality of the unstable sign. Alongside Jameson, Baudrillard
sees a postmodern society where absence is a dystopian condition that can leave the subject bereft of place or self-possession.

The common ground of all these views is in the aporetic response to the loss of either God or Self, with the author also disappearing as a corollary of the two. 22 Thus we are left with a postmodern discourse which has assembled a collection of terms meant to underwrite every presence with the incomprehensible vacuum of an absent logos. As postmodern subjects, we live in a curious condition, fully aware of our own depthless world and nature. Thus we come under the jurisdiction of what Beckett termed the 'Unnameable':

perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either... 23

The alterity of the Unnameable is the indefinable 'middle': a place which is no-place, caught within an unstoppable play of representation, surface and self. Yet Beckett's language masks a curious power of self-consciousness. The subject may be neither inside nor outside, but the product of not belonging is the ability to see all sides, to float in and out of worlds through the power of a realised alterity. I shall argue that alterity is just one of the many apophatic terms applied within postmodernism which, far from disrupting notions of self and God, actually retain a sense of ontological stability and even theological security. Alterity does not signify the limitless play of meaning, but an abstract foundation which serves to secure meaning rather than effect its disruption. I shall open this argument with an examination of theology's vigorous involvement with postmodern thought, especially its association with deconstructionist criticism. By exposing the metaphysical partnership between
postmodernism and theology, and through an analysis of the religious heritage of
Derrida's thought, we will be able to read alterity not as the subversion of
metaphysics, but as the repackaging of metaphysical priorities for a new age.

Postmodern theology

The term 'postmodern theology' suggests an instant contradiction. Postmodernism's
unflagging war against totalising narratives has often meant that religious notions of
God, Word, and Scripture appear as the most intolerable form of logocentrism. Why
this is so, is clear from Derrida's definition of God as:

the name and the element of that which makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-
present self-knowledge. (Derrida, Grammatology, p.98)

Though we shall see later that Derrida's theological critique is not strictly an assault
on religion, this line from Of Grammatology neatly illustrates why theology has been
targeted as an enemy of postmodernism. God appears to stand as the final, absolute
presence where the signifier is promised an ultimate rest and the determination of
meaning is guaranteed. For the postmodernist, God appears to tyrannise multiplicity
with its endless hegemony over reference. In many senses, postmodernism does seem
justified in this opinion, as divinity has frequently been summoned as the assurance
that thought and theology are working in the confidence of some eternal and stable
referred. Yet before we move on to examine the strategies and significance of strictly
postmodern readings of theology, we must offer some cautions about interpreting
traditions of religious thought.

We have already seen how alterity has historical roots in negative theology, yet
the religions of orthodoxy have had an equally important association with absence. If
we approach religion in history, rather than as a philosophical abstraction, we find the
frequent realisation that God is as much to do with absence as presence. In the Judeao-Christian scriptures there are many references to the God who is forever absent and mediated. The Fall itself, so significant to Derrida's thought, signifies that humankind no longer has unmediated knowledge of God and thus lives amidst the alterity of his withdrawal and the play of language later initiated at Babel. And in Exodus 33, Moses sees the glory of God pass by but is not allowed to see his face: the otherness of God remains assured and his presence is never complete or direct. The sense of God as otherness pervades the Pentateuch, the Prophets and in the New Testament, where we encounter Paul's most famous expression of the absence of God in 1 Corinthians 13:12: 'For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face'. Paul's God is always masked and mediated, a situation that places faith continually in the realm of what Kevin Hart terms 'a speculative discourse'. Hart observes that Christianity dwells within the domination of signs resulting from the fall of man. So it is that St. Augustine describes humankind's imprisonment in a regio dissimilitudinis, a place which Hart translates as 'a land of unlikeness'. In this land, detached from God's presence, all we have are signs which forever point to spiritual unity, but never close the immeasurable gap between the divine and the human.

It may be objected that though knowledge of God is mediated through the veil of scripture, God still provides the reassurance that full presence does exist and unmediated reference is still possible. This objection is certainly true in that Western religion, especially Christianity, has often placed the operations of the spirit over those of the letter. Yet while the spirit can be vaunted over the letter, particularly in New Testament theology, there must also be the recognition that the Judaeo-Christian religions are undeniably temporal and eschatological. Biblical religions are
constructed upon the sequential movements of nation, community and historical redemption, a fact which often militates against the easy representation of the divine as a presence aloof from differentialism and temporality. Brian Ingraffia has argued that Nietzsche’s, Heidegger’s and Derrida’s critiques of metaphysics are more centred upon the dualities of Platonic and Philonic thought than the eschatological and therefore temporal processes of Christian revelation. Though Ingraffia is guilty of presuming an original Christianity detached from its post-New Testament development, his argument is a useful caution against equating God’s transcendence with an unchanging presence. Instead, the concept of God demonstrates not only how temporality and logocentrism are perfectly compatible, but also how absence and metaphysics form an easy alliance.

What is important here is that in many ways religion can accept absence and lack as primary constituents of the divine personality. Indeed, the alterity of the divine in many ways ensures the play between theological meaning and spiritual practicality, whereby the ambiguous logos explodes determination yet still supplies metaphysical reference, albeit in an negative form. It is at this point that we start to see how the apophatic elements of theology reveal important implications for postmodernity. For if religious alterity offers a foundational otherness, an otherness that locates as much as it disrupts, we might question whether postmodern alterity has accrued a similar function of centring postmodern ideologies and protecting its implicit claims to meaning.

The similarities between poststructuralist notions, such as the trace and difféance, and religious alterity have provoked various theological readings of postmodernism. Critics such as Mark C. Taylor, John Millbank, Carl Raschke,
Thomas Altizer and John Caputo have explored the hazy middle ground between a sense of otherness and a sense of the divine. A distinctive trend has been to absorb Derridean theory into a form of non-theistic spirituality. Mark Taylor, for example, is famed for his 'a/theology', in which otherness is affirmed as a sacred space of difference playing between totalising metanarratives and the Other. Taylor's postmodern theology is not a worship as such, but a celebration of a postmodern Scripture that dances on the restless grave of totalities. Gillian Rose describes Taylor's theology as a 'nomadic ecstasy', and distinguishes it against John Millbank's more spiritually inscribed 'ecclesial eschatology'. Millbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, proceeds from a rather Levinasian concern with the violence he understands as intrinsic in secular ontology. Millbank sees postmodernism as a solution to such violence through a 'transcendental difference' and 'harmonic peace' that bring a new religious social ethics. Though Taylor and Millbank work to different theoretical ends, their ideas share a significant common ground. In both cases the postmodern heralds a realised liberty and a conceptual space that reoccupy the ethical directive of the divine. Thus their work is theological because difference becomes an act of faith: faith in the aporetic itself as the intuited presence that unsettles identity, interpretation and value. Ironically, the faith involved in the acceptance of postmodernism renders it indistinguishable from the faiths it juxtaposes itself against. For what postmodernism raises is an ancient religiosity, one that involves acknowledging the limits of understanding while making those limits a route to comprehending the unobtainable absolute.

Many theorists have singled out the indebtedness of poststructuralism to Judaic forms of thought as evidence that postmodernism is a project informed by a
distinctly religious iconography. Much of Judaism does seem amenable to a postmodern philosophy, especially in Rabbinical and Kabbalistic attitudes to textuality where scriptural meaning, especially in the halacha, is infinite and God's presence is always deferred within the text. Thus Derrida has engaged with Judaism with some passion, and it is worth remembering that écriture, a key term of Derrida's, can be translated as either 'writing' or 'scripture'. Kevin Hart has raised the issue of why the religious connotations of écriture have been suppressed:

To point out this difference within écriture is not to protest that Derrida has been ill-served by his interpreters and translators; it is to observe that the conception of écriture as 'writing', pure and simple, has been used to bring Derrida's text (and, implicitly, the text of deconstruction) completely in line with secularism. If we conceive écriture as 'scripture' a number of Derrida's remarks readily assume a different expression. We note for instance, how Derrida defines Judaism as 'the birth and passion of écriture' and that it is 'The Jew who elects écriture which elects the Jew'. (Hart, Trespass, p.50)

Hart is right to argue that Derrida need not be an automatic example of secularism. Derrida appears to lean towards Judaism as a primary milieu of textuality, difference and the trace. So it is that postmodern theologians like Thomas Altizer have claimed that Derrida has 'unveiled his own ground in Lurianic Kabbalism, perhaps the most deeply postmodern of all forms of mystical thinking'. Altizer goes on to link Kabbalistic alterity with Derrida's guiding concept of absence:

A Kabbalistic vision of God's contraction or self-withdrawal (zimzum) is surely one decisive source of Derrida's ground in a groundless beginning, a preprimordial "hole" rather than a primordial plenum, which Derrida can speak of as the "original exile" from the kingdom of being. (Altizer, Deconstruction, p.149)

Altizer understands Derridean alterity as extending from the absolute lack that is central in Lurianic notions of the self-hidden deity. Moreover, the 'original exile' from being is seen as Derrida's envisioning of alterity as both genesis and fall, the foundations of the conditions of language, self and meaning. With such connections between Derrida and Judaism, it is not arbitrary to compare the processes of deconstruction with the symbolic hermeneutics of Kabbalistic tradition. Altizer is far
from alone in his assimilation of poststructuralism and Judaism. Susan Handelman and Harold Bloom have also seen Derrida as following in Rabbinical and Kabbalistic traditions, with Handelman also including Freud, Lacan and Bloom himself as members of this following (Hart, *Trespass*, p.66). Altizer will be increasingly significant for my later analysis, as he ultimately sees deconstruction as historically manifesting the death of God in a silence so absolute that it effects a return to theology. Suffice it here to say that what Altizer and his fellow postmodern theologians demonstrate is not only the possibility of an allegiance between religious presence and poststructuralist absence, but also the untenability of associating deconstruction with an exclusively atheistic philosophy.

In addition to poststructuralist connections with Jewish and Christian negativities, it is important to widen our perspective beyond the remit of Western theology. Several ‘postmodern theologians’ have turned towards the eastern faiths of Buddhism and Hinduism as examples of theologies which are ill-at-ease with logocentric structures. Much oriental spirituality evinces a structural likeness to the textual strategies of poststructuralism. In particular, Buddhism and Hinduism often reject the easy association of language with reality, instead offering a view of the world based on difference and aporia and the rejection of metaphysical constructions. In such faiths, the divine either does not exist or is veiled behind the play of signs. It is this theological structure which has attracted many postmodern thinkers. Perhaps one of the most vivid postmodern debates has surrounded the Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna, an Indian mystic of the second century C.E. whose radical techniques of negating language have attracted the attentions of Robert Magliola, Harold Coward and David Loy. Nagarjuna is interesting for deconstructionists owing to his rigorous assault on
metaphysical identity and linguistic presence. Following a principle of reductio ad absurdum, Nagarjuna posits reality as the ultimate realisation of difference within and beyond language. No surprise, therefore, that in these claims several postmodern thinkers have seen a mirror of deconstruction and the possibility for reading a Derridean spirituality. Robert Magliola has argued:

that Nagarjuna's Middle Path, the Way of the Between, tracks the Derridean trace, and goes 'beyond Derrida' in that it frequents the 'unheard-of-thought,' and also, 'with one and the same stroke,' allows the reinstatement of the logocentric too.\(^3\)

Magliola equates Nagarjuna's ideas with Derrida's processes of destabilising identity and presence, though significantly Magliola also understands Nagarjuna's project as the reintroduction of a logocentric goal by way of the dissolution of metaphysics. Here we start to touch on how alterity functions as grounding metaphor rather than internal difference. David Loy interprets Nagarjuna as resolving the problem of a Derridean nihilism in a new experience of the world through a spirituality of negation. Loy suggests that whereas Derrida gets bogged down in the pursuit of difference, Nagarjuna actually deconstructs both identity and difference and so experiences a world and identity beyond language.\(^4\)

Harold Coward's assessment of Nagarjunan and Derridean textuality offers a slightly more cautious opinion than those of Magliola and Loy. Coward acknowledges that Nagarjuna's ideas are not identical with Derridean poststructuralism, though he further points out that deconstruction by no means implies the nihilistic abandonment of empiricism and ethics. Yet Coward recognises that Derrida's discursive relation to alterity is replete with theological content as the trace becomes the absolute horizon and primordial origin of being, language and ethics.

Here we reach an issue of fundamental importance not only to
poststructuralism, but to the way in which we evaluate the entire postmodern tendency to promote alterity in its theory and its fiction. What we have seen in negative theology is an expression of alterity that decidedly challenges referential certainty, while simultaneously providing a conceptual ground for a body of metaphysical foundations. Moreover, negative theology shows us that absence can reach an absolute state where it repeats the function of an absolute presence in its attributes of ubiquitous influentiality, disruption, confrontation and, above all else, transcendence across and within all moments of language and being. The claim I shall develop, therefore, is that it is not only justifiable but inevitable to invest postmodern alterity with the theological language of presence and metaphysics. This is because discussion of alterity centres absence in an absolute relation to being in all forms — physical, linguistic and conceptual. Alterity, in effect, becomes implicitly offered as the transcendental centre of postmodernity, a space commanding both our ethical response and our philosophical expansion. Otherness is not that which unsettles totalisation, but is a thematic presence in postmodern discourse which replays theological absolutes and reinforces ontological security. Such a series of claims means that, in effect, we must look at alterity not as a disruption, but as a generic convention which is at heart a repetition of metaphysical force. I will develop this argument more closely by examining the theological language of Derrida himself, to see whether the similarities between deconstruction and certain theologies are merely structural or are actually thematic. This distinction will be assisted by returning to the theory of Thomas Altizer whose work, I shall argue, shows the way that alterity is able to be viewed as a grounding presence in the postmodern world. Finally, I shall consider the ontological and ethical functions of alterity revolving around a negative
challenge to self and morality. Thus we will be able to attain an overview of how theoretical notions of absence relate to broader social conditions, a perspective which shall question the pluralism supposed to reside in the heart of postmodernism.

**Derridean religion**

The extent of the debate concerning Derrida and theology is huge and convoluted and it would be difficult to do full justice to its scope here. Thus, in this section, I shall limit myself to two main claims about Derrida and his theological tendencies:

a) Though Derrida resists the assimilation of deconstruction into negative theology, his theoretical bias is increasingly theological in context and language. This tendency is not merely due to the inescapability of metaphysics, but manifests itself through the attempt to elicit the *absolute* alterity of absence, *différence* and trace;

b) Derrida’s thought is saturated in Judaic philosophies of textuality and divine presence. The combination of mutability, creativity and morality in this theology has led Derrida to Levinasian developments where the Other becomes an explicit theological ground and alterity achieves a metanarrative status of its own.

These two claims may seem a theologically partisan interpretation of Derrida’s aporetic programme, as they centralise him within the ontotheological tradition which he has tried to unsettle (though not deny). Yet both Derrida’s relationship to theology and postmodernism’s relationship to metanarratives are ambiguous. My arguments propose that Derrida’s grammatology is structurally similar to negative theology because both are concerned with the extraction and distinction of alterity as a
metaphysical presence at the heart of all reality. By providing alterity with an almost transcendental scope of influence, Derrida is able to give *différance* an ethical potency by replaying the numinous encounter with God. As we reach texts like *The Gift of Death*, we find that the theological links become more explicit and less unsettled as Derrida seems to embrace the spiritual heritage behind the discourse of otherness. What this examination of Derrida will provide is the understanding of how alterity grounds rather than deconstructs, something which is evident in the broad language of postmodernism beyond Derridean theory.

In his review of *The Gift of Death*, Benjamin Hutchens contends: 'In a sense if [Karl] Barth tried to get out of theology Derrida is to some extent trying to get in'.

Such a claim may seem precarious when applied to a philosopher who is accredited with being one of this century's most wily saboteurs of logocentrism and metaphysics. *Of Grammatology* is quite explicit in its argument that the divine has been central to the construction of totalising binaries and the acceptance of a determinable presence and secure referentiality within the structures of meaning:

> The difference between signified and signifier belongs in a profound and implicit way to the totality of the great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics, and in a more explicit and more systematically articulated way to the narrower epoch of Christian creationism and infinitism when these appropriate the resources of Greek conceptuality. (Derrida, *Grammatology*, p.13)

Derrida here sees Christian theology as a force that presumes fixed and eternal presences beyond the play of meaning and in so doing divides word from object into separate ontological categories. As *Of Grammatology* is concerned with breaking down of the signifier/signified division, then metaphysical theology appears as an obvious target of Derrida's deconstructive technique. For God represents the desire to totalise in its most distinct form, especially visible in the notions of inerrancy which privilege the totality of the infallible Book over the multiplicity of the Derridean text.
Yet Derrida’s critique of Christianity is directed towards religion under ‘Greek conceptuality’, not towards faith as a generality. Both Kevin Hart and Brian Ingraffia have argued, though to different ends, that Derrida’s targets are not religion and God as such, but more the transference of the divine into an absolute presence under Greek transcendentalism. So are there other forms of religion more amenable to Derrida’s perspective? It is here that we must turn to Derrida’s most persistent sources of religious negotiation - negative theology and Judaism.

One of Derrida’s most direct confrontations with negative theology is contained in his essay ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’. He initially registers a resistance to the assimilation of negative theology into deconstruction, stating that such a combination would tend towards the ‘hyperessentiality’ from which he has always tried to escape:

I thought I had forbid myself to write in the register of ‘negative theology,’ because I was aware of this movement towards hyperessentiality, beyond Being. What différence, the trace, and so on ‘mean’ - which hence does not mean anything - is ‘before’ the concept, the name, the word, ‘something’ that would be nothing, that no longer arises from Being, from presence or from the presence of the present, nor even from absence, and even less from some hyperessentiality. Yet the onto-theological reappropriation always remains possible - and doubtless inevitable insofar as one speaks, precisely, in the element of logic and of onto-theological grammar. 36

Derrida is clear on the point that différence and the trace are not to be equated with either absence or presence in absolute forms. To make such an association is, according to Derrida, to treat différence and the trace as objects and presences in their own right rather than terms characterised by indefinability. And yet Derrida is equally clear that the ‘onto-theological reappropriation’ is always a part of the discourse about otherness, as metaphysical concepts are writ large upon the very terms with which alterity is discussed.

However, I would suggest that the alterities of the trace and différence are
more to do with the re-packaging of metaphysical priorities than the deconstruction of those priorities. The metaphysical presence of alterity is the result of themes of absence attaining an absolute significance within poststructuralist discourse and thus replaying the absolute presence of God and the Logos. So in his essay ‘Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book’, Derrida repositions God as an originary silence which draws forth language and action while, implicitly, retaining the ontological guarantees of full presence. Language:

starts with the stifling of his [God’s] voice and the dissimilation of his face. This difference, this negativity of God is our freedom, the transcendence and the verb which can relocate the purity of their negative origin only in the possibility of the Question.37

In this passage we see absence and silence reaching a form of apotheosis in the capitalised ‘Question’. It seems that, for Derrida, God needs to exist, if only in negation, for there to be the possibility of defining our own sphere of moral, linguistic and ontological action.38 The silence of God somehow precedes language and so, in the praxis of Derrida’s message, the alterities of différance and the trace act not as irreducibilities, but as transcendental presences grounded upon an absence deified in ontological and theological roles. Derrida’s Jewish heritage emerges forcefully in his association with negative theology, especially where the absence of God becomes in some way a ‘pure’ absence which confronts us with all the attributes traditionally associated with the Jewish deity: transcendence, infinity, influence and incommensurability. So Derrida, again writing on Jabès, speaks of the poet and the Jew as encountering the numinous silence within language represented by the apophatic landscape of the desert:

The poet - or the Jew - protects the desert which protects both his speech (which can speak only in the desert), and his writing (which can be traced only in the desert). That is to say, by inventing, alone, an unfindable and unspecified pathway to which no Cartesian resolution can impart rectilinearity and issuance. 'Where is the way? The way is always to be found. A white sheet of paper is full of ways.' (Derrida, Writing, p.69)
The physical specificity of the desert and the ‘white sheet of paper’ is significant. The desert and the paper are both locations of alterity which limit the limitless space of writing and spirituality. This space belongs to the Jewish prophet or the poet because both of these figures seem to acknowledge metaphysical lack and linguistic play rather than attempting to pin down the divine into a theological rigidity. What needs to be remembered, however, is that the desert and the paper give a metaphorical site to alterity. The absence within metaphysics is given shape and presence in Derrida’s language as the site of an expanded critique of totalising thought and a place of ethical demand. Moreover, alterity is defined using religious language not because of the internal resistance towards metaphysical terms, but because theology enables Derrida to ground alterity, différance and trace as obligations to which, like God, we must respond. In a sense, theology saves deconstruction from meaning nothing.

Derrida’s ethical theory contained in The Gift of Death illustrates, perhaps more than any other text, the way that alterity can shift from inaccessible principle to a thematic presence dependent upon religious codes. Written in response to the Czech intellectual Jan Patocka, executed by the Communist government for his support of the Charta 77, The Gift of Death speculates upon the ethical implications of death and the history of religious thought. What is perhaps most interesting about this text is the way that Derrida starts to gravitate towards a more conventional depiction of theology as a way of representing an apophatic morality. The foundations of Derrida’s argument is that the presence of ethical codes and prescriptions actually works as a distraction from the genuine complexities of ethical decision. Revisiting the Abraham and Isaac narrative, Derrida demonstrates how moral activity is based upon the silences of God and death which enforce our absolute responsibility for our own
actions. Abraham obeys the command to sacrifice Isaac not because of the demand of ethics but contrary to the ethics sanctioned within communal codes. Abraham’s actions obey the singularity of his relation to the *mysterium tremendum*, the silent gaze of the absolute Other which isolates his ethical moment. Derrida argues that for Abraham ethics actually function as a ‘temptation’ away from responsibility into codification, a temptation which must be resisted to preserve a non-mediated relationship with personal morality. The irresolvable space between the codified and the absolute results in an ethics which is capable of assaulting moral norms, yet which also has a practical familiarity:

This is ethics as ‘irresponsibilisation,’ as an insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between responsibility in general and absolute responsibility.³⁹

Derrida’s ethics of ‘irresponsibility’ offer a moral domain constructed upon the mute presence of the divine. Indeed it is notable that *The Gift of Death* seems to dwell more on God’s silence rather than his absence. By the implication that God is not speaking rather than not actually there, Derrida’s theory makes deeper resonances with negative theology, maximising the failures of representation to reach an incommensurable presence. *The Gift of Death* welds together religious universality and the apophatic gift into a paradoxical emblem of responsibility. What this mixture produces, through a strange mixture of Heideggerian, Levinasian and Judaeo-Christian associations, is an alterity that appears as a common property in the same way as the divine awe of Rudolph Otto’s *mysterium tremendum*.⁴⁰ The alterity of absolute responsibility is reified itself into a unifying awe rather than a pluralising difference. So Derrida is able to see the story of Abraham and Isaac as more than just a parable of individuality:

The sacrifice of Isaac belongs to what one might just dare to call the common treasure, the terrifying secret of the *mysterium tremendum* that is a property of all three so-called religions of the Book, the religions of the races of Abraham. (Derrida, *Gift*, p.64)
The 'common treasure' to which Derrida 'dares' to refer is that alterity which is shared by all faiths regardless of scriptural doctrine. Derrida speaks of the alterity of a silent God, because this alterity still provides the functions of the divine in its presentation of an unknowable space which permeates all being and draws mankind into a moral relation with the Other. The example of Abraham’s casuistic dilemma shows that there 'is no longer any ethical generality that does not fall prey to the paradox of Abraham' (Derrida, Gift, p.78). The gift of death, its gift of absolute responsibility, is a common gift whose presence, like that of the silent, shapeless YHWH, constantly returns morality to silence and secrecy. Derrida extends the demarcations of this gift beyond the confines of a Judaic, Christian or Islamic ancestry to embrace all others in the relationship to the Other. For the gift of death:

stands for Jews, Christians, Muslims, but also for everyone else, for every other in its relation to the wholly other. We can no longer know who is called Abraham, and he can no longer tell us. (Derrida, Gift, p.79)

Abraham is unidentifiable because he is representative of all others while attesting to the fact that he cannot speak for others. Hence he too becomes an alterity. Derrida's transformation of Abraham into a certain anonymity may seem to prevent the re-scripting of his ideas into the structures of logocentric religion. For example, when Derrida comes to re-appraising Christian irresponsibility, he sees Christianity as no longer in need of the event of revelation, but only the deferred possibility of that event:

It [Christianity] needs to think the possibility of such an event but not the event itself. This is a major point of difference, permitting such a discourse to be developed without reference to religion as institutional dogma, and proposing a genealogy of thinking that doesn't amount to an article of faith. (Derrida, Gift, p.49)

By insisting on the possibility of revelation rather than revelation itself, Derrida shows that religion has a deferral at its 'centre' which maintains moral urgency within the
secrecy of death and the infinite. Derrida goes on to say that the gift of death "repeats" the possibility of religion without religion' (Derrida, *Gift*, p.49) as the *mysterium tremendum* gestures within religion to that which religion cannot contain. Thus the *mysterium tremendum* seems to function as what Derrida has elsewhere called the 'ghost of the undecidable', a ghost that 'deconstructs from within any assurance of presence, any certitude or any supposed criteriology that would assure us of the justice of a decision'. Yet Derrida's resistance to an 'article of faith' can seem somewhat misplaced after arguments that have offered alterity itself as an *assurance* of responsibility. Just as John Caputo understands deconstruction as necessitating a very religious act of faith, so alterity gains our faith by offering a common (and capitalised) Other which secures a moral source in an attestation to the supposedly lost divine. Caputo makes the link between Derrida and negative theology in the faith of the impossible, the desire for the advent of the impossible that can never be achieved. Negative theology and deconstruction have the same stake in preserving the aporetic, for once the aporetic is realised, then the impossible and ineffable become 'a dangerous absolutism' (Caputo, *Prayers*, p.47). Caputo does credit deconstruction with the qualities of negative theology, but, I would argue, for the wrong reasons. While Caputo points to deconstruction's theological drive towards the impossible, he ignores the fact 'the impossible' has a burden of communication which resides in a reasonably limited arena of conceptual space. Deconstruction has theological tendencies because its conceptions of *différance*, the trace and so on, are theological in their scope of influence, performance and trans-rational genre. The nature of the poststructuralist other bears all the hallmarks of a metaphysical absolute: general influence, ethical obligation, an unknowable force, subjective isolation.
So what are we to conclude from Derrida’s intimacy with religious language and thought? My broad argument is that for Derrida, religious otherness and poststructuralist alterity are partners in a project that seeks to continually challenge conventions of thought while offering the stability of a reified and absolute alterity. This reification occurs on several different levels. Perhaps most important is that alterity is discussed as an absolute silence or absolute absence of the divine, the portentous quality of the absolute simply reinscribing alterity with the authority that belonged to the original trope of the divine logos. That Derrida would deny the absolute quality of alterity is largely unimportant, for it is the register of the absolute which supplies his theories with the ethical and ontological profundity they depend upon.

Thomas Altizer, one of the ‘death of God’ postmodern theologians along with people like Mark C. Taylor and Carl Rasche, is useful to consider here. Altizer understands that throughout history humankind has been steadily realising the absence of God and thus the absence of any total presence within history. The comprehension of the absolute absence of the divine, according to Altizer, reaches its conclusion in our present time. Yet it is this historical moment of recognition that effects a ‘grace’ by revealing the pure absence of the God that was always masked in logocentric language:

So it is that it is the death of God which makes possible the return of difference-itself, a pure difference which is lost with the advent of history or consciousness, and a difference or differance which is the true ‘other’ of God. That which can be known by both a metaphysical and a biblical theology as the Nihil can be known by a ‘new’ Kabbalah as the absolutely unnameable because it is ‘older’ than language. (Altizer, Deconstruction, p.155)

Altizer equates the death of God with the return to the original absence that was the divine before ‘his’ naming. Ironically the naming of God in language effected the steady deconstruction of this name, ultimately working towards the realisation of the
original divine absence. Altizer sees Derrida's *différance* as the full presence of absence in history and the focus of a "new" Kabbalah that returns to that which existed before language.

Altizer's analysis differs in many ways from that of Derrida. Yet Altizer is useful not so much for the coherence of his argument, but for the suggestion that the contemporary age, the age of postmodernism, is that which recognizes absence as the 'true' basis of language and identity. Alterity in Derrida, and postmodernity in general, has become a *thematic visibility*, a conceptual motive which operates as a discursive presence with surprising authority and jurisdiction. In Derrida, absolute absence squarely repeats absolute presence by reapplying the limited discourse of infinity and transcendence which is common to both. So it appears that alterity is reified by simply taking over the role and language of the absolute presence which it is meant to destabilize. It may be argued, as Kevin Hart has done, that the similarities between deconstruction and negative forms of theology are a matter of structure rather than theme, but I would argue that the former inevitably leads to the latter. For the structuring of deconstruction works by distinguishing alterity as the motive that centers a particular text or debate. Once alterity makes this step of thematic power then its inconceivability becomes a presence, a paradox which has always been a part of religious language. Moreover, Derrida makes this present absence an ethical space which self-consciously relies upon the obligation and responsibility contained in the *mysterium tremendum* of theology. Such a step seems to draw Levinas and Derrida much closer together, as Derrida's discussion of the Other shares with Levinas a sense in which alterity pushes the individual towards a very rabbinical set of ethical realizations. Indeed, Levinas does reveal the very clear roots of negative ethics in
biblical theology, thus suggesting that genealogies of postmodern ethics and discourse can be found in the oldest traditions of Western metaphysics. Levinas's philosophy, by his own admission, attempts to weld a Greek rationality to a Jewish theology in which God remains as Other; the result being an immanent trace which redirects the subject to an encounter with ethical interiority. Such an encounter with the Other is not intended by Levinas to be foundational in the sense of grounding. Yet the base of Levinas's theory, that the Other cannot be reduced to the Same, runs counter to my argument here. For the motif of the Other is itself a condition of the Same as it seeks to define the conditions of ethical experience and then transfer them into a community (Jewish) perception through discourse. Returning briefly to my emphasis on the performativity of language, the Levinasian other makes alterity a centre for philosophical direction and action, just as the absolute Other of YHWH makes alterity the source of religious community. In fact, the Other must become the Same to transfer its obligation into a communal praxis. What Levinas gives us is an overview of the religious iconography and world perception that has to inform any philosophy of alterity or otherness, for absence, like truth, has a history.

My brief analysis of Derrida and theology has taken us to the point where three claims can be made:

i) Alterity shares a structural and ontological foundation with many forms of theology, particularly Judaism and negative theology;

ii) Alterity is a metaphysical trope which relies upon theological language to retain an ethically, ontologically and philosophically meaningful discourse;

iii) Alterity's metaphysical content is not just part of the inescapability of metaphysical language. Rather, alterity is a distinct and limiting philosophical
theme which provides metanarrative functions within a classically ontotheological discourse.

From these three basic conclusions, we can now proceed to assess the role of alterity as a presence in the general expressions of postmodernism. Before making this step, however, an important clarification should be made. Throughout this thesis, my focus on alterity is more in terms of presence than of absence. This position of course begs the question as to whether I am endorsing the belief that full presence in language and referentiality is possible. Firstly, I fully concede to the argument that language and meaning are forever shifting with the multiplicities of different viewpoints and different combinations of signifiers. However, language is always within the performative expectations of social communication or meaning in production. The consequence is that presence always has a de facto status in the relationship between social discourse and social action. Even in vacillation between two contrasting viewpoints there remains the sense in which undecidability is generative of meaning rather than having absolute sway. So the alterity of postmodern philosophy does not deconstruct discourse into multiple forms but, as this thesis itself exemplifies, produces a fairly limited range of textual presentations grounded in the acceptance that alterity is a presence for the particular (usually academic) community which is being addressed. Alterity is produced on the basis of a social agreement of what it can mean within the textual codes of its practical performance. Derrida would agree that there are codes and structures (albeit metaphysical) in society that stop language scattering into impracticality and nonsense. However, I would suggest that in actual fact discourse consists of nothing but presences. Adopting a more Bakhtinian position, a
position I will fully expound in Chapter 5, I would argue that the multiplicities of language can only be negotiated as a dialogic exchange of presences rather than an acceptance of an alterity. Crowning alterity as sovereign merely enacts a moment of adjusted priorities for interpretation which produces its own set of guidelines and thematic expectations.

A brief return to postmodern theology may make this point somewhat clearer. The effect of deconstructive theology is best visualised, following Jean Luc Marion, as the word 'God' with a cross placed through it (GOD). This symbolism holds both the term and the negation of that term together in a dialectic of absence and presence. Yet it must be recognised that the actual crossing out of the term is an action which requires a hand to make the negation. The cross through the term is not self-existent; it is a symbol which is used as a conceptual indicator in the same way as 'God' beneath it. Consequently, both term and negation indicate the performative action making a conceptual relation between the two symbols. The position of this is paradoxical. As we perform the negation of the word 'God' there is the awareness that this is an action of which we are not capable, that is, we cannot erase the function of the term as it remains active beneath the negating mark. The incapacity to conclude the relationship between term and erasure manifests itself in the production of the concept of alterity, for the two symbolic presences become a single relationship with the acknowledgement of their interaction. What is important is that as we have produced this conceptual discourse there is a sense in which alterity has a social presence rather than an aporetic play; and by implication, otherness is always being appropriated into the positivity of a discourse which has no possibility of using alterity except as a conceptual presence.
In conclusion, much of my argument is based on the de facto expectations of presences in language. The sign may be protean, but this may only mean that language has to be fluid enough to keep equivalence with the possibilities of physical existence. I readily admit that there is no total summary of human existence which holds good for all people in all places. Yet this view in itself needs to acknowledge that it is part of a network of discourse which relies on its own expectations of what is present in the world to actually offer itself in meaning.

The next step in my analysis is to see how alterity relates to the ‘postmodern condition’ in general. This shift is necessary because I do not believe that the implications of alterity are confined to theoretical contemplation. If, as I am arguing, concepts are always related to social conditions, then it is right to question whether alterity accords with certain moods or tendencies in contemporary culture. I shall firstly argue that alterity is used as a way of returning the idea of the Cartesian subject while appearing not to jeopardise the politics and philosophy of multiple selves. The connection between this subjectivity and my religious theme is that the mysticism of alterity is the ideal spirituality for the capitalist individualism of the contemporary age. By seeking to represent otherness instead of others, postmodernism implicitly advocates a metaphysics that is a spiritual equivalent of the capitalist market’s ‘let-it-be’ policy, giving priority to subjective individualism while cautioning against overarching applications of social theory. Living in an age of seemingly endless problems in identity, economics, politics and race, we can perhaps argue that postmodernism has simply tried to make a spirituality that will give some metaphysical locus in a confusing world. As we will now see, however,
postmodernism’s tendency towards the transcendental can make for a very questionable social contribution.

Social alterity

Moving our perspective from postmodern theory to perceptions of postmodern culture, we still find a preoccupation with the absent. Toffler, Mccluhan, Bell, Jameson and Baudrillard, amongst others, have characterised much of postmodernity as the dissolution of reality within the technologies of representation operating within late twentieth-century capitalism. As the image becomes the reality, the world fragments into a self-consciously shifting play of signs, where reality is itself alterity, an indecipherable trace amongst nervous and unpredictable surfaces. David Harvey’s persuasive overview of The Condition of Postmodernity describes a society which now functions within the loss of permanent social presences and personal identity. With the shift from ‘Fordism’ into ‘flexible accumulation’ comes the effects of ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey, Condition, pp.284-307), where the experience of living is possessed by a massive acceleration in the speed of lifestyles and working conditions. The results are shorter vocational contracts with longer working hours; the need for multiple skills and social flexibility; the constant requirements for re-skilling individuals to match technological change; and the shrinking relevance of distance under the power of telecommunications. Such social effects extend themselves across both ideology and practicality:

The first major consequence has been to accentuate volatility and ephemerality of fashions, products, production techniques, labour processes, ideas and ideologies, values and established practices. The sense that ‘all that is solid melts into air’ has rarely been more persuasive. (Harvey, Condition, pp.285-6)
Harvey's postmodernity is a familiar emphasis on continual dispersal and impermanence. As social mobility and vocational transience increases, identities, both communal and individual, are endlessly caught in the act of reformulating themselves to match sociological instability. The consequence is that identity never seems to achieve a full presence or ontological satisfaction. Indeed the notion of permanent identity, a basic tool of self-reflection, seems to deconstruct itself towards a social alterity across which identities are continually written and rewritten.\(^47\) As the self vanishes under its pluralisation there is a pronounced dilemma of Being, for the subject is caught between the loss of identity and the social language of selfhood which enables the subject to inscribe her loss within discourse.

Yet I shall argue that the recognition of ontological alterity does not diminish the authority of the subject, but in many ways confirms the metaphysical subject and leaves the much assaulted Cartesian perspective unchallenged. The effect of alterity, and arguably the effect of social instability, is primarily one of self/social-consciousness. Postmodernity functions by offering a dispute to basic ontological assumptions. Yet the intention behind this challenge seems curious as it also produces an individual subject conscious of her own lack of stable identity. The paradox here is that subjective alterity then becomes a self-reflexive tool for the deepest ontological awareness. The otherness in our selves and in the world becomes a visible space demanding the reorganisation of the way we look at ourselves and the world.\(^48\) Moreover, alterity places the subject in an ontological isolation by making her aware of the individual responsibility for meaning requisite in this conscious juxtaposition of being and non-being. Consequently, postmodernism backs towards reaffirming essentialist conceptions of a subject which reflects upon itself and stands in a
possessive relation to meaning. So Kate Soper has described the postmodern subject as a conscious centre gathering fragments into an ontological order:

even as we acknowledge ourselves to be decentred and fragmented subjectivities, the gendered constructs of patriarchy, and the mouthpieces of a discursive ventriloquism, we also seem to rediscover a centre, the existential, angst-ridden self who must also make sense of it, and seek to reorganize desire, reread the world, adjust behaviour and so on, in the light of that awareness. As anti-humanist approaches present us as splintered, we feel a very humanist splintering between the self who acknowledges the Freudian or feminist challenge to autonomy, and the self who feels called upon to act as a morally responsible agent of self-change.

Soper sees in postmodernism not the splintering into an anonymous 'fragmented' subject, but the continuation of a sense of individual agency, an agency made more acute by the demand for interpretative action which is central when indeterminacy is foregrounded. Postmodern alterity functions as a reaffirmation of ontological stability because it impersonates the mechanisms similar to traditions of the divine confrontation with the self. For like Moses's confrontation with otherness on Mt. Sinai, alterity is presented as the absolute quality which should disrupt our entire sense of being and yet re-empower the way we see the world and our identity. Perhaps we could simply say that the postmodern subject affirms ontotheology by continually offering itself as something profound, rather than as the proclamation of indeterminacy.

We can see an illustration of how social alterity valorises the metaphysical subject in the theorisations of Barbara Claire Freeman on the 'feminine sublime'. Forming an allegiance between feminism and Lyotardian theory, Freeman argues in semi-mystical terminology for a 'feminine sublime' which:

is neither a rhetorical mode nor an aesthetic category but a domain of experience that resists categorisation, in which the subject enters into relation with otherness - social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic - that is excessive and unpresentable. The feminine sublime is not a discursive strategy, technique, or literary style the female writer invents, but rather a crisis in relation to language and representation that a certain subject undergoes.
It is evident that my general argument questions the whole premise of Freeman’s sublime politics. I have contended that alterity, and equally the sublime, are both ‘rhetorical modes’ and ‘aesthetic categories’ which attempt to transfer a specific conceptual content. Freeman’s hope for a sublime space, an airy liberty in the other, appears split by a subjective contradiction. Though Freeman contends that the feminist sublime is an ‘excessive and unpresentable’ experience, it seems her idea of the sublime confirms the rational subject’s jurisdiction over ontological issues. For Freeman’s sublime is an attempt to resist categorisation, yet it is also the force by which ‘the subject enters into relation with otherness’. The implication of this is that the sublime distinguishes the subject in all her isolation and the other then becomes the object of this self-identifying relation.

The mystical suggestions of the word ‘sublime’ are not to be overlooked here. Sublimity connotes transcendence and suggests the spirituality of a subject who is capable of a perceptual hovering over all restraints and logocentrisms. Indeed, it is interesting to see how unions between overt mysticisms and alterity are becoming more common in the marketplace of postmodern theories. The ‘Goddess’ movement of feminist religion is a good example of spiritualities which understandably reject the autocratic tendencies of patriarchal theology for faiths ostensibly based in the haunting non-place of otherness. This is evident in the short text ‘Candlemas in Cymru’ by Monica Sjöö. The following passage is not without concrete political engagement, performing this activity through the summoning of ‘ancient’ spiritual powers which are potent by their indefinability:

To me, feminism means the rebirth of the Goddess . . . she who is our infinite Self. For this to happen we must act politically to throw of the shackles of capitalist and imperialist patriarchy . . . so as to free ourselves and to set free again our Mother, the Earth. We are slowly beginning to regain some of our ancient menstrual, psychic, bisexual, visionary collective Womanpowers.
It is slowly beginning to hum within us... deep, deep within... slowly, slowly we are reawakening... The play between the singular and the plural in this passage is revealing. The political activity which Sjöö recommends belongs to the plurality of the pronoun 'our', for there must be a gathering together of individuals to enact social objectives. However, Sjöö's summoning of the collective seems to apply itself through a mystical alterity which actually absorbs difference in a figured absence. The 'our' is directed continually towards the essential 'She', 'She' being the mystical properties of earth and the female physique. The problems for political action arise in the fact that Sjöö validates female identity under the 'ancient' aspects of a feminine alterity and a spiritual future yet to be fully realised. Thus the time-frame of Sjöö's ideas is one which depends on an ahistorical aesthetic which appeals to a transcendent core of identity in the elemental 'truths' of the earth. The consequence is that social difference actually seems negated in a common principle of apophatic being.

What undermines Sjöö's argument the most is an awkward relation between spiritual truth and political action. Environmentalism has become a common feature of much postmodern spirituality, an understandable event in the light of the twentieth century's appalling environmental mis-management. Yet environmentalism is not free from the philosophy of individualism which has itself contributed to the historical progression of ecological disaster. On a social level, Sjöö's type of spiritual naturalism is generally composed of those with marginal relations to the actual living conditions of the natural world. Angela West draws attention to this as she casts a critical eye over what she terms 'back-to-nature' feminism. Her criticism of this movement is of its class structure:

Working-class people are not to be found in these movements in any significant numbers; nor are the nations and races of the Third World. The fact is, I suggest that Goddess/Nature worship, in all its forms, mild and extreme, is in no way an alternative to western bourgeois religion, but simply another manifestation of it. (West, 'Faith', p.75)
West's accusation of the goddess being complicit with the prevailing structures of western society is a fundamental criticism of postmodern spirituality in general. Whether or not we see the celebration of the Other as 'spirituality', postmodernism tends towards subjugating physical existence under the pure philosophy of negative theory. Hence the social composition of 'Goddess/Nature worship' sees the nostalgic reconstruction of the earth's benignity, rather than having a direct encounter with the physical environments of the planet. The spirituality of Otherness appears to be more about transcending the physical sphere in a combination of mysticism and romanticism, a transcendence which takes us back towards the spiritual/physical duality which is perhaps the psychological root of humankind's mishandling of planetary resources.

West claims much contemporary feminist religion as 'a child of the Enlightenment' (West, 'Faith', p.78) because it draws plurality back towards a transcendental rationality. Indeed, the appeal to a kind of primordial identity connects with theories which actually formed some of the Enlightenment's most prestigious voices. As West again points out:

quite a lot of the new feminist spirituality is 'woman-made' in the sense that it is a second-hand version of this eighteenth-century man-made tradition of the Noble Savage. (West, 'Faith', p.78)

West here implies that the political action of some postmodern feminist spirituality is merely a confirmation of an existing order and that its radical qualities are dispersed in its hunt for a 'pure' subject. West's parallel between Rousseau's Noble Savage and the Goddess defines the possibility that philosophies based within a resistance to metanarrative discourses are actually replaying a distinctly Enlightenment rationality.
I am not necessarily critical of the Enlightenment, the metanarrative, logocentrism, or the idea of the subject. What I do not accept is that postmodern theory offers something different to these ideas, since in fact it exercises the same tendencies towards pure philosophy, and hence theological aspiration, that have been inherent in the last three centuries of thought. What my brief journey through postmodern feminist spirituality illustrates is that a politics of alterity is absolutely and inevitably subject-based. As I have just said, my problem is not with the subject or the metanarrative; both are, I believe, politically and socially grounded and it is unhelpful to deny them. My concern is more with the type of subjectivity recommended by postmodernism. Alterity changes the subject into a space in which meaning is processed and through which temporality moves without settling into self-presence. This may produce the ‘absolute responsibility’ described by Derrida, but it also relocates obligation to meaning within the individual rather than within the individual’s context. The upshot is a kind of Cartesian solipsism where the subject focuses on herself as the central, temporal conduit for the creation of meaning. Such a solipsism has recognisable relations with capitalist individualism, where managing value-free power relations between individuals is a much more tangible goal than attempting to create trans-social systems.

To clarify this point, we should look at how postmodernism has structured itself politically within the confines of late-twentieth century capitalism. The concentration upon otherness and absence has produced several dangerous tendencies in postmodern politics. The first danger is that far from opening up our consciousness to the needs and differences of others, postmodernism simply forms its own linguistic binaries. Hence, feminist voices have frequently cautioned that the discourse of
difference actually prevents the construction of meaningful dialogues between groups rather than assisting such understandings.\textsuperscript{56} Likewise Terry Eagleton has contended that:

for all its talk of difference, plurality, heterogeneity, postmodern theory often operates with rigid binary oppositions, with 'difference', 'plurality' and allied terms lined up bravely on one side of the theoretical fence as unequivocally positive, and whatever their antitheses might be (unity, identity, totality, universality) ranged balefully on the other. [. . .] In its more refined theoretical reaches, postmodern theory acknowledges the mutual interdependence of terms like identity and non-identity, unity and difference, system and Other; but in terms of sensibility there is no doubt on which side its sympathies lie.\textsuperscript{57}

Eagleton's reference to the 'sensibility' of postmodernism is warranted, for postmodernism has often constructed an intellectual piety which gives designations such as otherness and alterity a prescriptive presence veiled by their own terminology. Far from liberating discourse, postmodernism adjusts the weighting of its binaries to favour a mystical exclusion of that which searches for the homogeneous or unificatory. It is when this exclusion is combined with the nature of the postmodern subject that the real dangers emerge.

I would argue that the postmodern subject, as characterised through the presence of alterity, is built upon the politics and economics of contemporary capitalism, though this allegiance is veiled through the mystical medium of its language. The complex connections between religious language, subjectivity and capitalism can perhaps be made a little clearer by a brief detour through some of the early ideas of Ihab Hassan. Hassan famously labelled postmodernism as 'the new gnosticism', a period in which human subjectivity becomes 'its own reality. Consciousness becomes all.\textsuperscript{58} Translating Gnosticism's mind-over-matter theology into a postmodern experience, Hassan took what he saw as the 'indeterminacy' of the present age and posited a new manner of self-sufficient human ontology. For Hassan, human beings can now see themselves as 'gnostic creatures constituting themselves,
and increasingly their universe, by symbols of their own making'. The leap that Hassan makes from an indeterminate age to a theology of self is of paramount significance to my argument here, not least for the fact that the aporetic is converted into a spiritual essentialism. Yet Hassan also implies that the postmodern world has given birth to the self-constituting subject as a way of meeting the demands, the truth, of indeterminate culture. Though Hassan's humanistic persuasion makes him an awkward benchmark for all postmodernism, he does acutely illustrate how social fragmentation and the culture of contemporary capitalism, can result in a metaphysics of those conditions that serve an individualist ideology. By spiritualising the essence of the indeterminate, then alterity becomes the deity that sanctions such conditions and blesses the individualistic, self-creating subject.

In short, postmodernism constructs an ideal ontology for capitalist individualism. We have already seen how an attention to alterity and absence creates a postmodern subject built upon the traditional metaphysics of self and philosophy. I extended this position by suggesting that postmodernism is inherently solipsistic and metaphysical, as it deifies the subject as an organising centre while reifying the negativity that sanctions such an ontology. This subjectivity is sympathetic with capitalist individualism because both capitalism and postmodernism posit a freedom where large scale social metanarratives are inappropriate and individual responsibility within power politics becomes sovereign. Postmodernism is ideally suited to capitalist economics because it backs away from judgements about social or human 'nature', emphasising value-free causality and the power of the sign; and all the while it retains an effective philosophical sanctuary in theories of anti-foundationalism.
Terry Eagleton argues that with the fragmenting forces of late twentieth-century capitalism, the ideology of anti-foundationalism is an ideal way of preserving a market pragmatism while at the same time protecting oneself from criticism. Should any direct political assault manifest itself, then the postmodern subject is able to retreat into a philosophical dialogue about the paucity of totalities, even though totalities may be firmly in place in the experiential content of people’s lives. So postmodern alterity provides a transcendent attitude towards social policy which can in turn protect capitalism from any sort of incisive dialogue. Eagleton further argues that the postmodern emphasis on incommensurability:

serves to swaddle the dominant system from any sort of searching criticism, at the same time as it serves to enhance its liberal credentials. The more conservative forms of postmodernism represent the ideology of those who believe that, if the system is to survive, truth must be sacrificed to practice, a move which would have been mystifying to Jefferson or John Stuart Mill but not in the least to Friedrich Nietzsche. (Eagleton, Illusions, pp.40-1)

Eagleton’s reference to Nietzsche suggests that the postmodern subjectivity is appropriate to, and protective of, contemporary power-based economic morality. The security of this subjectivity is described by Eagleton as a retreat into a selective anti-foundationalism which can kick into action when justification has to be transcended. Eagleton could further his argument by pointing to this postmodern security as more reliant on metaphysics than market-driven cynicism, for absence and otherness are reified into absolute categories somehow above the engagement with the social and political presences of the immediate and global environments. By returning to metaphysical and theological strains of language, postmodernism effects judgements which go beyond particularities and place the abstract well above the physical.

I am not suggesting that all postmodern criticism is politically bankrupt. The postmodern community has produced many fruitful insights into injustices across all social ideologies, including capitalism. Yet the explicit or latent insistence on figures
of alterity and absence is actually returning to an unproductive type of metaphysical attitude that embraces difference only in the abstract. Postmodernism has always struggled to transfer an ethics of difference into an operational social praxis. David Harvey contends that postmodernism has adequately produced a response to debates of multiculturalism and gender, but this awakening is enfeebled by the inability to engage itself with general politics of working conditions, economic policy or class oppression. Harvey quotes S. White who seeks to define the new performativity of postmodern justice:

One sees [. . . ] in Derrida's declaration that 'Deconstruction is justice' [. . . ] that one can neither speak directly about nor experience justice. In answering the sense of responsibility to otherness one serves justice but one does so with a sense of the infinite, open-ended character of the task.61

The open-endedness of postmodern justice ironically prevents an engagement with politics of class and occupation, because the theoretical basis of such an engagement is seen to belong to a tradition of totalising ideas. So Harvey points to the way that issues of occupational injustice rarely generate the same response as issues of identity. He exemplifies this argument by detailing the fire in 1991 at a chicken-processing plant of Imperial Foods, in Hamlet, North Carolina, in which twenty-five people died owing to dangerous working conditions and inadequate safety measures. The fire produced almost no media or intellectual interest in contrast to the explosive response that the Rodney King incident produced soon after. Harvey goes on to describe the deliberate governmental weakening of agencies such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the National Labour Relations Board in the United States. Enervated by the non-interventionist policies of Reagan, these organisations illustrate for Harvey the increasing difficulty of working-class politics to make itself heard through the language of the politics of difference. Harvey seems to raise the important
consideration that the appreciation of difference and possibility may be a class luxury in a world where certain capitalist sectors become increasingly expensive, exploitative and controlling. We do live in a world of local needs and the needs of difference, and these must be respected and protected. Yet, Harvey implies, theorising on the basis of locality can overlook the broad-based presences and systems of capitalism which deserve an intense and searching critique postmodernism often seems unable to provide.

Ultimately Harvey does want to retain some sense of difference. Yet he also accepts universals as 'necessary' (Harvey, 'Class', p.112) because we live in a world where presences are established and ingrained into the experiential content of our daily lives:

While identity does not rest upon sameness or essence, it does acquire durability and permanence according to the stories we tell ourselves and others about our history. Although identity internalises otherness, it nevertheless delimits and renders relatively durable both the field of 'othernesses' brought into play and the relation of those other to a particular sense of self-hood. (Harvey, 'Class', p.110)

Harvey sees the need to accept those social presences which are always discursively in place. These presences are multiple but with a real location in the world; they cannot be de-valued by incorporation into a general theory of multiplicity. The other is not a semi-mystical abstraction that subsumes the reality of a different frame of experience. Harvey seems to want a shift back into a less purist use of difference and a willingness to engage with concrete metanarratives because they are there in place in the way lives are lived. This, I believe, is a much more credible, and productive way of engaging with the conditions of the contemporary world. Difference, alterity, the trace and so on, are concepts which bring back a metaphysics and transcendentalism that is not suitable for effective social action. Alterity is not an idea which de-stabilises totality, but a metaphysical reification which is more suited to offering support to capitalist
This chapter has had several purposes. Firstly I have shown that alterity is an aesthetic and philosophical theme which returns to metaphysics via a theological type of discourse. Secondly, alterity enables the preservation of an Enlightenment sense of identity rather than the destruction of such a notion. Finally, I have attempted to demonstrate that the postmodern subject, governed by a reified alterity, is in accordance with capitalist structures and ideologies. In the following chapters, I shall move into a consideration of postmodern fiction to assess how the reification of negativity and alterity alters the politics and philosophy of postmodern writing. My critical objective in all the subsequent chapters will be to see how texts that ostensibly pursue indeterminacy and alterity actually structure themselves upon a foundational metaphysics of negativity. Many such works are living within a recognisable, even overt, theological heritage of the Other, where alterity acts as a reified 'god' over characters, plots and themes. Indeed, many of the novels I shall examine, some of which are central to the postmodern fictional canon, can almost be described as religious fiction in its purest sense. As a major element of my argument is that alterity falls naturally into transcendentalism, I have arranged the chapters into evaluations of the most important metaphysical repetitions of the role of the other. In Chapter One, a focus on characterisation will lead to the conclusion that far from radicalising the nature of the fictional character, postmodern indeterminacy actually sustains the importance of the individual as a spiritual/psychological entity defined in relation to an absolute Other. Chapter Two will expand this theme of the fictional subject by...
arguing that in many ways alterity is simply a thematic negotiation and understanding of mortality, even a way of transcending death's threat through a kind of imagined afterlife. Moving from ontology to history, Chapter Three will assess the problematic relation of alterity to time. Here I will suggest that postmodern indeterminacy reappplies the theological language of infinity and eternity to give a transcendentalist viewpoint over time rather than a temporal involvement within time. In Chapter Four, I shall turn my focus to postmodernist allegories to demonstrate that alterity acts as a new allegorical centre in the same way as God functioned within religious allegory and parabolic teaching. Finally, in Chapter Five, I devote the whole chapter to Salman Rushdie as an example of what I see as the way out of the impasse of postmodern transcendentalism. Applying a Bakhtinian perspective, I argue that Rushdie forges an equal bond between sociological foundation and spiritual impulse that avoids the theoretical detachment implicit in much postmodern fiction. Thus we are able to see the transcendental brought down to earth, whereas in many postmodern novels the earthly is always made unreal and shadowy by the all-powerful presence of alterity. Whatever my particular objective, this thesis strives towards one proof: alterity is a metaphysically and theologically informed theme and concept which grounds meaning, rather than deconstructing that meaning.

To return to where we started, this thesis is written in what I consider as the last days of confidence in postmodern politics. Much of the shift away from postmodernism has seemed instinctive rather than reasoned, perhaps because the world that has recently produced hideous genocides, economic crisis, environmental disaster and adapting exploitation, cries out for a pragmatism and realism that postmodernism does not seem to achieve. Postmodernists may point out that many of
the intolerable situations that the world provides have been directly caused by the structures of logocentrism that they attack. They are right. Yet to appeal to a lack of totalities is no answer, as that can soon lead back to an impotent form of discourse that attempts to purify itself from presence while engendering unproductive presences of its own. Perhaps postmodernism should more readily admit its metaphysical persuasion and define itself as a distinct ideology rather than insisting on the deconstruction of foundations. The liaison between Christianity and radical politics in places such as South America, South Africa and Poland demonstrate that the most philosophically presence-based ideas need not disregard the temporal and physical situations of the real world. If postmodernism were to acknowledge its own metaphysics, then its politics may be able to develop with more confidence. As it is, postmodern alterity produces a metaphysics which it continually masks and denies, and a presence which is frequently hidden behind the rhetoric of otherness.

NOTES


6 Derrida’s classic exposition of his resistance to negative theology, including a discussion of Neoplatonism, can be found in his essay 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds.), Derrida and Negative Theology (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992) pp.73-142.

7 Throughout this thesis my definition of postmodernism will include poststructuralist theory. While recognising that the compatibility of postmodernism and poststructuralism is far from axiomatic, my combination of the two is due to the de facto inclusion of deconstructionist theory in postmodern ideas and the common preoccupation with alterity and indeterminacy.


9 It should be noted that the term via negativa was first used by the neoplatonist Proclus (411-485), yet achieved full expression in Dionysius. Though Dionysius was the earliest explicit philosopher of the via negativa, it can be argued that all preceding 'affirmative' religions contain negative strains of thought, particularly in intuitions of infinity and awe. The Catholic cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464)
believed that negative theology was 'so indispensable to affirmative theology that without it God would be adored, not as the Infinite, but rather as a creature, which is idolatry' (quotation in Kesick, 'Via Negativa', p.253).


15 See Jacques Derrida, Aporias, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1993) pp.79-80: 'What is [Heidegger's] analysis witness to? Well, precisely to that from which it demarcates itself, here mainly from the culture characterised by the so-called religions of the book. Despite all the distance taken from anthropo-theology, indeed, from Christian onto-theology, the analysis of death in Being and Time nonetheless repeats all the essential motifs of such onto-theology.'


22 Robert Scharlemann gives a useful summary of the disappearance of self and God in postmodernism: 'Postmodern thought means, then, a recognition that just as there is no full transparency of the self to itself but a dispersal into concrete subjectivities, so there is no world as such but many "closures". Neither the transparency of the self (or subjectivity) nor the reality of the world (objectivity) nor the unity of the two as being or God can, therefore, serve as a final basis for thought or knowledge' - Robert Scharlemann (ed.), Theology at the End of the Century - A Dialogue on the Postmodern (Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia, 1990) pp.1-13 (p.6).


24 Derrida understands the sign itself as testimony to the 'fall' from presence: 'The sign is always a sign of the Fall' (Derrida, Of Grammatology, p.283).

25 Taken from Authorised King James version.


29 For a summary of various kinds of postmodern theology, see Hart, Trespass, pp.64-70. For a more developed treatment of the subject, see David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee and Joe Holland, Varieties of Postmodern Theology (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1989); Thomas J.J. Altizer et al., Deconstruction and Theology (New York, Crossroad, 1982); Scharlemann, Theology; Coward and Foshay, Derrida.

The quotations from Derrida are taken, with a 'modified translation', from Writing and Difference, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978) p.64 and p.65.

Thomas J.J. Altizer, 'History as Apocalypse' in Altizer, Deconstruction, pp.147-77. 'Two Lurianic doctrines in particular are related to Derrida's thinking: (1) on zimzum (God's retraction or withdrawal into himself in order to make possible the creation); and (2) on shevirat ha-kelim (the 'breaking of the vessels'). Altizer, Deconstruction, pp.148-9.


See David Loy, 'The Deconstruction of Buddhism' in Coward and Foshay, Derrida, pp.255-82.


Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' in Coward and Foshay, Derrida, pp.73-142 (p.79).

Jacques Derrida, 'Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book' in Writing and Difference, pp.64-78 (p.67).

In his essay 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices' (in Coward and Foshay, Negative Theology, pp.283-324), Derrida suggests that all texts must somehow be inscribed with the procedures and voices of negative theology to confess their inclusion within and defiance towards logocentrism: 'I trust no text that is not in some way contaminated with negative theology, and even among those texts that apparently do not have, want, or believe they have any relation with theology in general. Negative theology is everywhere, but it is never by itself' (pp.309-10).


See Rudolph Otto, The Idea of the Holy, trans. by John W. Harvey (London, Oxford University Press, 1958). Otto defines the mysterium tremendum as the 'wholly other', 'that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar' (p.26). It is interesting for our analysis here that Otto does not see the mysterium tremendum as remaining absolutely other but is made understandable by its projection onto objects or particular types of discourse (p.27).


'The self-naming of I AM as a unique and actual revelation is inevitably a loss of original and total transcendence, and hence a fall from that transcendence, a fall which is the self-emptying of pure transcendence. That self-emptying can only be a fall, a fall from the plenitude of an original transcendence, but a fall which is itself the irreversible beginning of a full and final actualisation.' See Thomas J.J. Altizer, 'The Beginning and Ending of Revelation' in Scharlemann, Theology, pp.76-109 (p.77).

Andrius Valevicius points out that Levinas does not see in Judaism an encounter with the numinous, but an ethical rejection of such an encounter: 'Jewish monotheism, says Levinas, is a break with a specific concept of the holy. It does not consolidate the cosmic powers so that its God represents the sum of all powers; it does not arrange the pagan manifestations of the numinous into hierarchies; rather it denies them. Before these pagan conceptions of the holy, Judaism is atheism, “a-theos,” a godlessness: a de-idolized, de-mythologized religiosity.' See Andrius Valevicius, From the Other to the Totally Other - The Religious Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (New York, Peter Lang, 1988) p.119.


My aim in this thesis is not to develop a Marxist theory of false consciousness in regard to what I term as 'postmodern spirituality', nor shall I offer a critique of the capitalist system of economics. Rather, my intent is to demonstrate how postmodern theory is specific to a particular socio-economic structure and is not free-playing within all social ideas. Postmodernism, in short, is an ideal philosophy by which capitalism can preserve its functions.

48 Bertens, *Idea of the Postmodern*, p.7: 'In its firm belief that the attack of representation was in itself an important political act, it [postmodernism] was content to celebrate the so-called death of the subject - and thus of the author - without realizing that the end of representation has paradoxically made questions of subjectivity and authorship [...] all the more relevant. [...] The end of representation thus leads us back to the question of authorship, to such political questions as “Whose history gets told? In whose name? For what purpose?” (Marshall 1992:4). In the absence of transcendent truth it matters, more than ever, who is speaking (or writing), and why, and to whom.'

49 Kate Soper, 'Postmodernism, Subjectivity, and the Question of Value', *New Left Review*, 186 (March/April, 1991) 120-28 (p.126).


53 See also Luce Irigaray, 'Divine Women' in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993) pp.56-72. It is interesting that Irigaray also seems to lean towards an elementalism as the basis of identity. In 'Divine Women' she states her intention to examine the relation of the female body to the four elements of earth, air, fire and water. These, says Irigaray, 'determine, more or less freely, our attractions, our affects, our passions, our limits, our aspirations' (p.57).


55 For a corresponding theory of the relation between environmentalism and transcendence see Jonathon Bordo, 'Ecological peril, modern technology and the postmodern sublime', in Berry and Wernick, *Shadow*, pp.165-78.

56 See Marianne H. Marchand and Jane L. Parpart (eds.), *Feminism/Postmodernism/Development* (London, Routledge, 1995). Marchand and Parpart quote Sylvia Wally who argues that 'postmodernism in social theory has led to the fragmentation of the concepts of sex, race and class and to the denial of the pertinence of overarching theories of patriarchy, racism and capitalism' (p.5).


58 Ibah Hassan, 'The new gnosticism: speculations on an aspect of the postmodern mind', *boundary 2*, 1, 3, (1973) 547-69 (p.548).


In my introductory chapter, I developed the claim that the notion of alterity actually
denies indeterminacy because of its absolute sway within postmodern meaning and
language. The rest of this thesis is devoted to exercising this premise in the complex
domain of postmodern fiction. My project of treating alterity as metaphysical presence
could appear immediately compromised by the burden of generalising the volatile
styles within postmodern writing. For in the postmodern literary landscape, textual
definition often appears limitless and unfettered, with many novels ranging through an
astonishing file of genres, motifs and references seemingly without rest or centre.
Postmodern fiction seems to literalise the absence of grounding presence, as it offers a
confusion of voices which suggest that it is only within the priorities of one’s reading
that ephemeral meanings emerge. Brian McHale, in his treatment of the
characterisation of Anna Livia Plurabelle at the end of *Finnegans Wake*, gives a neat
summary of this literary instability:

there is no stable world behind this consciousness, but only a flux of discourse in which
fragments of different, incompatible realities flicker into existence and out of existence again,
overwhelmed by the competing reality of language.

Postmodernist fiction, in short.¹

The lack of a stable referential world and the primacy of the unstable sign is the
dominant equation of postmodern fiction. Taking as read the Foucauldian premise that
‘truth has a history’, postmodern writing sketches *realities* without foundations which,
as McHale describes, compete with one another to temporarily assert dominance without the capacity to assert truth. As these realities 'flicker', meaning becomes trace and the book descends towards an alterity that resists the reductions of a dominant thought or theme within the text.

However, building upon the groundwork laid by my introduction, I shall question the basis of this interpretation arguing especially that the stylistics of indeterminacy do not lead to an inevitable vacuum in the place of textual foundations. I shall argue that we must look at the alterity of postmodern fiction as a structuring device which denies indeterminacy through the offering of indeterminacy as theme. Furthermore, I shall move from the introduction's examination of the postmodern subject to the claim that character is still a central priority in the apparently anti-identity strategies of many postmodern works. Tying these themes of character and indeterminacy together will be my emphasis on the mystical, religious and spiritual presences common to much contemporary writing. By examining the connections between fictional indeterminacy and a religious aesthetic, I will provide an overview, to be expanded illustratively throughout this thesis, of the role played by mystical, religious or theological imagery in controlling the political and cultural message of postmodern fiction and stabilising the ontological threat generated by multiplicity.

**Postmodern characterisation**

Alongside postmodernism’s largely ineffective incursion against the subject has been an equally direct attack upon the notion of character. As the concept of the determinable and self-consistent personality has been undermined, postmodernist fiction has responded by dissolving the individual character into multiple personae and constructed worlds. The characters created by such postmodern luminaries as
Pynchon, Coover, Carter, Auster and Barthelme appear as thoroughly temporal identities whose sense of self advances and recedes, unites and fragments, under the self-conscious fictional strategies of their creators. Such a perspective upon character is naturally compounded by a sceptical relation to the authoritative and omniscient author. Postmodern fiction attempts to draw the author into the status of fiction itself, and thus consign his or her intentional authority to a vacillation between fiction and reality. In the view of Roland Barthes, the movement from the Book to the Text has removed the author from his previous equivalence with a scriptural Father:

If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper author, his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work.²

Barthes mixes any distinctive authorial mark into the 'ludic' quality of the language which the author uses. Thus the writer is soaked up by his own fictions and becomes subject to the reader's act of assembly.³ Barthes's consignment of the author to the status of fictional play is a grounding link to the postmodern destruction of character. For as Barthes's author shares in the fictionality of a text dominated by the shifting signifier, the character's bond with intentionality is loosened and the idea of the self-consistent, essential character is questioned. Postmodernism seems to have completed a suspicion towards any representation of subjectivity that aims at psychological completion or verisimilitude.⁴ Postmodern fiction steps into a world where the consistent character is displaced into fragments or confessed as a textual convention, rather than emerging from a general store of transcendent human characteristics.

Finding fiction that exemplifies this positioning is not difficult. In John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse, Barth constantly draws the reader back from subjective identification with character through self-conscious digressions on literary technique
and narrative action. In ‘Lost in the Funhouse’, the story of the boy Ambrose’s bewilderment in a disorientating fair-ground attraction is punctured by Barth’s reflections on the obedience of his narrative to literary conventions:

Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of the several standard methods of characterisation used by writers of fiction. It is also important to ‘keep the senses operating’; when a detail from one of the five senses, say visual, is ‘crossed’ with a detail from another, say auditory, the reader’s imagination is oriented to the scene, perhaps unconsciously. This procedure may be compared to the way surveyors and navigators determine their positions by two or more compass bearings, a process known as triangulation. The brown hair on Ambrose’s mother’s forearms gleamed in the sun like.5

The return to the ‘main’ flow of the narrative in the last line of the quotation seems alienated by the prior revelations of characterisation technique. By confessing the fictional design which produces Ambrose and his family, Barth tries to steer the reader away from a depth model of character based on humanistic empathy, to a postmodern awareness of the superficiality and temporality of a character dependent upon narrative technique. Yet significantly, Barth seems also to be commenting beyond the limits of characterisation. His deconstruction of character extends to a general incursion into the assumptions which support ideas of the unique and continuous subject:

No turning back now, we’ve gone too far. Everything’s finished. Name eight. Story, novel, literature, art, humanism, humanity, the self itself. [ . . . ] Who can say how near this universe has come to mere cessation? Or take two people, in a story of the sort it once was possible to tell. Love affairs, literary genres, third item in exemplary series, fourth — everything blossoms and decays, does it not, from the primitive and classical through the mannered and the baroque to the abstract, stylized, dehumanized, unintelligible, blank. (Barth, Fun House, pp.104-5)

Starting from the failure of the story, Barth works through to the disappearance of the self, as if the disintegration of fictional realism leads inexorably to the ‘blank’ of a world without ontological assurance. What is perhaps most intriguing about this passage, however, is the sense of teleological progression from the ‘primary and classical’ to the apocalyptic ‘unintelligible, blank’. Barth seems to suggest that we have reached a kind of ontological terminus where all categories and subjects dissolve
into aporia and despair, and all that is left is Barth as a ‘storyteller in an anxious
time’. What interests me here are the implications of this apocalyptic voice for the
whole conception of the fictional subject. Barth’s teleology is very reliant on notions
of a rationality that comprehends an evolutionary historical development and self-
consciously relates itself to that progression - in short, a subject. For I shall argue that
postmodern fiction still relies on the idea of character because subjectivity is an
essential component in presenting the meaningfulness of realised indeterminacy.
Postmodern characters can appear fragmented and disparate. Yet these pluralised
characters control the play of difference through a perspective which reasserts the
philosophical salience of the detached creative individual in relation to a complex
world. From such a vantage point, a metaphysics of self becomes essential to the
emphasis on textual production and also limits the indeterminacy and alterity meant to
reside within postmodern writing.

To argue that postmodern fiction consolidates, rather than threatens, character,
I shall stake my differences in relation to the more orthodox theory of postmodern
character expressed by Thomas Docherty in his recent book Alterities. Docherty’s
argument is useful because his belief that postmodern writing reveals the fallacy of the
coherent subject unwittingly seems to incorporate a revelatory teleology similar to the
historical progression given by Barth. Docherty gives the postmodern reader, and
therefore subject, a curious power by privileging his historical moment as one of total
insight into ontological and epistemological history.

Docherty proceeds from the basic opinion that:

the primacy afforded to character in the novel has been a constant means of evading the
temporality of character, the existence of character in and through time. [. . . ] This evasion of
temporality has itself been instrumental in allowing criticism’s evasion of history, in which
criticism has ‘bracketed off’ characters from novels, and novels from their historical situation
and ideological moment. (Docherty, Alterities, p.39)
Docherty scans his eye over the novel from the eighteenth century up to the postmodern period and sees a type of characterisation that postulates an essential individual travelling though time, rather than a personality in constant mutation. He rejects the argument that the morally developmental themes of, say, the Victorian novel, offer early examples of a preoccupation with temporality. Docherty counters such examples by arguing that the characters they present are in a process of ‘coming to being’ (Docherty, Alterities, p.39), a process where time contributes towards self-realisation, thus asserting the belief that there is an intrinsic self to be realised. It is this type of transcendent characterisation that Docherty sees as ethically dangerous, for it suggests that the individual is detached from the material and temporal processes of life. Consequently, the material conditions of life become of secondary importance to psychological fulfilment, and Docherty consequently views any characterisation which does not take account of temporal difference as inimical to a sound historical materialism. In some of his earlier work, Docherty suggested that the poststructuralist shift away from the authority of the author not only resulted in a more liberatory, reader-centred approach to textuality, but also made character more related to surface rather than depth. The status of character as representational surface, however, is not perceived as a vacuity for the reader, but as a sense of ontological possibility in the exploration of temporal identities. Thus postmodern characterisation, for Docherty, starts to tie in with an ethically motivated resistance to ideologies that seek to imprison identities in uniform models.

Docherty’s theoretical anchor is Foucault. Like Foucault, Docherty targets the eighteenth century as the moment where the modern subject is invented under the mythology of Enlightenment reason, a reason which in turn produced colonial
aggression tied to economic liberalism. The effect within fiction of such an ideology of the subject, particularly in the early novel, is that:

the notion of character as locus of the revelation of an essential human nature provides a form which, while seeming to grant some measure of independence and a democratic equality to the individual, actually serves to proffer a normative legitimate role for the individual in a specific social formation: in short, the novel's characters enact certain practices as socially normative. (Docherty, Alterities, p.44)

The objection here levelled at traditional characterisation is that independent, self-determining character actually constrains identity by insisting on a human nature that sanctions capitalist liberal economy. Thus the pre-postmodern fictional character serves to naturalise a bourgeois ideology and make it appear as a groundwork of identity.

Docherty presents postmodern writing as a release from humanistic characterisation, with Foucault again offering the key to this periodising shift:

Foucault has argued that 'man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge [who] will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form'. The delineaments of this new form are now being traced in postmodern modes of knowledge, narrative, and characterisation. (Docherty, Alterities, p.42)

Supported by Foucault's exposure of the agenda and history behind the subject, postmodern literature can explore a characterisation which operates an 'economy of alterity' (Docherty, Alterities, p.40). In such an economy the character does not contain a map of human nature, but acts purely as 'a locus of temporal difference' (Docherty, Alterities, p.45) which respects material temporality and social transformations. Postmodern fiction effects its disruption of the subject by fragmenting character through multiple identities and sources, by positioning characters in sites of contradiction or inconsistency, or by offering character sketches which disallow the formulation of identities free from representation.

Postmodern narrative [...] insists on offering the merest fragments of character, without ever allowing for a fully coherent construction of an identifiable whole; it is, as it were, like a series of torn photographs, a photo-montage; and frequently, in its narcissistic self-consciousness, it offers fragmentary portraits of the artist or writer. Postmodern narrative stresses the
Docherty perceives the value of postmodern characterisation as a dissolution of the 'identifiable whole' which Docherty sees as underpinning centuries of colonial imperialism. As character disperses into difference, the reader is restrained from trying to process the text in line with a belief in novelistic unity and authorial mastery. In effect the postmodern character prohibits what Deleuze and Guattari might term the 'territorialisation' of the text. Instead, the reader is left with the process of reading in all its temporal mobility rather than its imperial presence. Docherty exemplifies this 'temporal disposition or dislocation of the reading subject' (Docherty, Alterities, p.57) with Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 and Borges's 'The Garden of Forking Paths' in Labyrinths. These texts, Docherty claims, decentre the act of giving priority to ontology which accompanied traditional expectations of character and provide multiple possibilities for character interpretation. The resulting textual alterity is offered as a distinctly ethical progression from previous forms of literature because it forces acknowledgement of historical motion and fluidity, rather than attempting to dominate history in transcendent or teleological narrative:

Earlier modes of characterization are related to the imperialist and colonialist impetus of modernity's appropriation of space, and the grounds on which a position of intentional authority is afforded an imperial self through its 'knowledge' of and understanding of an oppressed characterological or epistemological Other. Postmodern characterization disturbs this position by the injection of a temporal component in the process of reading character, replacing the notion of 'position' with that of the poststructuralist displacement or 'disposition'. In short, postmodern characterization seeks to return the dimension of history which earlier modes of characterization, or of the theoretical understanding of character as 'identity', deny. (Docherty, Alterities, pp.58-9)

For Docherty, postmodern narrative is the most sincerely historical form of writing. With the advent of postmodernism, Docherty argues that we have reached a much clearer perspective on the influence of time and multiplicity upon our much treasured history of identity. The 'alterities' which surround the postmodern character liberate
the reading subject from hegemonic ways of thinking and place them in touch with the
temporality which is genuine history and the basis of what Docherty sees as a more
promising historical materialism.

Whereas Docherty sees the alterity of the postmodern character as a movement
into a historical and ethical temporality, I shall argue almost the exact reverse. For it is
my contention that postmodern narratives do not dispense with the expectations of
identity or with the reader's sense of ontological hierarchy. Instead, alterity, which is
offered as an almost transcendent motif of the stylistics of indeterminacy, actually
reaffirms psychological and philosophical models as the primary focus of the fiction.

Yet I shall begin my criticism of Docherty's theory of postmodern fiction by
targeting his assertion that postmodern characterisation is inherently more 'historical'
than previous forms of literature, a debate which I shall expand in Chapter 4. Firstly, it
must be noted that the distinctions between postmodern and previous forms of
literature, especially Modernist writing, are far from clear. Fokkema points out that
criticism of Modernist characterisation by critics like Charles Glicksberg and Dennis
Brown, has produced an analysis which likewise sees character as 'an absence, a self
stripped of ontological truth'.¹⁰ Modernist and postmodernist characterisation are
often separated by the contention that modernism still holds to the idea of the unique
subject and the 'inner reality of character' (Fokkema, Characters, p.57), even though
this subject is disordered and fragmented. Postmodernism, on the other hand, holds no
such acceptance of the subject as the centre of experience and identity formation. Yet
this distinction does not hold much coherence on account of the importance of the
reader's subjectivity in a postmodern view of history.

Docherty's account of the history of temporality in fiction is informed by a
questionable teleology in which there is an ethical progression from the ignorance of
imperialistic identity through to the enlightenment of postmodern alterity. If the characterisation of the past is exposed by Docherty as ‘historically and culturally specific’ (Docherty, Alterities, p.37) then, by implication, postmodern characterisation is the coming into consciousness of this fault; postmodernism exposes the difference that has always been present. Thus what postmodern characterisation achieves is the revelation of the pre-postmodern ideological suppression of alterity, the subjugation of difference under totality. Equally, it reveals the alterity in the subject and history that was present even in times when alterity was not conceptually asserted or valued. Through the basic process of deconstruction, Docherty attempts to show up the aporiae that were ‘present’ in texts such as Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders, Woolf’s To the Lighthouse and The Waves and Proust’s A la recherche du temps perdu, texts whose historical moment and literary form did not accede to a philosophy of implied absence but to an acceptance of core identity.

At this point, Docherty’s exposure of the alterity of character starts to strain itself against his contention that postmodern narrative is more open to the temporality of history than other forms of literature. The first problem is that the economy of alterity detaches itself from the temporal dimension that is meant to be its origin. Alterity is treated as an ahistorical reality which the pre-postmodern world suppressed in its domination of a difference that postmodernism’s theoretical archaeologists have finally unearthed. By offering the indeterminate identity as authentic, Docherty is saying that postmodernism is the moment where the true nature of the being is discovered to a greater ethical satisfaction. Postmodern fiction, therefore, does not lead to the rejection of the unitary character, but actually converges on such a subject by both promoting ontological awareness as a major theme and by showing its subjectivity as an ahistorical condition. Aleid Fokkema holds a similar conviction:
By sitting in front of a mirror in order to ‘tune in’ to her or his multiple selves [...], by reading a book which forces its reader to take up a number of different positions of subjectivity, this reader will simply exchange the old ideology of the unified subject for a belief in the fragmented self. The point is, though, that character, once liberal and now liberated, is still seen as an autonomous agent. The celebratory postmodernists are therefore less radical than they seem: the liberal belief in the autonomy of character still holds sway. (Fokkema, Characters, p.63)

Fokkema deflates any revolutionary sentiments within postmodern characterisation by identifying its latent insistence upon subjectivity as an ‘autonomous’ sphere. It may well be that the character of postmodern fiction has lost the appearance of a consonant subjectivity, but the identity of such characters still coheres around their primary function of ontological illustration and subjective definition. It is not surprising, Fokkema argues, that postmodern writers such as William Gass and Raymond Federman move the postmodern dissolution of character closer to a ‘quietist reverence of Being’ (Fokkema, Character, p.66). Once language and indeterminacy become primary, then it is a short metaphysical step before subjectivity effects a transcendental orbit over materiality and celebrates purified being. In a theological step akin to that taken by Manichean dualism, fictional alterity acts as the trope under which an intimation of pure being can be experienced and the material and spiritual worlds are effectively separated.

The economy of alterity cannot support its own time-frame and thus provides no basis for the argument that postmodernism is uniquely empathetic with material temporality. For by presenting alterity as an ontologically veracious concept, Docherty ironically subdues history in the confines of an ethical relation with difference, rather than seeing ideological moments whose content defines how the world is to be seen. To understand ‘imperialist’ conceptions of character as inadequate because of their suppression of temporality is to deny that the concept of alterity itself has a history. Alterity, like earlier notions of identity, is historically shaped into discursive and
dialogic presences which attain, however briefly, permanence and presence. Perhaps Docherty’s mistake is to attempt to free the postmodern subject from being socially constructed, by finding a position which somehow does not belong to ideology. Once such a position is held, how can one resist the ‘imperialistic’ impulse toward history that was the original point of rejection?

The pluralised and indeterminate features of postmodern fiction lead us not to an ‘economy of difference’, but to an *metaphysical aesthetic* of difference that privileges alterity almost as a surrogate divinity. For in writing a novel essentially about the absolute influence of the negative, that negativity becomes the external horizon of being, ethics and epistemology. The aesthetic of alterity in turn enables the concept of character to be preserved because it maintains fictional multiplicity within the remit of dialogues in which the viewing subject is privileged and alterity is ontologically stable. Gerald Graff takes steps towards defining the nature of these dialogues, when he shows how postmodern writing easily makes the step from self-critical form to aesthetic ‘pathos’. Graff uses Borges as a primary example and initially concludes that Borges shows:

> techniques of reflexiveness and self parody [which] suggest a universe in which human consciousness is incapable of transcending its own mythologies.\(^\text{12}\)

For Graff, Borges exemplifies what he calls the ‘tragic’ version of postmodernism. The tragedy is one of human imprisonment, where the human being, without an essence on which to balance and judge, is constantly trapped within the fictions and narratives which form its identity. The implication is that humans may be born free, but their identity is always in chains. However, Graff then makes the step of outlining the aesthetic profundity on which this tragic perspective relies. The effect of the postmodern self-involvement is to ‘generate a pathos at the absence of a transcendent
order of meanings’ (Graff, *Literature*, pp.55-6). With the creation of a mood of self-conscious loss, the ‘memory’ of the ‘undistorted’ world is aesthetically recalled from the postmodern distortions. Thus the ‘critical power of absence remains intact, giving Borges a perspective for judging the unreality of the present’ (Graff, *Literature*, p.56). Graff suggests that the absences within postmodern writing do rely upon the logocentric ideas which they lament or disrupt. So the tropes of God, self, and identity, maintain their status and priority as postmodern fiction dwells upon their loss, simultaneously protecting against this loss by communicating the ontological and epistemological *significance* of the postmodern message. So in many ways, postmodern writing is a permanent inhabitant of metaphysical and humanist values.

The important point for our assessment of character is that however fragmented the ontological order of a character may become, he or she still proclaims the centrality of the subject. Postmodern characterisation may well be stylistically different from the form found in novels in other literary periods. Yet what is not so unique is the way that it still maintains reflection on the nature of subjectivity as its primary feature. Indeed, most postmodern characters seem to offer little more than an abstract reflection upon the nature of subjectivity, its composition and reality.

An excellent example of character basing itself upon a postmodern aporia is to be found in Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. In the pivotal Chapter Thirteen, Fowles addresses the question as to who exactly is the character Sarah Woodruff, the enigmatic protagonist of the novel. The answers which are provided unsettle the relationship between fiction, subjectivity and realism:

*I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside of my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my character’s minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I assumed some of the vocabulary and ‘voice’ of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the*
age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word.  

McHale has noted this passage as an example of postmodern 'frame breaking' (McHale, Postmodernist, pp.197-8), where the author breaks the frame of the appearance of reality, thus exposing that the reader is not touching character or history in itself, but is actually living within a 'writing situation'.  

McHale describes the factor of infinite regress involved in this fictional strategy. Once history is fictionalised, all realities, including those of the author and character, become open to an endless fictional relativity as signification becomes uncertain. There is a sense in which Fowles has deliberately divided the ontological substance of Sarah Woodruff. She has moved from being a character that promises to be fully revealed, to a fictional existence whose character is split between reality and representation. In such a position 'Sarah' is under erasure: she is flattened into the surface of the text, and her character is always the testimony to the linguistic alterity within narrative identity.  

However, after Fowles's typically postmodern destabilisation of character, he then seems to perform a rather strange volte face. Following from the assertion that 'a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator' (Fowles, French, p.86), Fowles proceeds to claim that the author is now a conduit for the freedom of characters outside of the old constraints of authorial supremacy:  

The novelist is still a god, since he creates (and not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely); what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority. (Fowles, French, p.86)  

Fowles admits to the fictionality of character, but implies that this fictional status can signify a liberation from the character's subservience to the author. The digressionary Chapter Thirteen introduces the 'new theological image' of a divinity that no longer offers itself as ground, instead permitting the character/subject to show its fictionality
and thus escape the naturalistic models of social order prevalent in the Victorian era.

Fowles’s ethical policy seems to be an urge to treat the characters as subjects in their own right, subjects who are self-determining beyond the pushings and proddings of the author. Thus the author is both an alterity, because he has declared the fiction independent of author, and the authority that allows alterity to be the guiding fictional regimen. In effect, therefore, alterity is not a ‘new theological image’ but new theology, a theology where abstracted negativity assures us of the integrity of the subjective self and the absolute jurisdiction of the author. By making characterisation more self-conscious in his fiction, Fowles ironically eulogises the independence of subjectivity from narrative and, in effect, the transcendence of social constraints. Having shown us the constructed nature of subjectivity in narrative conventions, Fowles goes on to show us that the alterity of a fictional character, one beyond the control of the author, indicates the route to a full experience of the independent self.

On many levels Fowles is uncertain whether to retreat from the subjectivity of the liberal humanist tradition. Yet on the basis of my general arguments, I suggest that the problem is resolved for him by the postmodern stylistics that he applies. As much postmodernism theorises the historical subject, it keeps individual ontological integrity alive by giving priority to the significance of ontological questions, a fact that qualifies Linda Hutcheon’s idea of ‘historiographic metafiction’. Hutcheon interprets novels such as The French Lieutenant’s Woman as works which:

define the subject in terms that are rather different, in the end, from those of liberal humanist individualism and human essence. There is no transcending of the particularities of the historical and social system. The subject, in a novel like Midnight's Children, is constituted in a way that postmodern theory would define as ‘the individual in sociality as a language-using, social and historical entity’ (Coward and Ellis 1977, 1) Such a definition almost must, if not preclude, then at least challenge, the humanist faith in the individual as free, unified, coherent, and consistent. 15
Hutcheon’s postmodern literature leads away from liberal humanist notions of the individuated self towards a concept of the historically constructed and psychologically fragmented subject. The postmodern character, like Fowles’s Sarah Woodruff or Charles Smithson, is a character who is not only a product of an age, but is also produced by the representations of that age. Thus for Hutcheon the self-reflexive characterisation we see in The French Lieutenant’s Woman lays bare the process of construction and representation, and attacks the idea that there is such a thing as the ‘natural’ or ‘eternal’. Yet the techniques of this novel frequently mediate social reflections through ontological speculations and hence the material is kept subservient to an Enlightenment ‘pure’ philosophy. Hutcheon needs to give more consideration to the difference between reflecting upon society and engaging with society. Postmodernism tends towards the former activity, locking itself into an unproductive attempt to question representation while pretending to avoid any metanarrative commitment.

There is, it would seem, a real problem with Hutcheon’s argument that the liberal-humanist subject is disrupted by postmodern writing such as that of Fowles. Postmodern characterisation works by questioning the ontological securities of character and reader. Yet it also, by destabilising the metanarrative, prohibits the character’s thematic role in the novel from reaching beyond the ontological impasse into socio-historical or psychological conclusion. There are many postmodern novelists who engage directly with historical subject matter, including such luminaries as Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, Reed and Winterson. They strive for an alterity of character which cannot be included within metanarrative structures. Their characters appear to be figures of alterity, riddled with absence, otherness and multiplicity in worlds where historical forces are continually constructing and reconstructing the
subject. What occurs in this situation is a renewed, and to some extent valuable, consciousness of the relation between the subject and history. Yet what is reinforced is that the only possibility of the character reaching a metanarrative conclusion about the world in which they exist, is through the realisation of the presence of alterity and difference as a guiding philosophy. Consequently, the character's and the reader's condition becomes one distinguished by the self-conscious acceptance that one can never know the external world, but one can experience an awakening to the representational nature of that world. The effect of this realisation is actually grounded in the liberal humanist subject, as the function of character becomes that of revealing the centrality of the subject as the primary philosophical question. Seen in this light, a redefinition of alterity must be proposed. Defining alterity as the stylistic and thematic pursuit of otherness, I would argue that treating alterity as an indefinable play within the text is an unnecessary mystification. Alterity should be treated as a theme like any other, one that drives, contributes, limits. The alterity of the postmodern character is the theme of the fiction itself, a theme which relies on the humanist interest in the subject. Yet this motif seems to be more materially limited than the humanist philosophy it opposes. All postmodern characterisation is generally able to do is to discuss the subject's relation to representations of history; it is rarely able to recommend how the subject should then proceed in relation to that history. Postmodern characters rely upon the theme of the subject because, as I argued earlier in relation to Graff, they assert the need for the viewing subject to lift above history, representation, consciousness, and see the way that society and personality are constructed. Postmodernist fiction, perhaps more than any other form of literature, requires an almost transcendent subjective viewing position which enables either reader or character to perceive the alterity of character and translate this into an ethical
/ social message. Postmodernity is fundamentally an epoch which demands free subjects.

We can now see that postmodern characterisation has driven itself into a theoretical cul-de-sac, trapped between dispersing the subject in representations and ideologies and privileging the subject which recognises this situation to be so, thus asserting the conception of subjective freedom over representational imprisonment. Postmodern characters are topographically different from the characters of the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel, yet they are the same in that they still offer the common theme of the development or comprehension of human consciousness. Under this interpretation, the thematic boundaries of alterity do not engender a challenge to liberal humanism, but merely rephrase its concerns. Through the midst of various strategies of indeterminacy, emerges a basic and familiar concern with understanding the human situation and establishing philosophical understanding. Perhaps this is why the containment of postmodern nomenclature within academia has been so pronounced, as postmodernism continues a distinctly theoretical reflection on the broad content of existence, a traditional focus of liberal humanist education. If anything, postmodern fiction is the continuation of liberal humanism by other means.

Perhaps what has been most overlooked in considerations of alterity in postmodern fiction is its role as a surrogate spiritual presence against whose aesthetic power the character understands the self. Critics like Patricia Waugh have noted distinct aesthetic similarities between postmodernism, modernism and romanticism. Waugh contends that postmodernism and romanticism share a reaction against Enlightenment forms of rationality by expressing themselves in a reinvigorated aestheticism which grants art 'a central place in the organisation of human
experience'. Waugh senses in postmodernism an unwitting move from anti-foundationalism into a new aestheticism and metanarrative of self:

Remove the forever and there is the spectre of solipsism; remove the inner self as a stable entity which can be looked into and there is Nietzschean bodily driven aesthetic self-overcoming. (Waugh, Practising, p.21)

Here Waugh describes the result of a Romanticism which removed the divine I AM, but by so doing relocated the divine creativity within the aesthetic drives of the post-Enlightenment self. Waugh sees clear similarities between this Romantic aesthetic and the postmodern insistence upon alterity and the sublime. Postmodernism, Waugh claims, is not a break with but a continuation of Romantic and Modernist movements that subscribe to an aesthetically self-defining character. With the death of the metanarrative, truth and fiction merge and so the aesthetic 'has actually incorporated everything into itself' (Waugh, Practising, p.6). Combining my views on characterisation with Waugh's ideas on the postmodern aesthetic, we can argue that what postmodern characterisation offers is an aesthetic of selfhood which reveals a total and creative cognition of being. This revelatory capacity of postmodern characters can be translated as a form of aesthetic epiphany:

The epiphanic moment is supposedly immanent rather than transcendent, but similarly involving a return to a state of primordial unity before the division into subject and object, mind and body. (Waugh, Practising, p.10)

In line with Waugh's contention, I would suggest that postmodern characterisation races towards an aesthetic epiphany where the 'primordial unity' of the subject is established. By making indeterminacy and fragmentation a theme of the fictional character itself, postmodern novels strive towards an immanence that is rather a transcendence. For by making characters who fully experience their implication in the composition of the external world, postmodern fiction achieves a kind of subjective holism where the character becomes the nexus between external and internal worlds.
In addition, because metanarratives of the unified self still inform postmodern expectations, indeterminacy becomes a mode of living, a horizon for activity and a hidden creed for behaviour and perception. This is achieved, however, not by rationalistic dogma, but by offering a non-rationalistic knowledge of the self, an aesthetic instinct in which the 'truth' of the human identity lies beyond the restrictions of the conceptual in a moment beyond representation. This aesthetic describes a striking resemblance to the postmodern sublime, even though Lyotard cautioned against turning the sublime into an ideal category in itself. Yet once otherness takes the thematic centre ground, it cannot resist the metaphysical identity. The transference of the postmodern character, under what Docherty asserts as the 'economy of alterity', to an aesthetic of self, is due to a misguided resistance to foundations that only succeeds in giving a total focus on the nature of ontological identity.20

It is by such a route that the latent, or even overt, mysticism in much postmodern fiction emerges. Before examining these spiritual tendencies in greater depth, I shall give an illustration of how the aesthetic character operates within postmodern fiction. Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, like Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, deliberately confesses the fictional status of the characters, as we see here when he reflects on the image of his central character, Tomas, who stands looking out of an open window:

And once more I see him the way he appeared to me at the very beginning of the novel: standing in a window and staring across the courtyard at the walls opposite. This is the image from which he was born. As I have pointed out before, characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about.21

Kundera reveals the provenance of his characters partly in linguistic and conventional constructs, thus disquieting the humanist character who emerges out of a slavish compatibility with the 'real' humanity external to a situated personality and language.
The insistence on the character as act of metaphor, however, sits awkwardly with Kundera’s contention that the character contains ‘a basic human possibility’. Poststructuralism insists on metaphor as representative of the arbitrary nature of language. Thus when Tomas is described as metaphor, his identity seems consigned to a condition of signifying difference, rather than reaching out towards a prescription of human nature. Yet Kundera appears to hold out a certain confidence that Tomas does distinguish the real from the metaphorical. The metaphor is described as ‘containing’ the ‘basic human possibility’, offering the image that some ontological reality can be reached by looking through the metaphor to its referent. Moreover, the aesthetic procedure of the metaphor, an artistic reconnection of signifier and signified, grants to both Tomas and Kundera the possibility of defining human identity through an aesthetic act. As a result, resistance to social constraints is possible through the possession of metaphorical processes.

Ultimately, Kundera’s aesthetic prises itself away from the remit of postmodernism. His characters speak of a humanistic self-realisation that takes them beyond the confines of totalitarianism. Kundera’s characters reach out towards the possibility of a liberated human essentiality:

The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each has crossed a border which I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own ‘I’ ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about. The novel is not the author’s confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become. (Kundera, Lightness, p.221)

For Kundera, the characters of his novels project the liberation of a defined and self-determining subjectivity. His hostility seems mostly directed towards that which imprisons the ‘I’ in ‘the trap the world has become’. What his characters give, by an act of aesthetic envisioning, is a set of surrogate selves for the authorial subjectivity. Yet these selves are able to explore a multitude of ontological possibilities only by
virtue of their relation to a mystical 'border' where the individual reaches a position of
fulfilment beyond social hegemonies. Kundera hints towards an ineffable moment
where the 'I' dissolves and being becomes purified in a moment of unity with that
which lies beyond all categorisation. The alterity that resides in the representational
confessions of The Unbearable Lightness of Being does not act as the awareness of
suppressed others, but gestures in the direction of an Absolute Other in all its
theological overtones and epiphanic expectations. Alterity is not conceptually
explained, but is used as a subjective border through which being is encountered,
transforming alterity into an aesthetic compulsion with all the pathos and mysticism of
the romantic exploration of self.

Kundera's appreciation of character is far from typical of all contemporary
writers, yet he displays an urge which is inherent in much postmodern fiction. Kundera
explores characterisation, its voids and metaphoricity, in order to reach
towards an intuitive conception of the self and its place in the world. The mystical
resonance of the 'border' where the 'I' dissolves is extremely significant not only in
the context of my debate of the postmodern character, but for this thesis as a whole.
The alterity sought through much postmodern characterisation is not an endless
testimony to the processes of difference, but actually elicits an aesthetic ideal of self
definition where subjectivity is retained, even heightened, by the ontological priorities
of otherness. The voids of postmodern psychology are custom-made for a radical self-
consciousness that relies upon trans-rational allusions in a foundationless context.
This argument leads me back to the point I made in Chapter One: alterity is a specific
theme which functions as an ontological stabiliser and quasi-religious experience. The
indeterminacy of postmodern fiction, like the god of negative theology, keeps the
characters in relation to an absolute that cannot be defined but which grounds the
interpretative process of understanding. My complaint is not that postmodern fiction produces this acute ontological consciousness. I believe that a confidence in the subject is an essential of inter-personal discourse. My main concern is that postmodernism's sense of moving beyond the traditional self produces an aporetic philosophy that transcends social content rather than engaging with it. Above all, postmodernist appeals to alterity and indeterminacy often belie the strict functions that otherness plays in revisiting and reinforcing traditions of omniscient subjectivity. The 'border' to which Kundera refers seems a more accurate rephrasing of the term alterity, for negativity opens a borderzone that the subject must cross to understand its true ontological condition. This condition has more to do with sublimity and ideality than it does with temporality and fragmentation. Thus I shall now consider the relation between theology and alterity in postmodern fiction in particular, before offering a summary of what I see as the functions of this spiritual alterity within different postmodernist fictional settings.

**Fictional alterity and postmodern spirituality**

As I have made an explicit allegiance between postmodern alterity and metaphysical negativity, there is a primary problem which must be faced in applying this contention to a literary environment. The problem is essentially that of defining how alterity is reified within a postmodern text when terms such as 'alterity', 'other', even 'postmodernism' are not actually present in the text. Many would claim that the typical construction of a postmodern novel prohibits reification and centralisation, and any attempt to discern a metaphysical master trope is somewhat missing the point. Fictional alterity, they might say, is not a thing or a theme, but the absence within a metafictional text that prevents the establishment of an interpretational ground with
which to totalise the narrative. Thus any spiritual or religious motifs produced by the postmodern text are relational not central and have their metaphysical security constantly eroded by the irrepressible 'presence' of alterity. By way of direct contrast, my argument shall be that postmodern fiction centralises alterity as that which visibly governs the priorities of style and content within the text, even to the extent of alterity receiving clear names, often capitalised, that signpost the development of the plot. Once it attains this visibility within the text, alterity can become a thematic absolute that dominates, contra Docherty, the other elements of the text. In short, alterity is the most important thing within the postmodern novel, as its conscious recognition is a precondition of the political, ethical and subjective content of the novel. I have already argued that postmodern alterity enhances rather than destabilises the priority of character and subject. Building on this contention, I shall argue that the intense relationship that postmodern fiction builds between a self-conscious subject and a visible theme of alterity explains the distinctly religious dimension in postmodern writing. Moreover, this metaphysical dimension is not merely something which the literary critic extracts, but is also a very explicit property of much contemporary writing. Part of my overall concern in this thesis is to show why the ostensibly anti-metaphysical stance of postmodern fiction has so consistently involved itself with spiritual motifs whose purpose cannot be explained away by parody or metafictionality.

A useful way into the main body of my arguments is through the introductory chapter of Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser's Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory. Budick and Iser posit negativity in fiction as that which 'in its very nature eludes conceptualization'. Despite this, negativity retains a function as an opening up of the 'unsayable', with negativity
qualifying the static presences of language and placing the text within "the sequential or temporal nature of the play movement itself" (Budick and Iser, *Negativity*, p.xiii).

Budick and Iser seem to align themselves with a typically Derridean position in relation to the negative, where negativity is not a thing in itself, but an operation of the text which opens up meaning to greater play and reveals that which is unsaid in the text. Throughout their introduction, they are insistent that negativity should never be treated as a thing in itself, and that the 'presence' of negativity is discernible only in terms of its effect.  

A negativity which is traceable only through its impact exists in marked opposition to an Hegelian negativity whose dialectical concept appropriates negativity for the purpose of bringing about self-consciousness. Indeed, in the modern post-Hegelian tradition there is a tendency to reify negativity by conceiving it as a determined negation or even as a kind of ordained enabling structure. Alternatively, it is defined as an antithesis to the empirical world which, as antithesis, incipiently affirms something that is as yet absent, though heralded. (Budick and Iser, *Negativity*, p.xiii)

Budick and Iser are resistant to a Hegelian negativity on the grounds that it treats the negative as a dialogic element which manoeuvres the subject towards synthetic goals. Thus Hegelian negativity is reified and transformed into either an essential principle or a transcendental category, both of which operate as foundations. It is the dialectical concept of reification which Budick and Iser assault that I find most convincing when trying to understand tendencies of negativity and alterity in postmodern fiction. What Budick and Iser need to explain is how negativity can resist becoming a reified and dialogical quality once it enters into conceptual discourse. Budick and Iser give fictional negativity a metaphysical edge by paradoxically locating it beyond rational appropriation while strenuously attempting to define its scope of effect, its antitheses, and its descriptive shape. In saying that the concepts of negativity are always inadequate, Budick and Iser imply that the assignation of presence to alterity, something inevitable in fiction where alterity is top of the novelistic hierarchy, is
somehow inauthentic to the 'real' nature of the negative. The problem then becomes one in which the fictional content is rendered subservient to an all-powerful alterity to which the subject relates, but at the same time says it cannot grasp. This denial of perception in effect brings about the suspension of social commitment and the free-floating subject which I noted in my introductory chapter, as alterity leaves its effects at the level of cognitive disruption without proceeding to social recommendation.

Returning to the 'dialectical concept' which 'appropriates negativity for the purpose of bringing about self-consciousness', I believe that this is in fact an accurate description of the way that alterity functions in postmodern fiction. For what most postmodern fiction achieves is the gathering of all the elements of the novel under the umbrella of alterity. Reified by its own metaphysical packaging, alterity then becomes a site in itself which starts to work like the endlessly deferred God of the via negativa: the silence that never reveals itself but which is always in dialogue with the subject's consciousness of its own spiritual condition. Returning to Altizer, we could also argue that postmodern alterity reaches towards an apocalyptic moment of history where the negative is faced in all its absolute sway and potency and all metanarratives collapse. Thus postmodern fiction's play upon images of social collapse and degeneration can be interpreted as a stripping away of the socially extraneous in the hunt for the tense confrontation with otherness.

A fictional example will help illustrate these points. As I said above, alterity is merely a label for the postmodern stylistics of indeterminacy. These stylistics equal the standard package of postmodern writing strategies described by McHale and many others, strategies which disrupt conventional expectations of linearity, chronology, subject matter and intelligibility. Yet, indeterminacy is used not so much as the process within language, but route for a pilgrimage towards a final confrontation with
the eternal negative. In Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, we have a text layered with all the circuitous trappings of the detective novel, with the appropriate emphasis on the activities of deduction. Yet the rational security usually found in deductive activity is undermined by a continual pull into the *total* negativity of an arbitrary and uncontrollable expansion of signs and worlds. In 'City of Glass', Quinn, the self-styled detective, is one who initially holds out a confidence in the integration of signs into meaning:

> The detective is the one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable.  

Quinn's definitions of the detective and the writer depend on a belief in a stable world of evidence comprised of present elements capable of being drawn together into a coherent and definitive dénouement. However, once Quinn accepts the job of protecting the psychologically damaged Peter Stillman from his potentially murderous father, any analytical confidence collapses and structural confusion mounts in both reader and character. Quinn impersonates the detective named as Paul Auster, who ultimately turns out, not surprisingly, to be a writer rather than a detective. His subjective integrity split by this metafictional device, Quinn's attempt to pursue Peter Stillman senior is further hampered by two identical Stillmans appearing at New York Grand Central Station, the place where Quinn is meant to pick up Stillman senior's trail. Quinn's selection of which one to follow is thus an arbitrary selection. The clash of arbitrariness and significance is continued in Quinn's physical representation of Stillman's wanderings about New York. By drawing on a map Stillman's movements around the city, Quinn starts to see patterns of letters developing which, after several days of charting, appear as the sequence 'OWER OF BAB'. Quinn deduces that this sequence is part of the phrase 'The Tower of Babel', a theological preoccupation of
the young Stillman senior who as a religious writer was obsessed with the Fall from God's original language. It was this language that he attempted to discover by imprisoning his son in complete solitude for the early years of his life, hoping for the spontaneous manifestation of original speech in the absence of social corruption.

'City of Glass' is principally preoccupied with the status of words and their (in)ability to connect with reality. Signifying connections are questioned by Stillman junior's absurd, self-contradictory speech, the historically documented obsession with the original language of God, and Quinn's growing awareness that the patterns he discerns may be *his* act of writing where words shift in a contingent and volatile assembly. As Quinn contemplates the words drawn from Stillman's urban wanderings, the credibility that he attaches to referential fixity becomes increasingly agitated:

But the letters continued to horrify Quinn. The whole thing was so oblique, so fiendish in its circumlocutions, that he did not want to accept it. Then doubts came, as if on command, filling his head with mocking, sing-song voices. He had imagined the whole thing. The letters were not letters at all. He had seen them only because he has wanted to see them. And even if the diagrams did form letters, it was only a fluke. Stillman had nothing to do with it. It was all an accident, a hoax he had perpetrated on himself. (Auster, *New York*, p.71)

Quinn's doubts about words and world having any necessary connection are not resolved in the story. The recurrent blending of fact, fiction, presence and absence eventually lead Quinn, and the reader, into the predictable postmodern impasse where no narrative centre seems possible. By the end of the story, the case of Peter Stillman and his father have receded behind the issue of Quinn's steady psychological disappearance into the vacuity of assumed personality and uncertain meaning. Quinn rapidly becomes uncertain of who he is, to which sector of society he belongs, how to interpret his plight, and where lies the kernel of his identity. 'City of Glass' seems to be a story charged with the negativity described by Budick and Iser and the alterity
understood by Docherty, for it reveals nothing but the temporality, alterity and difference within meaning and language.

And yet this is not the full picture. There is a metaphysical dimension to 'City of Glass' which cannot be overlooked, even though the novel's epistemology would appear to be in the radically anti-metaphysical stance of much postmodern fiction. In a theology based upon a via negativa, God is always sought by way of negation. Through the continual rejection of the sufficiency of signs, the religious aspirant is able to move closer towards the encounter with the ineffable which is the truth of existence, albeit an inconceivable truth. As we saw in my introduction, theology has aligned itself with poststructuralist theory because it perceives the latter as moving towards an absolute recognition of alterity and absence; in a sense, the negativity left by God's demise is so absolute that it becomes a new centre, or truth, of meaning. Auster's 'City of Glass' is self-consciously related to poststructuralist linguistics in its content, but I also believe that the theological elements of the story are part of the general postmodern presentation of alterity as an absolute, reified centre which unwittingly attests to the presence of meaning and the necessity of metanarratives.

'City of Glass' is framed by the impossible quest for the original Word of God. The elder Peter Stillman locked his infant son away in solitude in the hope that he would produce evidence of an uncorrupted language direct from the divine. Quinn's further investigations into the history of this quest show Stillman to be one of a long line of people to be obsessed with those detached from all social contact, hoping to obtain an unmediated contact with the divine. A connection between theology and poststructuralism emerges from Stillman's belief that with the fall of humankind from the grace of God, comes a severance of word from object and a loss of defining power initially established by Adam:
In that state of innocence, his tongue had gone straight to the quick of the world. His words had not been merely appended to the things he saw, they had revealed their essences, had literally brought them to life. A thing and its name were interchangeable. After the fall, this was no longer true. Names became detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language had been severed from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, not only records the fall of man, but the fall of language. (Auster, *New York*, p.43)

The movement from the fall of humankind to the fall into arbitrary signs brings to mind Derrida's claim that 'The sign is always a sign of the Fall'.

‘City of Glass’ seems to be a fictional illustration of this claim. Stillman's failed experiment results not in an original divine language, but in the random patterns of his son’s speech. Furthermore, Quinn’s attempt at detective work leads to epistemological doubt rather than deductive satisfaction.

However, the lapsarian theme of the story means that alterity and indeterminacy which Auster pursues is focused into a thematic presence by the dependence upon divine imagery and allusion. What seems to be a priority in ‘City of Glass’ is that the ineffable divine and absolute alterity are commensurable, for both place being into a metaphysical relation to the absolute other of what is beyond the text. Reflecting upon the nature of Quinn's epistemological journey, we find some quite distinct parallels can be made with the spiritual journey of negative theology. Quinn starts out with a belief in the total sufficiency of words, yet becomes aware of the Fall and its disruptive effects upon language. After this point, Quinn’s identity becomes more vacuous and shapeless, mirroring the traditional self-emptying of the negative pilgrim. The processes of cancellation and negation go on until Quinn finally meets his creator, the ‘Author’, Paul Auster. This meeting is unsettling for Quinn when he finds out that Auster is a writer rather than a detective, the writer's profession tying Quinn back into the impossible world of words. The meeting is also unsettling for us as readers, for we see Paul Auster as both the ironic creator of the text and a fictional character. The pull between these two ontological conditions places the
Author in the absolute negativity which has been the steadily revealed throughout the novel. ‘Paul Auster’ is the alterity between the internal and the external, but therefore his negativity extends over both worlds in a heightening of negative power. My argument, therefore, is that ‘City of Glass’ is not a story which assaults the metaphysics of presence associated with postmodernity. Instead, the story teleologically leads the reader up to a recognition of negativity itself embodied through the absolute negativity of God/Author. The reader guided through various patterns of indeterminacy to the point where indeterminacy itself is recognised in the trope of the negative author and so meaning is returned and alterity becomes a thematic visibility. Irena Makarushka has argued that:

> Though the gods have fled, the need to create meaning out of chaos remains a compelling and immediate concern, a concern common to both literature and religion.\(^{29}\)

What the indeterminate features of postmodern writing achieve is the ultimate satisfaction of the concern to create meaning. By pushing deeper and deeper into an exposure of the effects of alterity, postmodern fiction makes the whole process of indeterminacy meaningful and visible. For like the negative divine, alterity stabilises chaos as it becomes a significant location in itself and a challenge to the nature of being.

Going back to the ‘dialectical concept’ attacked by Budick and Iser, we can also say that the steady revelation of the negative is an alteration in the relationship to both historical and subjective consciousness. Alongside the theme of the fallen sign in ‘City of Glass’ runs the theme of Quinn’s psychological transformation and social displacement. With every aporetic deduction, Quinn experiences a mental deterioration and a plunge into an isolated, vagrant lifestyle. Yet because this social disintegration is primarily illustrative of the negativity in culture, language and
representation, the social content of the novel is dominated and even devalued by the
discourse of otherness within which it is framed. Negativity constantly distinguishes
Quinn’s subjectivity in an epistemological plight that reaches an epiphany of the
negative as the absolute absence of God throughout the history of humankind’s search
for His voice. The multiple social elements of this story, and the postmodern novel in
general, are ultimately restrained by the overall preoccupation with evoking the
negative, as the alterity of such fiction stands out as the meaning of the novel itself.
Thus there is much critical agreement in postmodern literary criticism about what
postmodern fiction means and suggests, maybe not in terms of the minutiae of the
plot, but certainly in terms of what general principles are illustrated. (General
principles are, after all, what postmodernism has been most keen to disturb.) Alterity
is now a qualifying thematic code which must be included in the dialectics of
discursive presences; instead it is treated as an ineffability which must be preserved.

What is important in Auster’s theological preoccupations is the fact that
postmodern fiction and religious negativity offer the same goal: confrontation with
alterity. As we shall see, the religious imagery that appears with an insistent frequency
in postmodern writing is symptomatic of the desire to encounter the ‘purity’ of what is
beyond language, or what cannot be contained in language. Postmodern writing does
not disorganise metaphysical absolutes, but hints at the absolute alterity of the divine
to give negativity the almost metalinguistic status of the absolute, and capitalised,
Other.

Postmodern literary criticism has overlooked what Steven Connor calls the
‘addressivity’ of the novel, a term which refers to the novel as an act of
communication between subjects. Rather than focusing on the postmodern novel as
an abstract resistance to totality, it can be more useful to voice the question: What is
this novel trying to communicate? Placing this question around the theme of alterity can yield some significant results, because in many ways the techniques of indeterminacy in postmodern fiction seem to be trying to communicate not only alterity itself, but also an inviolable ethics within such alterity. Texts do not exist in vacuums, and postmodern fiction must develop, if not start with, a particular communicative aim, or otherwise it would not become a publication event or a literary entity. This communicative aim, I would suggest, is to promote the independence of the individual through an empowering alterity. By ostensibly deconstructing values and metanarratives, while using mystical overtones to transform alterity into a potent symbol, postmodern fiction celebrates the revelation of a new meta-linguistic centre for action. For by offering alterity as a mystical property which is able to suggest a new ethics without ethics, postmodernism is able to intellectually hedge its bets, with alterity offering a meaning which supposedly cannot be stated. (The resilience of deconstructive theory is a good indicator of why mysticism has been so perennially successful.) What is important here is that negativity in postmodern novels has its own communicative project; thus it is either implicitly or overtly reified as a thematic quantity. Part of any process of reification is the search to find appropriate analogies and metaphors with which to express the quality of the object which is described. In the case of alterity, the analogous material is to be found ready-made in the metaphysical negativities of religious and theological language and imagery.

What we have in much postmodern fiction is access to a centralised negativity which is frequently sculptured out of the icons and allegories of the religious. John A. McClure is a theorist quick to point out that postmodern writing is far from secular either in social project or literary tone.31 McClure indicates that although the last two or three decades may not have seen an increase in formal attendance at religious
institutions, they have seen a general resurgence of interest in the more mystical and alternative branches of spirituality. In particular, Eastern religions, feminist spirituality, ecological mysticism and New Age faiths have taken a hold over large communities of individuals. McClure contends that postmodern fiction seems to be exploring such new spiritualities (new in Western terms), and in so doing offer alternative ontologies to that secured by western capitalist rationalism. Using such texts as Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* and Don Delillo’s *White Noise*, McClure shows that postmodern fiction is soaked in religious, supernatural and mystical allusion. These allusions draw upon both fundamental and alternative faiths, as well as creating new spiritualities which are mediated through the language and imagery of media religiosity. McClure goes on to argue that while postmodern fiction does not explicitly propound or defend spiritual perspectives, it at least offers them as challenges to the ontologies of secularism:

Wild and defiantly unrealistic exercises in irreverent citation, genre-splicing, excess, caricature, and the grotesque, they [postmodern texts] run so against the grain of realistic or even modernist seriousness that it seems absurd, at first, to treat them as taking any issues seriously. And yet if they seem cosmically irreverent, they are also comically cosmic: they address sacred alternatives to secular constructions of reality in ways that invest these alternatives with a certain authority and invite us to reflection. If we accept this invitation, of course, the joke may be on us: there’s always the suggestion, in these texts, that any kind of faith, secular or spiritual, is folly. But if we refuse the invitation, the case is the same: for the texts also suggest that secularism is a form of mystification and that those who accept its definition of possibility are victims of a world historical ruse. (McClure, ‘Post-Secular’, p.149)

McClure suggests that postmodern fiction uses spirituality to embrace a cosmic panoply of alternative ontologies. By being involved with such ontologies, the metanarratives of secularity are undermined and we are faced with a ‘polyontological cosmology’ (McClure, ‘Post-Secular’, p.149), where mechanistic and rationalistic totalities are faced by the other of instinct and mysticism. The emphasis which McClure places upon the cosmic is significant, because he implies that the spirituality of postmodern fiction is part of a motivation towards a more holistic recognition of
multiplicity than secularism can allow. In particular, McClure offers postmodern writing as a testing ground for ontological constructions and ways of perceiving reality.

In the case of a text such as *Gravity's Rainbow*, McClure contends that its "ontologically plural and undecidable world [. . .] might for instance be seen, paradoxically, as both the "foundation" for and the product of a specifically postmodern quest for something like truth" (McClure, *Post-Secular*, p.150). As I argued above, postmodern fiction contains its own version of the traditional epistemological quest for truth and consequently forms the association between alterity and religious language. Furthermore, postmodern fiction attempts to confront the subject, either character or reader, with alterity itself. This confrontation, I would suggest, not only challenges the subject's self-perceptions but also enforces the need for the subject's exploration of the various surrounding ontologies. Life, once confronted by alterity, becomes a form of pilgrimage through a world of multiple ontologies in which the negative acts as a constant, judgmental presence which questions the seeker's conclusions, yet also promises the 'truth' of a foundational negativity. John Barth's character Henry Burlingame in *The Sot-Weed Factor* is a prime example of this postmodern quest, as he journeys through the New World, trying on different personalities, all the time recognising the absolute void which hangs beneath identity and reality.

My own explanation of the rationale behind postmodern spirituality goes somewhat against that of McClure's. I would argue that the spirituality in postmodern fiction is not simply the attempt to provide alternative ontologies to those of western commercialism. If we consider, say, New Age religion, it is ironic that an ostensibly anti-commercial philosophy has become such a major appropriation of business
enterprise. Successfully marketed on the basis of its intuitive, non-rational content, New Age faiths have provided a wealth of commercial offshoots ranging from mystical books to healing crystals, all of which have a distribution base that extends across the entire range of social categories. What is intriguing about this situation is the easy alliance made between a mainly aporetic mysticism and capitalist venture, an alliance that indicates capitalism's usual flair for absorbing alternative ontologies. In an age when the market and its concomitant individualism are dominant, aporetic religions form ideal spiritualities because they create a faith out of the individualism of intuition while rarely intruding upon the social policy of capitalism itself. So what is the significance of this state of affairs for the analysis of postmodern fiction? McClure is surely wrong in seeing postmodern spirituality as a resistance to capitalism. Instead, the religious mood in much postmodern fiction enshrines the individuality on which capitalism thrives by presenting alterity as a kind of divinity that locates meaning only within separate selves. Postmodern literature can, and often does, launch into criticisms or parodies of the capitalist system, but in the end the foundations of the market are left untouched by a religiosity that implicitly advocates systems of self, rather than social, government.

From a more structural angle, postmodern spirituality can be seen as part of the quasi-mystical dialogue which results when alterity and negativity become reified themes within themselves. Returning to Connor's theme of the 'addressivity' of the novel, we can say that alterity, when communicated through techniques of narrative indeterminacy and juxtaposed worlds, maximises the religious themes of the ineffable and the indescribable, while also positing this indescribability as the reality about the nature of meaning and being. A more compact way of saying this is that postmodern negativity, and postmodern fiction, leads us back to the great subjects of God and self.
On such a basis, we can also debate whether postmodern literature's absorption of popular forms is a sincere attempt to break the hierarchies of language, or merely the attempt to embrace all in a philosophy of negativity.

An alliance between poststructuralism and religion has been solidly forged over the last thirty years, so it is hardly surprising that novels written under the auspices of contemporary theory should produce distinctly mystical images and themes. What these images and themes actually are will be a dominant concern of this thesis, with the following chapters offering close analysis of particular writers and their relationship to theology and alterity. Before moving on to this examination, however, it is important to spell out some of the general images of postmodern spiritual representation and describe some of the functions which alterity can perform in various fictional settings.

Religious representation in postmodern fiction can come in as many forms as religion itself, both in terms of style and spiritual content. The range of religions which are encountered extends across the entire theological spectrum, with texts such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*, and Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* representing all manner of faiths, oriental and occidental, alternative and orthodox. Other texts, an early postmodern example being Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, keep more closely to a single religion: in Gaddis's case his entire epic is mysteriously hung together upon Christian iconography. Often in these texts, religion is treated to a searching critique of its relation to various mechanisms of oppression in a particular culture. So in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, the fundamentalist manifestations of Hinduism and Islam are treated to a critique of their ability to quash dissenting voices and standardise culture. However, the critique of orthodoxy has never been an enemy to the more mystical and
negative forms of spirituality, and even in the midst of postmodernism's direct political writing, there is a sense in which the desire for a world without totality produces a more mystical yearning for the indefinability of self and existence. What links much of postmodern religious representation is the attraction towards the peripheries of orthodox faith, where, in line with postmodern anti-representationalism, language and reality are treated as mobile qualities and truth is forever mediated but constantly sensed. By utilising mysticism in its fiction, postmodernism is able to grant alterity the place often left by the demise of the 'direct, epileptic word'. For mysticism presents little threat to poststructuralist sentiments. It allows negativity a spiritual authority by alluding to foundations of reality while confessing the vacuity of those foundations. What is left is a resonance where the intuitive and irrational aspects of faith come to the fore. The situation arises in which alterity and religion meet in the common ground of deferral and ambiguity, both offering up the anchor of a centre, but a centre which pretends to retreat into ineffability and silence. So the primary function of alterity is to ground the postmodern novel with a meaningful centre. Often this involves giving alterity some motif that represents the aporetic middle. These motifs are varied and can involve either a physical object, such as the rocket in Gravity's Rainbow, or a human condition, such as death in Delillo's White Noise. Another typical strategy is to capitalise negative words in the same way as capitalised deities, with terms such as 'Nothing' and 'Silence' changing alterity into a potent void that terrorises or inspires the subject. With these systems of imagery, alterity can function in all manner of roles, but commonly it seems to be representing the numinous presence of absent meaning, which functions in every way as ineffable meaning.
What we shall see repeatedly throughout this thesis, is the reapplication of religious alterity to present the profundity of postmodern alterity. As I have claimed in my introductory chapter, postmodernism is an epoch which works within certain metaphysical boundaries and expectations. In postmodern fiction, metaphysical and mystical themes are unavoidably produced when indeterminacy is pursued as a communicative presence within itself. Once alterity becomes a reified focus, then a suitable system of imagery and language is required to convey the message, or ontological impact, of alterity. Religious language provides this system because it is able to secure a profound expectation of meaning, yet apparently defer the final encounter with the source of meaning.

Postmodern fiction displays a deeply mystical aesthetic, because any text which uses alterity, otherness and negativity as structural principles is inherently moving in religious language. I am not suggesting that the postmodern tendency towards religiosity is always unwitting. As we shall see in the cases of John Barth, Peter Ackroyd and Don Delillo, there is a sense in which the postmodern encounter with absence is the intense realisation of a fundamental spiritual condition. Alterity’s primary function is as a stabilising factor in the apparently aporetic text. Postmodern fiction seems to be a world of fleeting fragments and broken signs, an anarchic textual world where foundations are not to be found. However, the total play of meaning within a postmodern text is restrained by alterity itself because the ontological confrontation with negativity, made infinitely more profound by the religious language carried within, keeps the text within the familiar obligations of referential meaning. Therefore, fictional alterity is essentially an act of liberal humanist communication, a communication which constructs the indeterminate aspects of the text as gestures towards the demand for making meaning. With its subsequent
reification, alterity operates as a quasi-mystical property which gives the text a code of discursive identity and generic communication while always masking such identity in the appearance of void and aporia. Alterity in postmodern fiction is a disingenuous void, and its primary function is to maintain the importance of meaning and identity, not to disrupt it.

In the chapters that follow, I shall take alterity to be an umbrella under which the attempt is made to create a contemporary spirituality. In Chapter Two, I shall look at alterity in the symbolic function of representing mortality, focusing particularly on the images of death in selected novels from Thomas Pynchon, Don Delillo, and Kurt Vonnegut. Chapter Three will see a shift from the symbolic to the allegorical, using John Barth, Angela Carter and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* to show how the alterity of such texts enables the postmodern allegory to retain the allegorical function of spiritual or psychological lesson by maintaining the reference to 'real' world revelations. In Chapter Four, I shall present alterity as a trans-historical judgement. Here the striving for negativity in historical narrative unwittingly leaves the individual with a subject-centred power over historical meaning. Key authors in this chapter will be Peter Ackroyd, Umberto Eco and Toni Morrison. In all these chapters I will distinguish those authors who actually *embrace* foundational impulses and thus strain against their incorporation in the postmodern canon. These authors are important not only because they reveal postmodern theory's tendency to misappropriate certain texts to its sympathy, but also because they demonstrate the alternatives to an anti-foundational approach. My final chapter will focus exclusively on Salman Rushdie. In Rushdie I see one of the best alternatives to the postmodern obsession with otherness without declining into an unwelcome dogmatism. Using Bakhtinian ideas of dialogism, I shall claim that Rushdie uses religion to contemplate a human identity
half-way between materiality and spirituality, a blend that protects against some of the excesses of postmodern individualism.

Linking all these chapters together will be a preoccupation with the religious content of the visions of negativity. Postmodern writing, I believe, is generally a collection of genres which insist upon the philosophy of human existence rather than the content of human existence. There is a latent transcendentalism in fictional alterity which can be seen as an explanation of the persuasive presence of religious codes and voices within postmodern fiction. I shall not argue against the acceptability or credibility of such spirituality. What I shall question, however, is the common acceptance of postmodern fiction as resisting foundations and metanarratives when, in actual fact, the techniques of indeterminacy produce fundamental ontologies and a sense of the absolute which overrides any aporiae within the text.

NOTES


3 On Barthes’ reappraisal of the status of the author, Eagleton suggests that the ‘biography of the author is, after all, merely another text, which need not be ascribed any special privilege: this text too can be deconstructed. It is language which speaks in literature, in all its swarming “polysemic” plurality, not the author himself. If there is any place where this seething multiplicity of the text is momentarily focused, it is not the author but the reader’. See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1996) pp.119-20 (p.120).

4 For the moment I shall make no distinction between the theories of Derrida and Foucault. Alex Callinicos makes the distinction between the Foucauldian ‘power-knowledge’ poststructuralism and the ‘Textualism’ of Derrida. Though this distinguishes between constituted and differential identity, both positions seem to offer an ethical ground in a subject who recognises his own lack of essentiality and thus resists the language and metaphysics of totalising ideas. See Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism - A Marxist Critique* (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1990) pp.68-91.


10 The quotation here used by Fokkema (p.58) is from Charles I. Glicksberg, *The Self in Modern Literature* (University Park, PA., Pennsylvania, 1963) pp.xi-ii.

11 See Fokkema, *Character*, p.66: 'Like those who celebrated liberated and multiple selves, Gass, Federman, and others turn away from analysing the strategies of discourse, the functioning of language, or the effects of social and cultural patterns, and move towards a quieter reverence of Being.'


14 This phrase is from McHale's quotation (p.198) of Ronald Sukenick, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1985) p.25. Sukenick contends that in giving priority to the act of reading and writing, Fowles prevents the reader 'from being hypnotised by that illusion of that make-believe so effective in the hands of nineteenth century novelists but which by now has become a passive escapist habit of response to a creative work'. While accepting this historical disruption, I would argue that instead the reader becomes hypnotised by the aesthetic of the moment of disruption and its subjective profundity. Consequently, historical factuality in a novel such as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is always subjugated under its function of illustrating postmodern alterity.


16 Hutcheon admits that postmodernism does not sever itself from 'liberal humanist culture', as the postmodern techniques of parody and pastiche always incorporate that which it unsetles. Instead, postmodernism disturbs liberal humanism 'from within its own assumptions' (Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p.6). This admission of postmodern incorporation does not protect Hutcheon's argument against the contention which I shall develop here, namely that postmodernism effects a continuation of the liberal humanist tradition of subjective priority. The act of disruption is always centred upon self-realisation, a foundation of humanist thinking.


19 'Postmodern theory can be seen and understood as the latest version of a long-standing attempt to address social and political issues through an aestheticised view of the world, though it may be more thoroughly aestheticising than any previous body of thought.' (Waugh, *Practising*, p.6).

20 Waugh, *Practising*, p.59: 'In my view, it is most fruitful to see Postmodernism in its literary modes not dissolving but rescuing the possibility of coherent subjectivity, historical significance and ethical stability by re-examining rather than refuting their foundations in modern thought and representation.'


22 Derrida argues that metaphor is the perennial condition of language, and no step can be outside of a position of metaphoricity. 'How could a piece of knowledge or language be clear or obscure properly speaking? All the concepts which have played a part in the delimitation of metaphor always have an origin and a force which are themselves "metaphorical"'. See Jacques Derrida, 'White Mythology', *New Literary History*, 6 (1974) 5-74 (p.54). See also Jonathon Culler, *On Deconstruction - Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London, Routledge, 1993) pp.146-48, pp.243-46.

23 It is interesting that these moments of self-conscious reflection in Fowles and Kundera occur when the characters are placed before open windows looking out. Perhaps the significance is that the author and the character in a sense look at one another in an act of judgement about the ontological condition of author and character. In line with my general argument, this moment does not necessarily disrupt the confidence of the fictional subject, but places both figures in a reciprocal acknowledgement of confronting another who challenges a reassessment of ontological priorities.

25 Mark C. Taylor's 'a/theology' likewise attempts to deny the 'presence' of alterity and difference by phrasing absence in terms of disruption: 'There is always difference within identity and absence within presence. Through an unexpected inversion, repetition and representation turn out to involve a “depresentation” that disrupts presence and dislocates the present.' Like Budick and Iser, Taylor sees alterity in terms of its internal effects, yet Taylor is a prime example of one whose style and preoccupations lend alterity a discursive transcendence through the infinite regress of pure difference. For quotation see Mark C. Taylor, *Erring*, p.49.


27 See Frank Kermode, ‘Endings, Continued’ in Budick and Iser, *Negativity*, pp.71-94. ‘As in all discourse on God, even the most apophatic, there is the trace. The power of negative theology to speak in its own way of God comes from God as its necessary cause. He is called upon in consequence of an irrepressible desire for a referent, a desire for meaning’ (p.76). Kermode’s perspective is useful because the negative is implied as a definable trope of the desire for meaning rather than the resistance of meaning. In a sense, therefore, alterity is a figure which produces an overwhelming encounter with the source of metanarratives and the quest for that provenance to be experienced.

28 See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.283. Derrida uses the myth of the Fall to argue that the sign is already always fallen from presence; indeed, Derrida disrupts the notion that there was ever a presence there to be disrupted in the first place. For an account of the relation between Derrida and the Fall, see Hart, *Trespass*, pp.3-21.


32 McClure, *Post-Secular*, p.158: ‘To write the intellectual history of the last forty years [...] is of course to call attention to a glaring division of interest between writers and readers of fiction on the one hand and academic critics: the one community turns away from existentialism to new spiritualities, the other to poststructuralism. But perhaps this split, if it occurred, is not as sharp as I have just suggested. One could also write a more dialogic account of intellectual life in the last third of the century, one in which the new spiritualities and poststructuralism would be seen as addressing some similar issues and producing - in the work of some of the best writers - new and less dogmatic forms of spirituality.’

Chapter 2
On the Edge of Death: Mortality and the Postmodern Imagination

Insofar as postmodernist fiction foregrounds ontological themes and ontological structure, we might say that it is always about death.
(McHale, Postmodernist, p.231)

No art is possible without a dance of death.¹

Brian McHale’s argument that postmodernism is ‘always about death’ has implications which probably exceed the intended controversy of that statement. McHale insists that inasmuch as postmodernism is formed upon the ‘ontological dominant’, then death as the ultimate qualification of ontology must form the ever-visible horizon of postmodern thought. Vonnegut’s sonorous declaration that art and the ‘dance of death’ are emphatically linked, offers a different angle to that to McHale. Whereas McHale suggests that postmodernist fiction involves death because of its ontological priority, Vonnegut alludes to death as the primary condition for the expressions and concerns of art. Could it be said that the temporality and fragmentations sought by postmodern fiction are partly a response to the metaphysical gravitas of death? Is postmodern writing simply a way of trying to visualise death, to make it more manageable, even transcend its threat? Throughout this chapter, I shall argue that the alterity of postmodernist fiction is often an attempt to represent death and speculate upon its significance. Moreover, through my interpretation of such writers as Kurt Vonnegut and Don Delillo, I shall contend that the treatment of death
often removes from the postmodern canon authors who previously formed its backbone. For death, though a realm of speculation and absence, is a common human destination that can easily expand into broad metanarratives about existence and the unknown. What I shall suggest throughout this chapter, is that alterity is frequently just another way of envisaging mortality. In fact, I would go as far as to say that alterity is about *conquering* the threat of death through an artistic application of negativity. In its negotiation of death, postmodern fiction produces some of the most visible connections between itself and theology. For in many ways, postmodern otherness seems to represent a manner of negative afterlife, moving from ontological threat to metaphysical deliverance. In key postmodern texts, we shall see that visualising death through alterity not only renders plain postmodernism’s theological heritage, but also evinces an unusual soteriology geared up for the contemporary age.

**Postmodernism and death**

Understanding postmodern appreciations of death is a fundamental destination of my argument. In my introduction, I loosely sketched the origins of postmodern negativity in the historical ‘death’ of the authority of several concepts central to western history: God, Author, Self and Truth. Catherine Belsey’s insistent claim that the ‘epoch of the metaphysics of presence is doomed, and with it all the methods of analysis, explanation and interpretation which rest on a single, unquestioned, pre-Copernican centre’, is part of a general attempt to erect a gravestone over all that was previously held to ground thought and being in the external world.² According to Belsey and many others, postmodernism’s language and focus live in the ‘afterlife’ of the metanarrative: the metanarrative may live on in various (necessary) ghosts, yet these ghosts are ‘always already’ reflecting upon the conditions of their own demise.
Simultaneous with this desire to describe a death of totalities, postmodernism also posits redeeming qualities that emerge from the demise of the metanarrative. The postmodern 'salvation' lies not in the rediscovery of a saving totality, but in the embrace and affirmation of the very conditions of difference and volatility arising from the death throes of metaphysics. Postmodernism seems to have acceded to Saul Alinsky's aphorism that 'Once you accept your own death then all of a sudden you are free to live'.\(^3\) How to live is another question.

In attempting to formulate a postmodern praxis, theorists have frequently returned to Nietzsche as one who provides a potential model for individual ethics and action. Derrida, whose *The Gift of Death* we have already seen to be a celebration of the confrontation with absence, tends towards an embrace of 'Nietzschean affirmation', where the loss of the centre allows praxis and interpretation to assert themselves merely on the fact that there is no absolute to which they now surrender:

> Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. *This affirmation then determines the noncenter as otherwise than as the loss of the center.* And it plays without security. For there is a *sure* play: that which is limited to the substitution of given and existing, *present*, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace. (Derrida, *Writing*, p.92)

Derrida's vision of 'affirmation' is an interesting counterbalance to his later statement that 'The sign is always a sign of the Fall'. Derrida's loss of centre, the fall from presence and reference, need not be a fall into a postlapsarian guilt where society and individuals punish themselves for the 'murder' of God and Truth. Instead, if the loss of centre is received as the attestation of 'sure play', then that loss can be embraced as the commendation that there is no original blame in the world, but 'signs without fault'. Consequently, the Fall becomes an 'affirmative' moment because there is the
release from a slavery to an 'origin' which is actually not present, into a groundless experience of 'the seminal adventure of the trace'.

Jay Bernstein is a critic who has used Derrida to springboard into an extended examination of the affirmative legacy that Nietzsche has bequeathed to postmodernism. In particular, Bernstein turns to the theorist Peter Sloterdijk, who explores Nietzsche as a celebrant of foundationless living. Rather than seeing postmodernism as a degeneration into despair at the absence of ideals, Sloterdijk understands the possibility of a 'cynicism' where the subject consents to life, truth and reality as an illusion. This illusion, Bernstein goes on, is the ironising of 'Apollonian' foundations under the 'Dionysic' impulse of a centreless and fragmenting play:

The text is not a Dionysian manifesto, a defence of Dioysius against the serene authority of Apollonian vision, rather the polarity between Dionysius and Apollo is a stationary one 'that leads to a clandestine doubling of the Apollonian. The Apollonian Unified Subject (Eine) makes certain, through the mechanism of the silently established axiom of balance, that the Dionysian Other never comes into play itself, but only as the dialectical or symmetrical Other to the Unified Subject' (Sloterdijk 1989, p.25). This is necessary because a pure eruption of Dionysic forces would entail the utter dissolution of self and world; thus Dionysic rapture can be re-presented but never presented. It is the foundation, the force that makes Apollonian unity possible, while the Apollonian Unified Subject is forever compromised by a ground incommensurable with its ideals of reason, clarity, unity and completeness.

What is affirmed by the reciprocity of metanarrative and Other is the potential for nihilism to be overcome by the aesthetic creativity of a re-doubled metanarrative. The metanarrative, through having its foundations ironised by the Dionysic urge, loses its transcendent substance and becomes the property of those who see their responsibility in designing narratives with no meaning outside the locality of performance. Thus 'the existence of the world can be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon' (Sloterdijk, Thinker, p.78). In a world which is tottering over the acceptance of despair, we can find a source of affirmation in the presentation of life as a creative milieu 'without the ontological commitments typically assumed by it' (Bernstein, 'Whistling', p.260).
Bernstein offers Theodor Adorno’s Critical Theory as a significantly different theory to Sloterdijk’s affirmative postmodernism. Unavoidably implicated in a world ‘guilty’ of the crimes of both rationalism and nihilism, Adorno sets himself against transcendental forms of morality and also against the ‘affirmative trans-valuation of morality of Nietzschean postmodernism’ (Bernstein, ‘Whistling’, p.262). Adorno balks at affirmation because of its tendency to erect a view of the whole that absorbs the particularities of existence, as well as because affirmation post-Auschwitz seems a practice in either bad-taste or naivété. Adorno wants a moral code that acknowledges the incommensurability of thought and praxis, generality and particularity, and by so doing, promotes an instinctive morality resistant to rational reductionism. The crimes of the twentieth century prevent Adorno from reaching towards affirmative theory; instead, he adopts a dialectical process where thought and concept are constantly suspended from being permanently identified with the object for which they strive. Thus the object or moral code, though never satisfied, are the silent presences that demand response, but which stipulate that thought always turns back on itself in criticism:

If negative dialectics call for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking itself is to be true – if it is to be true today, at any rate – it must also be a thinking against itself. If thought is not to be measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.

The ‘negativity’ of Adorno’s brand of dialectics lies in the assault on rational confidence in the face of the irreducible Other, the ‘extremity’. Perhaps the affirmative is pejorative for Adorno because of its attempt to escape from self-deconstruction and so wilfully forget moral urgency, a forgetting seen in the smothering music of the SS murder squads. Adorno’s dialectics move away from a Hegelian desire for synthesis and recommend a dialogue between the concept and the
anti-concept which forever refuses resolution. This dialogue must always guard itself against the pull into an affirmative practice which blindly steamrollers the 'context of guilt' (Bernstein, 'Whistling', p.262) in which post-Auschwitz society finds itself.

So what is the significance of these two brands of postmodern thought — the affirmative and the negative — for our discussion here of the representation of death in postmodern fiction? For all their genuine divergence, Adorno and Sloterdijk share a certain amount of common ground. What seems to unite their theories within a recognisably 'postmodern' category are two essential relations to ontological activity:

1) Both critics proceed from an absolute loss of foundations, yet seek to transform this loss into a praxis whose basis and drive is the challenge posed by otherness;

2) Alterity becomes a dual attestation: it focuses on the presence of death and degeneration in a world of decayed foundations, while simultaneously suggesting a regenerative promise in the attempt to purify life through an immanent praxis and through the constant rejection of conceptual self-sufficiency.

On these two premises we can see that the alterity of the lost metanarrative offers a double potential. On the one hand, alterity attests to the thematic of death which dominates a culture which is hyper-aware of the passing of metanarratives and the presence of an apocalyptic history (Adorno). On the other hand, alterity also stands for a life-affirming sentiment that resides in the acceptance of the immediacy of living and objects which are unmediated by rational language (Sloterdijk). Thus it is no coincidence that many early postmodernists such as Olson celebrated a new 'immanence' whereby objects claim more sensory authority through the lack of narrative domination. In a single trope alterity can encompass both fall and salvation, blindness and insight, as it comprehends the absolute nature of death and a way of life and moral awareness. More importantly, however, is the transcendental aura
surrounding otherness as alterity attests to both the *universal* presence of death and the *universal* solution to death in the Other. This is what Spanos referred to when he claimed that the postmodern literary 'aesthetic of de-composition' produces the sensation of 'the primordial not-at-home, where dread, as Kierkegaard and Heidegger and Sartre and Tillich tell us, becomes not just the agency of despair but also and simultaneously of hope, that is, of freedom and infinite possibility.'\(^{10}\) In my introductory chapter, I described how Derrida looks upon the 'gift of death' as a common gift which incorporates all in a responsibility to the absolute Other. I would argue that alterity in postmodern fiction particularly, often functions as the attempt to visualise and experience this common gift and, by way of sublimation, to transform death into a positive backdrop that emphasises the liberty of the existential self. In short, postmodern fiction describes both the fear and conquering of death. In the process, alterity acts as a linguistic and cognitive disruption, but is then turned into a stable metanarrative of human and social realisation. I shall illustrate this argument through several key postmodern texts, continually returning to the contention that alterity is a figure that centres and controls. Alterity is applied to the impossible task of visualising death as it tries to manage the threat that death poses to a culture profoundly conscious of the battle between mortality and consumer-designed health. Within this scenario, I will once again insist that postmodern fiction returns itself squarely to metaphysical forms of security, as the language of death becomes mingled with the language of ineffability, religious vision and salvation.

**Mortality and the limits of representation**

The quotation from McHale with which I opened this chapter is the basic starting point for my examination of death in postmodern fiction. With McHale's now familiar
argument that postmodernism signals the shift from the epistemological to the ontological dominant, comes a new, perhaps more absolute, relation with death. McHale contends that literature and death have always been in alliance, with the theme of mortality in a work of fiction gesturing to ‘the limits of representation’ (McHale, *Postmodernist*, p.228), the horizon beyond which language and thought cannot proceed. Furthermore, the reading of a work of fiction seems to confess the author’s death at the turn of every page, as the writer’s existence is threatened by the inevitable conclusion and closure of the book. After taking a brief tour through the history of fictional death, McHale suggests that with postmodernism comes the ‘foregrounding’ of death with an intensity not previously seen in the Modernist defiance of fate:  

Of course, like the correlations between eros and writing, these correlations between death and writing are permanent features of *all* literature, in all periods. But just as in the case of love, they have traditionally remained in the background, below the threshold of fictional self-consciousness, except in postmodernist fiction which thrusts them into the foreground. Indeed, insofar as postmodernist fiction foregrounds ontological themes and ontological structure, we might say that it is always about death. Death is the one ontological boundary that we are all certain to experience, the only one we shall all inevitably have to cross. In a sense, every ontological boundary is an analogue or metaphor of death; so foregrounding ontological boundaries is a means of foregrounding death, of making death, the unthinkable, available to the imagination, if only in a displaced way. (McHale, *Postmodernist*, p.231)  

Note that McHale highlights not only the confrontation with death in postmodernist fiction, but also a negotiation of death through its visualisation. Characterising some postmodernist fiction as pursuing the ‘flight from death’ (McHale, *Postmodernist*, p.229), McHale reads the indeterministic manner of postmodern writing as a way of approaching, even transcending, the experience of death. By taking the reader beyond the ontological certitudes of existence into the void of non-existence and the consciousness of the aporetic, postmodernist fiction allows the reader to imagine the nature of death and experiment with the final absence:

Gabriel Josipovici said it one way: the shattering of the fictional illusion leaves the reader ‘outside’ the fictional consciousness with which he or she has been identifying, forcing the
Josipovici's contention that the reader is left 'outside' fictional consciousness and so experiences a closer intimacy with death is proximate to the argument I have made throughout this thesis, namely that postmodern fiction leaves the reader in a state of hyper-reflection where the subject becomes a transcendent centre for consciousness. The essential element in this 'dress-rehearsal for death' is that the individual recognises itself as a subject, whose identity is unique in relation to a unique death. McHale needs to address the fact that death, like Sloterdijk's use of alterity, can be turned into an affirmative theme which implicitly depends upon the metanarrative constructions of subjectivity that postmodernism has set out to avoid.

Both McHale and Josipovici indicate, though withdraw from directly stating, that the alterity in postmodernist fiction is actually an attempt at reifying the state of death. With postmodernism's endeavour to 'imagine a posthumous discourse, a voice from beyond the grave' (McHale, *Postmodernist*, p.230), comes the aspiration to transcendence, where the subject is able to use the destruction of 'fictional illusions' to see into the world beyond discourse and so lose fear of that world. So McHale proceeds to claim that postmodern writing has a seriousness which has often been overlooked:

So perhaps this reputedly nonserious and irresponsible form of writing turns out to be 'about' something after all, and something supremely serious, at that. Postmodernist writing models or simulates death through confrontation between worlds, through transgressions of ontological levels or boundaries, or through vacillation between different kinds and degrees of reality. (McHale, *Postmodernist*, p.232)

The key words here are 'models' and 'simulates'. By attempting to replicate or objectify death, postmodern fictional alterity is a restraining of narrative play, rather than the initiation of that mobility, as the narrative is channelled towards an analogical centre in the theme of death or related ontological speculations. Moreover, alterity
becomes a universal figure as it attempts to represent the common experience of humankind - a death metanarrative. I would go further than McHale by suggesting that ‘transgressions of’ should be replaced by ‘transcendence over’, for alterity embodied in death becomes a means by which we can see into life beyond praxis and beyond language. In the rest of this chapter, I shall discuss a collection of texts which have death as their symbolic centre. The use of death as a centre is, I shall demonstrate, used alongside religious imagery to give alterity the function of a soteriological experience, a saving insight into the world outside of verbal and conceptual play. More than anything else, the postmodernist approach to death bears all the hallmarks of a negative theology, as the subject attempts by way of negation to have union with the ineffable or that which is beyond existence. Alterity offers a common ontological message of inevitable mortality, but balances this message by giving the subject the power to comprehend the world of death and thus break its power.

Kurt Vonnegut — Slaughterhouse Five

*Slaughterhouse Five* is a novel in which meaningful narrative and purposeless death brutally collide. The subtitle of the novel, ‘A duty-dance with death’, heralds a work in which death is an ever-present qualification of physical life and liberal optimism. The autobiographical centre of *Slaughterhouse Five* — Vonnegut bearing witness to the destruction of Dresden as an Allied prisoner of war — is a motif for the sheer limitations placed on existence by a world technologically capable of producing its own annihilation. In addition, Vonnegut is quick to remind us that apart from the most extreme encounters with mortality and imposed mass-extinction, ‘there would still be plain old death’ (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse*, p.3).
Can there be any redemption in such a novel, where progress and enlightenment are engaged in a seemingly futile battle against inevitable decay and failure? One of the most memorable qualities of *Slaughterhouse Five* is its aura of inexhaustible cynicism, a voice which Salman Rushdie describes as

a sort of hip, cynical world-weariness, his tone halfway between jeremiad and shrug. He is the only important and original writer in the world whose *œuvre* can be summed up in three words: ‘So it goes.’

The compact philosophy that Rushdie ascribes to Vonnegut’s entire creative output is accurate in that an advanced fatalism does seem to accompany most of Vonnegut’s speculations on the human condition. ‘So it goes,’ as Bo Petterson has pointed out, occurs almost every time a reference to death is made in *Slaughterhouse Five*; thus, Petterson concludes that the novel is ordered upon the principle of ‘cosmological determinism’. Whether we accept fatalism as Vonnegut’s dominant mood, or ascribe the ‘cosmic cool’ perceived by Raymond Olderman, we must be careful not to see Vonnegut as one who has lapsed into a passivity after the events that he has witnessed. In this chapter, I shall re-engage with the argument that Vonnegut is an inherently metaphysical writer, regardless of his advanced scepticism about religious and theological thought in general. Vonnegut’s extreme awareness of death leads not to a psychological void, but to a potentially redemptive metaphysics of narrative and time. Applying the contentions contained in Robert Detweiler’s work of theological/literary criticism, *Breaking the Fall*, I shall suggest that the postmodern qualities of *Slaughterhouse Five* are directed towards a rediscovery of social morality through the transcendence of narrative over blind causality. Peter Freese, in his essay on Vonnegut’s *Galápagos*, proposes that many postmodern novelists

are interested in how to survive the end, that is, in the new beginning to be wrested from the all-embracing apocalypse, in the redirection of evolutionary processes, and in the halting of thermodynamic and informational entropy.
Kurt Vonnegut is one such novelist. Though he never falls into the trap of facile or idealistic sermonising, Vonnegut constructs a metaphysics which admits both the appalling ugliness of modern methods of death, while suggesting that through the sheer impact of death can come a new sense of human identity and a realisation of the almost mystical possibilities within narrative. In the context of my thesis as a whole, *Slaughterhouse Five* illustrates perfectly that the aporetic form of the postmodern novel can actually be a representation of mortality and the provision of a stable ontology. The void into which Vonnegut gazes is not the abstraction of meaningless play, but the deepest sense of the limits placed on our very existence. Little surprise, therefore, that works such as *Slaughterhouse Five* seem to fit rather awkwardly in the category of 'postmodern'. There are distinctly postmodern traits in *Slaughterhouse Five*, mainly within its structure and composition. However, Vonnegut's direct purpose is not an assault upon metaphysics and totalities, even if he is cynical about many metaphysical ideas, but a desire to explore the human capacity for meaning in the face of certain extinction. In this regard, Vonnegut is my first example of a novelist who has been appropriated into postmodernism while having a project that is actually contrary to that of postmodernism. Yet it is because of this theoretical fracture that Vonnegut is valuable, for he clearly shows how a novel with an aporetic form uses alterity to drive a metaphysical theme.

Bo Petterson has defined three main characteristics of postmodern American fiction, all of which are displayed in *Slaughterhouse Five*:

1. a deep scepticism of ontological explanations as well as (2) of bourgeois values and socioeconomic forces in society, and (3) confronts the outside world by a playfully innovative and self-reflexive use of literary tradition and technique. (Petterson, *World*, p.15)

Using this sort of criteria, we can easily place *Slaughterhouse Five* in a postmodern pigeon-hole filled with the repetitive 'radical skepticism of ultimate questions'.

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Petterson, however, is reluctant to go down the path taken by McHale which reduces Vonnegut's work to a mere display of the total presence of fictionality, where history and reality are reduced to the width of a page and the temporality of a word.\textsuperscript{19} It is understandable why \textit{Slaughterhouse Five} has been sectioned in the postmodern camp: there are chronological contradictions,\textsuperscript{20} the 'real' world and the world of the Tralfamadorians is confused, as is the distinction between fact and fiction, and time is volatile, non-sequential and plastic.\textsuperscript{21} Yet all these features are fundamentally connected with Vonnegut's relationship to death. The fragmented nature of \textit{Slaughterhouse Five} does not pronounce a judgement upon metanarratives of death, but actually has its source in the all too real confrontation with death. Mortality is the centre of the novel, and Vonnegut's style is a way of negotiating the tumultuous confrontation with the silence of a single corpse, such as Edgar Derby, or a city of the dead, such as Dresden.

Jerome Klinkowitz has argued that the rather indirect treatment of Dresden in \textit{Slaughterhouse Five} is a way of by-passing the conventionalities of traditional war writing and offering a more human engagement with the absolute silence of Dresden and the general inhumanity of war:

\begin{quote}
Facing the silent challenge at the center of all his work so far, Vonnegut has to embark on a new way of writing, factual \textit{and} fantastic, dislocating and displacing reportage toward the functions and possibilities of the imagination, which might speak in the necessary silence, make pathetic, console.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

\textit{Slaughterhouse Five} fits awkwardly into the postmodern category because of the obligation implicit in the 'necessary silence' and the 'silent challenge' which form the kernel of its theme and structure. Dresden is in many senses a trace in the novel, as its destruction is always related through a confusing veil of fiction and autobiography. Yet the fact that Dresden never seems to be directly touched is, I would argue, an
attempt to preserve the physical reality of death that so massively occurred in that city. In the indirection of its telling, the narrative surrounding Dresden fundamentally denies any theory of groundless existence by evoking the silence of death that equally asserts the massive value of human life and the crime of violent death. The alterity of Slaughterhouse Five, the void at its heart, is not a nameless absence, but a place, a time and a death-toll of 135,000 individuals. Dresden is the metanarrative of the novel, a metanarrative the indirect telling of which does nothing to lessen its reality. Yet the big problem for Vonnegut is what to say about this metanarrative, and whether there can be any redemption in the face of such death.

It is steadily apparent in reading Slaughterhouse Five that alongside the tremendous encounter with mass killing, there is an equally vigorous consciousness of life, especially life as a holistic process or cycle. The void that is created by Dresden, a void consisting of the failure of humanity and the absolute silence of a dead city, is a generative absence that forces the central character, Billy Pilgrim, into an acute sense of his own existence and the intuitive morality that accompanies this existence.

The first significant episode in Billy Pilgrim’s ontological expansion comes when he is lost in the Ardennes forest following the German offensive in northern Europe in late 1944 - early 1945. In a weakening state, pushed along by the mounting annoyance of three aggressive companions, Billy stops momentarily in the vast forest and experiences a dislocation within time and space:

This was when Billy first came unstuck in time. His attention began to swing grandly through the full arc of his life, passing into death, which was violet light. There wasn’t anybody else there, or any thing. There was just violet light - and a hum.

And then Billy swung into life again, going backwards until he was in pre-birth, which was red light and bubbling sounds. And then he swung into life again and stopped. He was a little boy taking a shower with his hairy father at the Ilium Y.M.C.A. He smelled chlorine from the swimming pool next door, heard the springboard boom. (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse, p.31)
At this moment when Billy comes 'unstuck in time', Billy's 'present' in the Ardennes forest is contextually frozen between the twin voids of pre-consciousness birth and post-consciousness death. We might simply say that the vision that Billy has of birth and death can be interpreted as 'the craziness of a dying young man with his shoes full of snow' (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse*, p.35). Yet such an interpretation, if allowed to become central, does not do justice to the metaphysical register which attends Billy's hallucinations, nor to the autobiographical input of Vonnegut himself. Whether Billy is hallucinating or not, by no means alters the fact that what is offered at this point in the novel is an augmentation of spatial and temporal consciousness. Instead of the novel denying causality by its fragmented chronology, it actually seeks to show the seamless interconnections between events and thoughts in the life of an individual and a society. What Billy experiences in the above passage is the equality of pre-life and after-life: the red and the violet lights. Only with the near encounter with death, freezing and weak in a murderous environment, is Billy able to see with any real intensity his life as a totalised event between two definite poles of existence. His is a humanistic and holistic vision, in which time is capable of being transcended so that all events are seen in their proper significance, rather than being seen as infinitely divisible units which lose their existence with the passage of each fleeting moment.

What I am suggesting is that the encounter with death that is so central to *Slaughterhouse Five*, is an encounter with a physical absence that produces a more developed consciousness of the life process. This consciousness does not remain trapped in solipsism, however, as Vonnegut also reflects upon our responsibility to historical and personal experience within a social history. Vonnegut offers a metaphysics of death by proposing a spatial time in which the Dresden bombing is never finished nor completed. Dresden is set as an eternally recurrent event, the
silence of which permanently attests to the lives of those who were destroyed there. So in the alien world of Tralfamadore, a society wholly based upon the simultaneity of time, Billy discovers a metaphysical message that places a new responsibility upon the act of narration:

There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse, p.253)24

With this address from the Tralfamadorian to Billy Pilgrim, we can perhaps start to appreciate the significance of the autobiographical element in the novel.25 The Tralfamadorians convince Billy that the genesis of patterns of meaning lies with authorial selection. With the selection and presentation of these events in an overall model of significance rather than a pure exercise of linearity, then the momentary becomes part of the holistic. Through Billy’s time-travelling exploration and presentation of Vonnegut’s fiction and autobiography, Vonnegut shows the importance of narrative compilation as a way of uniting fragmented ‘messages’ into a pattern that can attest to all that is ‘beautiful and surprising and deep’ in life and thus refuse a fatalistic resignation to the finality of death.26 Vonnegut demonstrates that his experiences, represented through those of Billy Pilgrim, are always kept alive in an act of narrative that accepts that events are always kept alive in the retelling. For narrative is a way in which time can be cognitively transcended, a form through which moments can be reclaimed and replayed, and thus our obligation to events like Dresden never recedes.

The responsibility inherent in narrative is an important counter-balance to the undeniable mood of cynicism within Slaughterhouse Five. Vonnegut is certainly pessimistic about the human capacity to fight against the more deterministic trends in human nature. So Billy Pilgrim, and the soldiers that surround him, are the radical
antithesis of the heroic models of Hollywood soldiery, as they display failings and aggressions which control their personalities with a blind propulsion. Kathryn Hume has argued, from a distinctly psychoanalytical angle, that Vonnegut’s experience has destroyed for him the literary conventions of the ‘hero monomyth’, and the moral dichotomies of ‘saint/sinner’, ‘hero/monster’. Hume states that Vonnegut’s evident dialectic between religious and classical mythology does not provide a way to redeem the violence that he has witnessed:

If the land of the dead provides the landscape for the ordeal, death and rebirth begin and end the sequence. That symbolism does not work well for Vonnegut. In the initiation ordeals he describes, innocence is not laid aside, to be replaced in the natural course of things by knowledge and maturity; innocence is murdered, and only a void remains. (Hume, ‘Myths and Symbols’, p.437)

Hume is right that Vonnegut does not revisit mythic models in order to contain and ennoble events such as Dresden. Yet Hume seems to underestimate the productive potential of the ‘void’ which remains in the silence of ‘murdered innocence’. If Dresden is a void, a silence, it is silent only because its capacity to speak has been destroyed. Slaughterhouse Five addresses the responsibility to fill the void with an obligation to speak in the silence of the dead, while acknowledging all that legislates against facile ideals. So, after the war, when Billy goes to visit his war comrade Bernhard V. O’Hare with a view to gathering memories for his novel, Billy is made painfully conscious of the ethical burdens resting upon his narrative acts. O’Hare’s wife, Mary, gives Billy a frosty reception which she eventually explains as her anger against any narrative that glorifies and perpetuates conflict:

‘You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs.’

So then I understood. It was war that made her angry. She didn’t want her babies or anybody else’s babies killed in wars. And she thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies. (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse, p.11)
Mary's fears stem from the belief in the interconnectedness of narrative and future action. For Mary, the void that remains after murdered innocence is not a void of fatalism, but a moral lack in narrative itself. The silence of death can give narrative a blank sheet which is quite capable of forgetting the causes behind the silence and the potential for creating future voids. Billy's response to Mary's anxiety is moving:

So I held up my right hand and made her a promise: 'Mary,' I said, 'I don't think this book of mine is ever going to be finished. I must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away. If I ever do finish it, though, I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne. 'I tell you what,' I said, 'I'll call it "The Children's Crusade."'

She was my friend after that. (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse, p.11)

Billy / Vonnegut's decision to sub-title Slaughterhouse Five 'The Children's Crusade' unsettles the presumption that the novel is drowning in a fatalism about human action and human meaning. What clearly emerges in this quotation is that Billy understands the atemporal value that narrative exercises within past, present and future moments. Narrative and time share in the future of those who are yet to be and the past of those who have ceased to be. The collections of historically factual war narratives that Vonnegut includes towards the end of the novel (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse, pp.135-37), demonstrate the sanitising power of narratives when narratives dissociate themselves from present implication in past events. The refrains of 'So it goes', and 'And so on', that follow these passages, are not necessarily a numb resignation to the 'facts' that these narratives contain. Instead, we can interpret these sayings as a judgement upon 'historical' narrative voices for their perpetuation of war as grandeur and pathos. Thus 'So it goes' and 'And so on' might be blended together into the phrase 'And so it (the Voice which dignifies war) goes on.'

Vonnegut may be realistic about the weak chances for reformation, but he also sees that the transcendence narrative performs (crossing barriers of time in the
replaying and projection of moments), means that narrating the bombing of Dresden does contain the possibility of redeeming both past and future events.

Such a holistic lesson comes in part from the novel's surreal dimensions. As we have seen, much of Billy's education in the nature of temporality comes from the Tralfamadorians. This alien people instruct Billy in the belief that:

All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It's just an illusion we have here on earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse, p.20-1)

The Tralfamadorians' relation to time closely corresponds with Vonnegut's narrative spatiality. With the ability to see all moments at once, without any teleological preoccupations, the Tralfamadorians seem to urge an envisioning of our own history in these terms. For by understanding all moments as 'permanent', our ethical responsibilities broaden to include the events of history as well as future actions. There is a strong dose of humour in Billy's sci-fi journeys, but there is also the impact of awakening the reader to new temporal/ethical relations. Vonnegut does appear to adhere to a less than conventional view of time in many of his other works. He has elsewhere remarked that:

Anybody with any sense knows that the whole solar system will go up like a celluloid collar by-and-by. I honestly believe, though, that we are wrong to think that moments go away, never to be seen again. This moment and every moment lasts forever.28

Vonnegut's perspective upon time, though displaying a rather other-worldly quality, illustrates how his fragmented narrative and style can still possess some degree of commitment to a moral framework. If every moment lasts in an 'eternal present', then we are always under the obligation to respond to all events in all moments of history. Billy's narrative, if anything, questions the nature of our relationship to the silence of Dresden, as the reader is not able to consign Dresden to history in a narrative that
negates historical boundaries. Vonnegut's intention in the novel seems to revolve around forcing us into an encounter with the void left after Dresden, to make us conscious of how this event is being replayed in narrative and whether such narratives do justice to the demands of the dead. Vonnegut does not dictate strict moral answers.\textsuperscript{29} He offers instead the recognition that we have responsibility for our present world, the world that has been and the world that is to come because of the transcendent capacity of narrative. So Billy, though usually quite absorbent when it comes to the views of the Tralfamadorians, does show a doubtful resistance to their idea that because of the simultaneity of time, we need only look at the good moments and ignore the bad (Vonnegut, \textit{Slaughterhouse}, pp.84-85). Fatalistic dismissal or blind ignorance are not part of the moral scheme of \textit{Slaughterhouse Five}. \textit{Slaughterhouse Five} is a genuine attempt to engage with the human responsibility for historical failings, with a distinctive spatio-temporal awareness that focuses upon our continual implication in eternally present events.

Because of Vonnegut's singularly metaphysical notion of time, it is inevitable that he has been read with an eye to mystical and religious content. Critics such as Robert L. Nadeau have seen in Vonnegut's structural fluidity a combination of the 'new' physics of chaos and relativity and a holistic brand of mysticism:

Although Vonnegut's fiction has always tended to read like messages from Tralfamadore, his use of short passages and crude illustrations - both which serve as clumps of symbols that are not 'ordered' in the Newtonian sense - becomes increasingly more pronounced beginning with the publication of \textit{Slaughterhouse Five}. It is, I think, clearly Vonnegut's hope that these scattered lumps will no only eventually cohere in the mind of the reader, producing an 'image of life that is beautiful, surprising, and deep,' but also that the experience will convince us of the possibility of knowing the 'depths of many marvellous moments seen all at once.' In terms of the metaphysic derived by Vonnegut from the new physics, that moment allows us to sense communion with the alpha and omega of all being which \textit{is} every conceivable moment of time.\textsuperscript{30}

Nadeau's communion with 'the alpha and omega of all being' may overstate the case somewhat, but there is certainly an aspiration in Vonnegut's work to attain some
manner of ontological and spiritual overview of existence, even if such an aspiration is frequently parodied. Vonnegut's relation to orthodox religion, as we shall see, is mostly derisory. However, in keeping with the general argument of this thesis that postmodern texts are rooted in religious language and spiritual iconography, I shall suggest that *Slaughterhouse Five* has a theological commitment to the consistent imagery of Fall and Redemption which is played out against a backdrop of the expanded consciousness of being and time. I have already argued that Vonnegut senses a moral obligation in his narrative from the silence of the devastated Dresden. Extending this contention, I shall read Vonnegut against the religiously-based literary theory of Robert Detweiler in order to argue that Vonnegut hints at a humanist metaphysics, one that embraces a universal sense of the human identity and mortal predicament.

Vonnegut's relation to religion has always been ambiguous. The ambiguity does not lie in his relation to orthodox religion, which Vonnegut has always tended to parody in his fiction. Rather, what is uncertain is Vonnegut's attitude towards the more esoteric peripheries of faith and the value of aspirations to a more spiritually directed consciousness. Though Vonnegut has written novels of more direct relevance to religion than *Slaughterhouse Five*, I shall remain with this particular novel because of the implicit relation Vonnegut creates between the encounter with death and the yearning towards a redemptive message. My basic argument is that Vonnegut accepts the incredible limits placed on faith in an apparently random and frequently cruel world, but also suggests that a spirituality based on a lack of knowing can be a primary and productive, even necessary, impulse. Moreover, Vonnegut avers that religious world views are inevitably entangled in the human impulse to create
meaningful narrative, an impulse that attempts to fill the void which death can forge in an individual and social psychology.\textsuperscript{32}

Vonnegut's front-line of comment on religious and mystical ideas is a conspicuous and grimly humorous parody. One of \textit{Slaughterhouse Five}'s most memorable religious episodes is the re-reading of gospel morality contained in Kilgore Trout's work \textit{The Gospel from Outer Space}. Passages from this text are read to Billy by Eliot Rosewater, a fellow patient in a veteran's hospital, passages that represent Vonnegut's irreverent sense of critique:

The flaw in the Christ stories, said the visitor from outer space, was that Christ, who didn't look like much, was actually the Son of the Most Powerful Being in the Universe. Readers understood that, so, when they came to the crucifixion, they naturally thought, and Rosewater read out aloud again:

\textit{Oh, boy-they sure picked the wrong guy to lynch that time!}

And that thought had a brother: 'There are right people to lynch.' Who? People not well connected. So it goes. (Vonnegut, \textit{Slaughterhouse}, p.79)

This satirical transformation of the gospel narratives not only picks upon the unwritten implications of biblical morality, but also tends to show the terrible strain under which orthodox faith is placed in a society unused to certainty and adept in ridicule. Vonnegut, in the company of many postmodern writers, repeatedly turns a satirical voice upon traditional religious language and doctrine to show contemporary expectations of meaning are not suited to authoritarian structures. This type of voice is equally found in the works of Joseph Heller, especially in the extended tabloid-style text, \textit{God Knows}:

'You want me to tell them You're I AM THAT I AM?'
'I AM THAT I AM,' repeated God. 'And from the Pharaoh,' He went on, 'I charge you to get permission to journey into the wilderness for three days to make sacrifices to Me. Tell him to let your people go.'
'Let my people go?'
'Let my people go,' spake the Lord.
'Will he let my people go?'
'I will harden his heart.'
'So he won't let my people go?'
'Now you've got it. I want to show what I can do. I want to trot out my stuff for the children of Israel.'\textsuperscript{33}
In this dialogue between Moses and God, Heller portrays Moses as the ironising victim who finds himself in a fatalistic relationship with an egotistical deity. The familiar words of the bible are transformed by their inclusion in a dialogue no longer governed by an axiomatic reverence for the dictums of Yahweh. The use of ‘trot out my stuff’ by the divinity deconstructs scriptural thought in contemporary language and acknowledges the death of old perceptions of spirituality. *God Knows* may be free of the weight of Dresden that burdens *Slaughterhouse Five*, yet the thought behind the treatment of religion is similar. By ironising biblical history and precepts through contemporary language and attitudes, Vonnegut and Heller invoke a mood that encompasses both liberty and resignation: liberty, because the author’s humour testifies that human wit is finally detached from the legislation of divine authority; resignation, because any humour is enacted within a universe that has lost its foundations for meaning and security.

The aspiration to hang on to some belief in meaning and system is a vigour, however, that does rise to the surface through Vonnegut’s persistent satire on religious life. Describing himself as a ‘Christ-worshipping agnostic’, Vonnegut’s private and public life has exhibited a paradoxical compound of atheism and reverence, where declarations of life’s meaningless nature are qualified by practising Unitarianism and an instinctive attraction toward religious themes. Some of Vonnegut’s clearest articulations upon religion can be found in his work of criticism *Wampeters, Foma and Granfallons*. Vonnegut moves that religion, for all its possible pointlessness, may have its value in the generation of moral force and philosophical direction:

‘Thou shalt not kill.’ That’s a good lie. Whether God said it or not, it’s still a perfectly good lie. And if it gives it more force to say that God said it, well fine. (Vonnegut, *Wampeters*, p.215)
The blunt style here adopted by Vonnegut belies the subtlety of his ethical ideas. Vonnegut recommends the divine not as a centre of unshakeable belief, but as a symbol through which morality can be invested with a more efficacious property. The actual content of the notion ‘God’ appears as relatively unimportant next to the fact that divine symbolism can provide morality the requisite security of a foundation or origin. Whether the foundation or origin is substantial in itself is not an issue. What is important is that morality has an adequate symbolic structure to transfer ethical ideas with the influence of external obligation. As religion is historically adept at ‘naturalising’ morality, Vonnegut argues for an application of spirituality even in a world where science has ostensibly eroded the possibility of faith:

A great swindle of our time is the assumption that science has made religion obsolete. All science has damaged is the story of Adam and Eve and the story of Jonah and the Whale. Everything else holds up pretty well, particularly the lessons of fairness and gentleness. (Vonnegut, Wampeters, p.160)

In a world where moral orientation is desperately required under the shadow of events such as Dresden and Auschwitz, Vonnegut sees some validity in the practice and content of religion. Though Vonnegut has always maintained the futility of trying to reach truth, he does accept the need to aspire towards meaning and to search for moral definition. Thus the function of religion becomes one of enabling such quests and symbolically assisting the construction of identity and reality.

So if, according to Petterson, ‘The nonexistence, or at least passivity of God is an axiom for Vonnegut’ (Petterson, World, p.62), then how does this spiritual positioning emerge in a text such as Slaughterhouse Five? Throughout this thesis, I have looked at various texts to evaluate how postmodern negativity is directly comparable with notions of religious negativity. Vonnegut, too, pursues a principle of negativity in his thought and narrative structure. Yet as the void at the centre of his text is a physical and historical event, he more successfully resists the trans-social
tendencies which I have frequently criticised in postmodern fiction. Vonnegut regards absence as a very clear demand on morality and meaning. Alterity, for Vonnegut, is already reified in the silent bodies of the Dresden corpses, and it is this absence, like the absent God who still commands symbolic authority, that urges us towards ontological clarity rather than ontological fragmentation.

To clarify my views on this issue, and to close my section on *Slaughterhouse Five*, I shall now briefly compare Vonnegut’s strategies of negativity with the religious literary theories of Robert Detweiler. Of particular relevance is Detweiler’s Preface to the Westminster John Knox Press edition of *Breaking the Fall*, which Detweiler added to the original text after he suffered a massive stroke in March 1995. Detweiler’s brand of theological thinking is centred in *Gelassenheit*, a concept which founds itself in the subject’s practise of *kenosis*, or self-emptying:

*Gelassenheit* can be seen as a practical discipline, one that recognizes the irony of the operating principle: ‘He that saves his life loses his life.’ The system of *Gelassenheit* as abandonment is what we continually struggle to work out, and it correlates with the operation of *kenosis* — a self-emptying, an outpouring of the self. It is a lying-down of life when one sees no other possibility. One stops to contemplate death in the midst of living.37

*Gelassenheit*, for Detweiler, implies a resignation before the experience of death which becomes a spiritual practice and means of deferred revelation. Detweiler acknowledges all that is absurd or ironic in life as valuable, because by experiencing the continual promise of death hanging over life, one becomes more involved in the act of narrating existence; indeed, narrative, with its expectations of beginning, middle and end, is, for Detweiler, an intuitive and necessary replaying of the life-cycle itself, a way of understanding death. The revelation produced by irony is a consciousness of narrative as the telling of life under the absurdity of death. Detweiler moves on by modelling a theology out of the union of suffering, death and narrative:

What is the relationship between *Gelassenheit* and narrative theology? The conjunction is between suffering and narrative. Narrative theology presents the possibility of life after death:
What else is there after God disappears? In a way, theology is necessitated by the death of God. The concepts to work out are these: faith, death, and Gelassenheit—and the dynamic whereby these are realized and actualized toward death. Above all, narrative theology and its relationship to irony is the key to the irony of death. I exist and yet I do not exist. I exist as ironic. That is why we tell stories.

Narrative fiction, not at all secular to many, explores this relationship. Story is redemptive by nature, hoping against hope that one will yet be saved by and through the telling. (Detweiler, Breaking, p.ix)

Narrative theology becomes a way of asserting life in the face of death. Detweiler suggests that narrative has even taken the place of God: story-telling assimilates the role of redemption, with purposeful language redeeming us from the negativity of death. In effect, narrative stops the collapse into nihilistic living and so performs the theological restraint of a foundation. Thus, Gelassenheit becomes an attitude whereby we both recognise the irony of our existence, yet also embrace narrative as a way of restoring vitality in the face of such irony. Significantly for our study of Vonnegut, Detweiler also sees the narratorial impulse as a moral urge which unites communities when individuals participate in a shared act of narrative. Thus Detweiler sums up his basic argument:

religious reading at least in the Western world finds itself still entangled, in the late twentieth century, in the mythology of the Fall and seeks its fictions to brake/break the fall into meaninglessness and death. (Detweiler, Breaking, p.xv)

Fiction, for Detweiler, arbitrates between death and life by accepting the former as the end of the voice, but promoting the latter by telling the story of death, by moving death into the narrative activity of life. Likewise, Slaughterhouse Five offers a way of ‘breaking the fall’ by shifting between the ironic confrontation with death and the narrative that can embrace such death in the potentially redemptive act of story-telling.

That Slaughterhouse Five attests to some manner of fall is conspicuous within the novel’s theme and style. Images of the massive failings of human morality litter the text from the shooting of Edgar Derby for the looting of a teapot, to the mass killings systematically perpetrated throughout the Second World War. The effect on
witnessing such appalling forms of human brutality arguably finds parallels with Detweiler's Gelassenheit. The refrain 'so it goes', which usually follows any description of inhumanity in Slaughterhouse Five, ostensibly depicts a psychology that has given up trying to rationalise existence in the face of death and accepted the fact that the self is dominated by ineluctable absence. This form of kenosis is a much more psychologically fragile and disturbed Gelassenheit than Detweiler recommends, though both seem to understand bodily discomfort and extremity as ways of experiencing language and reality in a new way. However, like Detweiler, Vonnegut moves towards an ethical response to the ironic horror of mass death as the narrative begins to adopt a psychologically redemptive function.

Early in the novel, Vonnegut describes the futility and silence after the Dresden massacre in a way that initially appears to acknowledge the failure of speech and the emptying of reason. When Billy offers his literary agent, Seymour ('Sam') Lawrence, his latest book on the Dresden massacre, he issues the following caution:

It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.
And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like 'Poo-tee-weet?' (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse, p.14)

Billy Pilgrim describes the aftermath of a massacre as the deprivation of all the profundity that is usually sought by historical narratives. The birds' meaningless noises emphasise a human inability to make meaningful speech in the face of so much death. In effect, Dresden brings about a fall in both language and morality as language falls away from its ability to meet the object and morality fails because of the distortions of power narratives. However, directly following this passage are two short paragraphs which pull against the fall being a total one:
I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee.

I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that. (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse*, p.14)

These two pieces of moral advice fit into the general proposal of my analysis, namely that Vonnegut shows how humanity must accept responsibility for its narratives as these will cross time and influence future identities. The voids that Vonnegut evokes in *Slaughterhouse Five* are productive centres that morally ground the fragmentation from which they come. These voids suggest the fall of mankind, yet they also become the source of redemption in the rebirth of new narratives. Like the absent divine, such vacuums elicit a language that accepts its own inadequacy while feeling the presence that gives morality its assurance of value. Of equal interest here is the structural organisation of these two axioms in relation to the previous quotation. On the same page of the novel, we have a section dealing with the futility of any sort of rational response to the Dresden massacre, shifting to two sharp and well-defined paragraphs of moral prescription. This manner of juxtaposition is common in the novel and can lead to a distinct confusion about Vonnegut's positioning in relation to his fictional and autobiographical material. My interpretation, following on from Detweiler's thoughts on 'religious reading', is that Vonnegut's morality is based upon a semi-mystical combination of the following elements:

1. An experience of death that necessitates a kenotic psychology because of the awareness of the limits placed upon human existence and the failings of human rationality;

2. Narrative is accepted as a means by which morality and human meaning can be restored, though this morality must proceed from the inherent, and silent, ethics of mortality rather than from idealism;
3. Narrative is able, by its very nature, to transcend and contain time and place. Therefore, we are always implicated in the life-cycles and events of others through our powers of narration.

Vonnegut's quite mysterious brand of new physics, philosophy of mortality and aggrandisement of narrative, 'breaks the fall' of the twentieth century injustices by using the physical silence of death as an ethical demand and a space for narrative transcendence. For Vonnegut, God may no longer exist but the otherness of absolute meaning and ethics remains with all its theological redolence and verbal imperative. Vonnegut accepts the origin of this challenge as residing in a world where death and narrative collide and inexplicably demand a meaningful product. To describe Vonnegut's work in this way may sound awkward when applied to the cynical tone of his works. Yet wherever Vonnegut's fatalism occurs, it tends to have a humanistic message and a spiritual tone lingering in the background of his dismissive mood. In the same way that Billy Pilgrim harbours 'a big secret somewhere inside' (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse*, p.126), Vonnegut hints at a lingering theodicy that 'somewhere' brings together spiritual beliefs and ethical foundations. The narrative of *Slaughterhouse Five* is undoubtedly a dark vision into the effects of war. At the same time, Vonnegut provides a novel that attests to the unavoidable quest for meaning that humanity must embrace if it is to redeem itself. What is religious about *Slaughterhouse Five* is the combination of a holistic vision of time, a positing of death as a moral metanarrative and the use of language as a redemptive Word rather than a sign of the Fall itself. Supported by Vonnegut's ambiguous spiritual practices, I would suggest that Vonnegut is an inappropriate author to include in the postmodernist canon.
Don Delillo — *White Noise*

*Slaughterhouse Five* is ultimately a text which escapes the category of the postmodern. The themes of mortality, morality and human nature in the novel proceed as metanarratives in which otherness and alterity become elements of the concrete experience of life and death. And *Slaughterhouse Five* is far from alone. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall examine several classic postmodern texts, particularly Don Delillo’s *White Noise* and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *V*. Building on my treatment of Vonnegut, I shall argue that once again it is the treatment of death that effectively prevents the labelling of such texts as postmodern. My contention is what could be described as the alterity of such novels is in fact nothing more than an attempt to express a heightened consciousness of life in the face of death. In the case of *White Noise*, this consciousness means that we should, like *Slaughterhouse Five*, remove this novel from a generic association with postmodernism. Instead, *White Noise* should be seen as a comment upon postmodern society with the premise that the contemporary media environment is merely an evasion of humankind’s fundamental condition of mortality.

Don Delillo’s *White Noise* has become for many the supreme example of postmodern fiction. In the world of *White Noise*, images take precedence over reality, language is assembled using consumer sound-bites and movie philosophy, and technology expands into the psychological fabric of society itself. With such an environment, it is natural that the novel has been seen as perfectly illustrative of Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacrum and Foucault’s understanding of language and power. Yet some critics have started to question whether *White Noise* really does make a convincing candidate for the postmodernist genre. Cornell Bonca’s incisive essay ‘Don Delillo’s *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species’, is a
persuasive sceptical voice. Bonca introduces his argument by accepting that 'White Noise' has begun to replace The Crying of Lot 49 as the one book professors use to introduce students to a postmodern sensibility.\textsuperscript{40} However, Bonca does not see in the title of the novel the white noise of a culture without foundation, the static crackle of an artificial media consciousness. What Bonca senses instead is a background noise that alludes to humankind's deepest intuitions of mortality and the sense of the sacred that is bred from these intuitions:

'White Noise' is for Delillo contemporary man's deepest expression of his death fear, a strange and genuinely awe-inspiring response to the fear of mortality in the postmodern world. (Bonca, 'Natural Language', p.27)

In a postmodern society that is centred upon commercial lifestyle and consumer life enhancement, the 'death fear' is able to emerge more forcefully and, Bonca suggests, reintroduce the sacred and the 'awe-inspiring' into what appears a depthless social organisation. What is more, if 'alterity' is substituted for 'White Noise' in the above quotation, then my position in relation to Delillo becomes clear. White Noise certainly depicts a reality that is dominated by the media image and commercial language. The product of this condition seems to be the postmodern alterity where reality becomes trace and the simulacrum holds sway. Yet I would argue that this alterity in fact represents what Delillo sees as the reality of death and the unknown behind the façade of postmodern culture. The alterity of media world in White Noise is not the absence of reality, but the suppression of a mortal reality that contemporary language disallows. This suppression is what Bonca terms 'the natural language of the species', a language which Bonca locates in a useful passage from White Noise where the charismatic Murray Jay Siskind philosophises to Jack Gladney within the sterile hum and glare of a modern supermarket:

'Fear is unnatural. Lightning and thunder are unnatural. Pain, death, reality, these are all unnatural. We can't bear these things as they are. We know too much. So we resort to
repression, compromise and disguise. This is how we survive in the universe. This is the
natural language of the species.\textsuperscript{41}

‘Unnatural language’ in the contemporary world is that which admits the vulnerability
that haunts physical existence. Unable to cope with the constant imminence of its
demise, the human race constructs a ‘natural language’ where the frailty of life is
covered with psychological safety-nets that stop the fall into full mortal recognition.
This ‘natural language’ does not negate the concept of reality in the manner of the
Baudrillardian simulacrum. Siskind implies that language \textit{attests} to reality in its
implicit acknowledgement of the mortal silence which motivates ‘repression,
compromise and disguise’. The sign, therefore, is a qualification of reality, but not the
dominant in that reality. The feelings and phenomena that Siskind lists as unnatural
are only so because contemporary language and living conditions can no longer
incorporate them within its outlook. Thus the ‘unnatural’ physical existence is
repackaged in a way that negotiates its threat. For all this, Delillo also seems to argue
that this does not necessarily dismiss the awe that can result from glimpsing the
haunting shadow of death.

On this basis, Bonca argues that what appears as spiritually parodic in the
novel, such as Steffie’s sleepy incantation of the words ‘\textit{Toyota Celica}’ and glorious
sunsets following the ‘Airborne Toxic Event’, are actually moments of real spiritual
significance. Jack Gladney frequently finds a religious sense of awe in the media
language and images that surround him because these phenomena always point to the
prodigious mystery of human mortality acknowledged in the very profundity that they
try to emulate. So Bonca interprets the novel’s title as a representation of the
mysterious religiosity and power programmed into modern language by its activity of
denying death:
What the novel brings together, then, are two kinds of white noise: that which is a product of late capitalism and a simulacral society, and that which has always been "the natural language of the species"—death evasion—and which now gets expressed in the argot of consumer culture. The result is a vision of contemporary America that bypasses cultural critique in favour of recording awe at what our civilisation has wrought. Because for Delillo, while white noise certainly registers the ways in which Americans evade their death fear, it can also be heard—provided we learn to listen properly—as a moving and quite beautiful expression of that death fear. It becomes nothing less than a stirring revelation of the fear of death, a noise of great (and frankly, unpostmodern) pathos. (Delillo, White Noise, p.33)

There is something inherently romantic about Bonca's description of the way that language functions in White Noise, though I believe that Bonca is correct to extract such a romance. Even in the thoroughly postmodern reading of White Noise provided by Reeve and Kerridge, there are fleeting tendencies towards extracting epic qualities from episodes in the novel such as the Airborne Toxic Event, a moment when 'human beings discover their mortality, and gain access to a world beyond the arbitrary play of signifiers' (Reeve and Kerridge, 'Toxic Events', p.313). Bonca, Reeve and Kerridge, though with incommensurate degrees of commitment, subscribe to an interpretation of Delillo as one who speaks of the metaphysical mystery of human existence through the language of consumerism. Delillo becomes an unwitting commentator upon last things, with the complex and protean forms of postmodernism constantly shielding the individual from the mortality which always waits at the end of interpretation and writing.

By reflecting directly upon death, Delillo's language progresses from deadpan humour to spiritual grandeur. An important episode on which Bonca focuses in the novel is when Jack's son, Wilder, starts up an 'inconsolable' seven hours of crying which displays no medical cause. The pain behind his wailing, and the uncanniness sensed by those around him, becomes almost a physical manifestation of the alterity of existence, namely death, and the sacredness of that which is beyond language:

They watched him with something like awe. Nearly seven straight hours of serious crying. It was as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place, in sand barrens or snowy ranges—a place where things are said, sights are seen, distances are...
reached which we in ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions. (Delillo, *White Noise*, p.79)

Jack imagines Wilder as having been to a place where the gap between subject and object is closed in a way which is refused by the postmodern society. The 'awe' and 'reverence' produced by Wilder's Olympian expression of grief are derived from this sense of contact with the primordial and essential, even though the origin of the tears is a mystery known only by Wilder (though perhaps not even to him). In Lyotardian terms, Wilder appears to 'present the unpresentable'; the 'sublime and difficult dimensions' suggest an alterity which equals the mystery of the essential rather than the absence of the essential.

At this juncture, we can start to espy the more overt theological content within Delillo's 'deathward-pointing novels'. Whatever the composition or nature of society, Delillo implies that death will always emerge through the gaps in our coded securities to give us a glimpse of the mystery of life. Furthermore, the way that Jack finds Wilder's crying a strangely comforting experience, draws us back towards Detweiler's idea of 'breaking the fall'. The presence of death stops the fall into an infinite degeneration of language and, like the effect of Wilder's elemental wailing, we can start to see beyond language into more intuitive and metaphysical types of discourse and sensation. Thus Bonca is able to comment:

*White Noise* is one of the few novels capable of mastering—perhaps taming—our schizoid confusions about the mass media experience. It is a novel which, because of its wide-ranging explanatory power and uncanny compassion, somehow *helps*. (Bonca, 'Natural Language', p.26)

Bonca celebrates *White Noise* for an 'uncanny' quality which grounds the narrative in death and mystery and so restrains the runaway activity of language in a metaphysics of mortality. *White Noise* 'helps' because it gives priority to a humanistic and metaphysical encounter with a negative truth once the devices of a playing language
are confronted and overcome. When Jack and his wife, Babette, argue about who would most be affected by the other’s death, the argument may not be concluded, but the metaphysical context of the discussion renders the lack of final decision inconsequential:

She claims my death would leave a bigger hole in her life than her death would leave in mine. This is the level of our discourse. The relative size of holes, abysses and gaps. We have serious arguments on this level. She says if her death is capable of leaving a large hole in my life, my death would leave an abyss in hers, a great yawning gulf. I counter with a profound depth or void. And so it goes into the night. These arguments never seem foolish at the time. Such is the dignifying power of our subject. (Delillo, White Noise, p.101)

Two significant themes emerge from this debate. Firstly, the ‘holes, abysses and gaps’ which Jack and Babette debate are treated as physical properties whose ‘relative’ dimensions can be argued and discussed. Yet apart from the irony of arguing about the size of a void, the notion of a vacuum or lack having an effective dimension is supported by the physical reality of the topic, death. Thus, the debate is stabilised by the reification of absence in death even though the debate is not concluded and goes on ad infinitum. Secondly, Jack offers the assurance that the inconclusive nature of the disputation, which could be recognised as symptomatic of Derridean fallen language, is overridden by ‘the dignifying power of our subject’. Jack implies that the subject, death, is always a presence behind the swirls of linguistic confusion and one which gives a metaphysical dignity through the humanistic reflections it produces. In White Noise, the very fact that Jack and Babette can discuss something which ultimately lies outside the remit of postmodern language games seems to offer a uniquely human moment which is ennobling in a world of superficiality.

Once again, we find a certain romantic strain in Delillo’s writing which does not sit easily with the postmodern rejection of metanarratives. White Noise forms itself out of humanistic speculations upon the implications of death and so retains the idea of physical presence even though this presence is sensed through the alterity of
death. *White Noise* also appears to criticise postmodern society along similar lines to my argument in the introductory chapter. Postmodernism fragments the world and language and by so doing, can practice a blindness to what is felt to be essential by certain societies. Delillo counters such a view by indicating death and the metaphysical negotiation of death as constants within this world which are frequently hidden in the commodity affirming dialogues of consumerism.45

So far in this chapter, I have looked at novelists whom I have classed as being outside of the sentiments of postmodernism, even though their texts have often been held up as being archetypal postmodern novels. Shifting my focus somewhat, I shall now examine several novels by Thomas Pynchon to see whether resolutely postmodern fiction still succumbs to the metaphysical essentials of death and the unknowable presence. In Delillo and Vonnegut, the alterity within their fiction is actually a specific reference to the event of death or the mystery of that event. In the case of Pynchon, I shall stay with the theme of death, but broaden the argument somewhat to claim that alterity in postmodern fiction, has the ability to adopt symbolic roles in its need for adequate representation. When alterity becomes a metaphysical theme, it searches out appropriate symbolic vehicles through which it can be expressed. Death is perhaps the most recurrent symbolic structure into which otherness can be prominently incorporated, though we will see a little more variety in the case of Pynchon.

**Thomas Pynchon — The gravity of death**

I start with *Gravity’s Rainbow*, focusing on Pynchon’s representation of the V2 rocket as a sign that, whilst simulating deconstructionist play,46 also provides a metaphysical focus to the novel. Throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the V2 performs a totemistic
function, uniting vast groups of disparate individuals as a focus for veneration, fascination, or even worship. The unity that the Rocket creates, originates from its symbolic reification of the alterity that results from the multiplicity of systems and meanings with which it is approached. The ‘real’ identity of the V2 may appear lost amidst the explosion of signification typical in a work by Pynchon, yet the resulting negativity elicits spiritual modes of perception in many of the characters. For the Rocket seems to physically embody negativity with its ‘absent presence’, as it becomes imbued with an uncanny metaphysical potential similar to that created by the imponderable black monoliths in Kubrick’s *2001*. This is illustrated when we are told of the ironic Jewish spiritualisation of the Rocket by various elements of the Schwartzkommando, the German Rocket corps:

But the Rocket has to be many things, it must answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it - in combat, in tunnel, on paper - it must survive heresies shining, unconfoundable . . . and heresies there will be: Gnostics who have been taken in a rush of wind and fire to chambers of the Rocket throne . . . Kabbalists who study the Rocket as Torah, letter by letter - rivets, burner cup and brass rose, its text is theirs to permute and combine into new revelations, always unfolding. . . Manicheans who see two Rockets, good and evil.47

Despite the fact that the Rocket appears to contain no intrinsic properties other than what relations and ‘heresies’ build into it, the Schwartzkommando is quite capable of transforming its negativity into metaphysical content or Manichean duality.48 Indeed, the Kabbalistic perspective is a significant illustration of how the Rocket’s alterity can be reified in a kind of a *via negativa*. The parallel that Pynchon draws between the Schwartzkommando’s relation to the Rocket and the Kabbalistic relation to the Torah, indicates that the Rocket is an open text that does not dictate its doctrines, but which defines its presence because of its ineffability and negativity. The loss which the Rocket embodies is reified by religious narratives that have the traditions of translating negativity into mystical presence. Hence the Kabbalistic viewpoint accepts
a scripture that retains the haunting presence of the sacred, yet at the same time flows without ceasing. In the same way, the Rocket, continually disappearing into the various narratives of Slothrop, Enzian, Blicero and others, becomes a mysterious presence that grounds narratives in a distinctly metaphysical negative. Just as Tony Tanner discusses entropy as the unifying figure of the novel, the alterity of the Rocket acts as a spiritual ground that appears capable of producing genuine revelation. Enzian, the Herero leader of the Schwartzgärt, here berates an engineer for mistrusting the operational data extracted from performance tests of the Rocket:

'Proud man,' said the Nguaroverue. 'What are these data, if not direct revelation? Where have they come from, if not from the Rocket which is to be?' (Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p.315)

The revelatory powers that Enzian believes the Rocket contains do not come from an existent source but from a deferred source, 'the Rocket which is to be'. The Rocket, though it does not yet exist, is still capable of producing revelations because its negativity, like the divinity of a negative theology, is capable of providing spiritual direction apparently without direct contact with a presence. More than anything, the Rocket offers a location for the alterity of Gravity's Rainbow's multiple and confusing narrative lines. Though there appears to be no such thing as Enzian's 'direct revelation' in such a complex and enigmatic novel, the Rocket grounds any ambiguity in a symbol of negativity itself. Thus, the otherness of the novel starts to act as a theme that hints towards a spiritual sublime within postmodernity. Marc W. Redfield has discussed Pynchon's work through the lens of the Romantic sublime and Fredric Jameson's later work on sublimity. Redfield describes the 'economy of the Romantic sublime' as that which 'typically consists in sacrificing perception in order to produce a super-sensory truth structured like a perception'. In the same way, ontological and metaphysical order is able to occur in Pynchon's novels because alterity becomes the
structuration of obscured meaning rather than the proof of indeterminate, absent meaning. Pynchon probably does not mean to suggest the possibility of any sort of essential presence behind language in *Gravity's Rainbow*. However, the figure of the Rocket shows how indeterminacy is restrained within a symbolism that enables negativity to remain within the economy of meaning and influence.  

Whatever the abstract religious sentiments elicited by the Rocket it is also an instrument of death, and Pynchon is at home with Vonnegut and Delillo in his recognition of the significance of mortality. This is more apparent in Pynchon's novel *V.*, in which we see the experimental Beat artists who compose 'The Whole Sick Crew' writing the text of their existence with finite resources. When we see them at 'the Spoon', their meeting place, they are engaging in a futureless linguistic play where the limits are set by their extinction:

> Conversations at the Spoon had become little more than proper nouns, literary allusions, critical or philosophical terms linked in certain ways. Depending on how you arranged the building blocks at your disposal, you were smart or stupid. Depending on how the others reacted they were In or Out. The number of blocks, however, was finite . . . This sort of arranging and rearranging was Decadence, but the exhaustion of all possible permutations and combinations was death.  

The presence of death seems to offer a kind of ultimate sign, a conclusion to the shifting patterns of word and object. In mortality, Pynchon perceives a final text which escapes the activity of words and definitions and thus becomes a transcendental signified beyond the motion of language. Death is the inescapable negative of ontological performance, yet it is also the visualised end which is a primary locus for defining self-identity. So, like the Rocket, death gives a physical time, space and influentiality to the alterity within the narrative, as death is the moment where words dissolve into an ontological reality rather than a postmodern aporia.  

At the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, we see death and alterity uniting in a final, absolute state. Gottfried, the sexually enslaved assistant of Oberst Weissman of the
Schwartzgerät, is placed into the elusive test rocket numbered 00000 and launched to his death. The apocalyptic symbolism of this scene is rich. The Rocket number consists of a compound five zeros, presenting a number with a total lack of numerical value. The Rocket is described as a 'womb' and also as a kind of ultimate sexual fulfilment, attaining the status of mother and procreational act, while also representing the contrary role of death and destruction. This fusion of characteristics produces a Rocket that cancels out both life and death, number and nothing, in a moment of represented void. I emphasise the word 'represented' because Pynchon seems eager to give the reader a vision of a pure, almost sacred, alterity. This vision is pursued in the description of the Rocket when it reaches the end of its fall:

And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last immeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t. (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 760)

Away from the violence of the impending explosion, the Rocket achieves a moment of static balance between earth and space. The quotation is replete with the language of infinity and eternity, 'absolutely and forever' and 'immeasurable' gesturing to a place beyond time, definition and voice. W.T. Lhamon, speaking on *V.*, argues that Pynchon focuses on 'the language of the Pentecost', a language which consists of marginal and non-rational voices that bear 'a longing for transcendence'. *Gravity's Rainbow* bears evidence to a similar kind of language that strains to touch the point between all poles and all distinctions, purifying alterity so that it reaches beyond language into the 'immeasurable gap' of a trans-conceptual space. This is the space that the statistician Roger Mexico inhabits in his calculation of V-2 strike patterns: the 'domain between one and zero' (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 55), where possibilities and probabilities become a zone of infinite division. The Rocket becomes representative of this zone because of its perfect arbitrariness.
What conclusions might we derive from the Rocket of *Gravity’s Rainbow* in relation to religion, alterity and postmodernism? Firstly, for Pynchon the otherness in linguistic difference can be represented upon the common object of multiple relationships, in this case a Rocket. By giving a symbolic focus to otherness, alterity is able to perform as a theme which, after all, is the intention of a novel that discusses indeterminacy or over-determination. The upshot, however, is that ‘genuine’ alterity is lost as soon as it is pursued and what is left is an influential negativity with all the mystery and spirituality of the object of a negative religion. So Joseph Slade is able to see an equation between the Rocket and the practices of Eastern mysticism:

One draws parallels between rocketry and Zen archery. Mondaugen borrows metaphors from Stefan George and Hermann Hesse; he visualizes the rocket as a resolver of paired opposites: male and female, life and death, creation and destruction. (Slade, *Pynchon*, p.221)

Interpreting the Rocket in terms of Buddhist spirituality is far from irrelevant. Just as the Buddhist attempts to see beyond binaries and to dissolve self through such practices as archery, so the Rocket appears as a means by which the self can be transcended in a trans-linguistic mode of perception. The narratives surrounding the Rocket are held together around a negativity of conspicuously metaphysical influence. Much of the language of *Gravity’s Rainbow* seems theological in its scope, drawing on the transfer of the absolute presence of God into the absolute absences of postmodern mythologising.

Turning our attention back to V., there is the same gravitation towards alterity as is displayed in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, though this time it is not made manifest in a Rocket, but is personified through the multifarious appearances of V. ‘herself’. Herbert Stencil’s pursuit of the secrets which he believes V. contains, leads inexorably to his mysterious death at sea in a waterspout, his death appearing to be the only adequate fulfilment to a quest in which nothing is concluded except Stencil’s yearning
to be united with the truth of V. Like the Rocket of Gravity's Rainbow, the signifying structures that surround V. are multiple, subjective and contingent. Yet in V.'s case 'she' not only centres the focus of the narrative, but also appears to transcend historical, geographical and even material conditions with the non-materiality of otherness. V. is not frozen in the Rocket's twentieth century space; she appears in diverse forms and personalities such as the mysterious hinterland of Vheissu, the persons of Victoria Wren in Cairo and Florence of the 1890s, Vera Meroving at Fopple's siege-party in southwest Africa, and Veronica Manganese on Malta in 1919, a place to which she returns in the final form of the 'Bad Priest' during the siege of that island in the Second World War. Sidney Stencil pursues V. amidst a plethora of historical and metaphysical signs, attempting, like Oedipa Maas attempts with the Trystero, to find an essence which can be classed as the definitive V., the sum of all her parts. Yet we see in Stencil's search a belief that truth would be a mortal discovery, the initial warning of which Stencil discovers in his father's journal:

'There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write that answer, either here or in any official report.' (Pynchon, V., p.53)

The 'answer' to V. is perceived as a nameless threat which must never be voiced to protect personal and social safety. A comparable dread is apparent in Gravity's Rainbow, when Tyrone Slothrop discovers the complex links between his past and present life and the world-wide corporate network linked to the production of the Rocket. When he acquires the dossier of Laszlo Jamf, his self-understanding is overwhelmed by the evidence that his father, William Slothrop, while in economic difficulties with his business, sold Tyrone to the scientist Jamf for unknown scientific purposes. Through this knowledge, Slothrop has to re-identify himself, reformulating his history in the light of Jamf as a new, mysterious centre in his personal history. He
experiences a dream which defines his crisis, a dream where he reads from an old
dictionary of technical German and sees the definition ‘Jamf: I’.

He woke begging It no - but even after waking, he was sure, he would remain sure, that It
could visit him again, any time It wanted. Perhaps you know that dream too. Perhaps It has
warned you never to speak Its name. If so, you'll know about how Slothrop'll be feeling now.
(Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p.287)

The capitalisation of the ‘It’ achieves produces a haunting effect. ‘It’ becomes as
fundamental as the ‘I’ of the dream definition, an ‘I’ which destroys Slothrop’s
illusion of the independence from the impersonal constructions of capitalism. The
therefore the ‘I’ is threatened by replacement with the ‘It’, an external and ghostly
force which lurks at the edge of perception. Yet despite the chilling mood surrounding
the ‘It’, there is also the feeling that contains a truth which needs to be discovered as
much as it will remain forever out of reach. The nameless threat contains the
possibility of desolation and destruction, and yet lures with the assurance that ‘the
truth is out there’. In V. the momentum behind the narrative is supplied by a
fundamental yearning towards the discovery of V.’s truth, even though the result is
potentially disastrous. Stencil’s quest for V. is never completed in his lifetime, but his
central amongst the forms of V. enable him to relate his identity to meaning. The
mystery that V. represents to Stencil is absolute. Because it is absolute, it defies total
participation in its shifting forms and seems to point to some ultimate cognitive
recognition beyond human ken. Stencil is engaged in a negative pursuit of V.,
constantly dismissing the forms of its identity in the attempt to unify himself with its
ineffable presence.

Stencil is an unlikely quester in the early stages of the novel, for he adopts a
position of complete relativism with regard to truth and reality, a position which
would seem to threaten any belief in a trans-historical V.:
He had decided long ago that no Situation had any objective reality: it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment. (Pynchon, V., p.189)

For Stencil, truth is an utter contingency which is wrought within the ‘specific moment’ of a particular history. Yet it soon becomes evident that V. is an answer to this disconnected perception of reality, overturning Stencil’s contention by producing meaning and what Thomas Schaub has described as a ‘fourth dimension’ of Stencil’s world (Schaub, Pynchon, p.9). This extra dimension is the abstracted world that provides the ‘solace of an explanation’ while never resolving itself in a definitive perception. Schaub claims, in the case of Stencil, that this solace ‘does little to diminish the chaos he sees around him’, but I would suggest that disruption is the very mode by which otherness performs its function of ontological location. V. is later described as ‘the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name’ (Pynchon, V., p.226), a designation with a paradoxical blend of grammar and meaning: the ‘Plot’ is without a name, but the capitalisation makes this lack of identity into an object within its own right, a pure otherness in the same way as the ‘I AM’ of the Old Testament Yahweh. The same paradox of the personified void emerges when Old Godolphin is asked by Signor Mantissa about what he saw in the mysterious realms of Vheissu: ‘“Nothing,” Godolphin whispered. “It was Nothing I saw.” ’ (Pynchon, V., p.204). ‘Nothing’ is able to become God-like in V. and thus becomes a source of metaphysical interest and a solution to ontological problems, fulfilling what Tony Tanner calls ‘the need to see patterns’ (Tanner, ‘V. and V-2’, p.8). By absorbing himself in V., Stencil is able to embrace the Nothingness and the void of contemporary (postmodern?) existence and turn it into a personified goal, enabling him to see the elusiveness of V. not as a futility, but as the indicator of metaphysical presence pointing outside the uncertainties of reality and truth.
It is important to contextualise my argument of the metaphysical potential of V. with Deborah Madsen's contention that the mystical and religious elements of V. are actually illustrations of the ultimate depth of bureaucratic conspiracy and political control in the twentieth century. Madsen interprets V. as representing the mechanistic nature of modern, institutionalised rationalism, instead of showing a possible transcendence over it. This is embodied in what Madsen calls the 'V-metaphysic' (Madsen, Postmodernist, pp.29-37) whereby V., in her procession from the animate, though destructive, Victoria Wren to the inanimate Bad Priest, a mere collection of inert prosthetic limbs, symbolises the dehumanising effects of capitalism, the fatal 'disease' which Stencil describes as infecting the world 'somewhere between 1859 and 1919' (Pynchon, V., p.461). Madsen argues that V. seems to provide 'a signifying centre which would be the 'spirit' informing modern history, giving it pattern, significance and direction' (Madsen, Postmodernist, p.29), though this centre ultimately undermines its appearance of transcendence by ironising the 'ideology of the transcendental signified' (Madsen, Postmodernist, p.31). The 'confessions' of Fausto Maijstral on the island of Malta perhaps provide the most immediate support for this interpretation, when Maijstral describes his descent from strong spiritual convictions to a cynical belief in the inanimate, such as it is embodied in the Malta that lies passionless under the bombardment from the German forces:

Fausto's kind alone with the task of living in a universe of things which simply are, and cloaking the inanimate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor so that the 'practical' half of humanity may continue in the Great Lie, confident that their machines, dwellings, streets and weather share the same human motives, personal traits and fits of contrariness as they. (Pynchon, V., p.326)

Fausto presents religion as a massive act of self deception, the giving of a spiritualised form to 'a universe of things'. In such a universe, objects are the only reality and the order of the inanimate, of which the mechanistic philosophy is its servant, is the
complete truth of modernity. I would, however, be reluctant to conclude that the insistent use of religious material in Pynchon’s novels is merely for purposes of parody. 59 David Seed has remarked that Pynchon’s use of religion points towards an ontological gravitas rather than a depthless model of existence:

The gap left by the loss of religion, implied as an ironic absence in V., leads to a collective yearning for an absolute confirmation of characters’ own existence and for a dimension exempt from the flux and uncertainty of this world. 60 Seed notes that the ‘gap’ which remains after God has disappeared has a ‘collective’ potential for giving meaning to a world that displays chaos and fragmentation. The fact that this meaning is indefinable is not the real issue. Once a novel is constructed around an absent centre, then that absence becomes the centre in itself, 61 and replays the qualities of the original centre, e.g. God. Pynchon’s characters and worlds are centred by the constant postulation of a meaning which is present and total, but which is not invested in the terms or objects with which we form understanding. As one of Pynchon’s ‘Proverbs for Paranoids’ makes clear: ‘You may never get to touch the Master, but you can tickle his creatures’ (Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow, p.237). The ‘Master’ is that which is never comprehended directly, but only through the illustrative nature of material reality. By negating the authority of particular morsels of evidence and information, Pynchon focuses our attention on the alterity of the text as the inconceivable truth of his textual world. Moreover, once this alterity becomes defined or symbolically contained in such physical vessels as death, V. or the Rocket, then otherness performs the security of embodying the presence of the demand for meaning. Therefore, alterity actually protects against what Slothrop terms ‘anti-paranoia’, ‘where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long’ (Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow, p.434).
Madsen is right to point to Pynchon’s ironising of capitalism and religion. Yet what he ironises them with is no real threat to either. Pynchon finds his ‘still point in a turning world’ through attempting to push his novels deeper into a cosmological alterity. For as he ranges across many social, political and philosophical worlds, he unites them all with a portentous sense of otherness and mortality. This ‘common gift’ (to use Derrida’s term once again) is the ultimate judgement upon social hegemonies, but only insofar as it dominates the philosophical horizon of how they justify themselves. So even in Vineland, Pynchon seems to use political injustice to illustrate the absolute force of the aporetic as a reality that goes beyond all forms. The novels of Thomas Pynchon manifest deep mystical tendencies because he uses the ineffable to connect, even transcend, characters and events, and by so doing gives alterity a position of influence, power and meaning within the text. As such, what criticisms he can make are always pulled askew by the gravity of pure philosophy and religious sentiment.

In this chapter I have attempted to show how the alterity which is meant to define the postmodern novel can be a distinctly unpostmodern attempt to negotiate death and represent negativity. In the cases of Vonnegut and Delillo, I have argued that labelling their work as postmodern is a mistake, not least for the fact that they are more concerned with exploring the human condition than they are with pondering the death of the metanarrative. Regarding Pynchon, I consider that he does sincerely try to depict an indeterminate and fragmented world, but his focus on that which is lost ultimately returns his language to the priorities of essential, even absolute, meaning. The recurrent focus upon death in postmodern fiction has perhaps not been treated with enough seriousness in recent criticism. The insistence of this theme is a humanistic shout often unheard by the ear of contemporary criticism. We can read
postmodern attempts to express alterity and otherness as a way of instructing us in the experience of death by its visualisation in form. Thus we have seen several ‘postmodern’ novelists who have made death and alterity intersect in an attempt to reify otherness as the confrontation with that which we cannot see or know. The effect of this is that postmodern fiction recognisably fits into a model of literature where certain primary constituents of human experience are presumed. In much postmodern fiction, these constants seem to be the consciousness of death and the negotiation of the unknown. The metaphysical register surrounding the postmodern speculations on death, therefore, comes as no surprise. Postmodern fiction concerns itself with seeing beyond the limits of the concept and even beyond life itself - in effect it is a permanent speaking of the last rites. By seeking indeterminacy, postmodern fiction seems to desire a point of satori when the subject is able to see the whole of the world through the lens of negativity itself. The critical discourse that has surrounded postmodern writing has obscured the fact that alterity surges into meaning rather than deconstructing meaning. Metaphysical and mystical truth is admittedly obscure and indirect in such writing, yet the presumption of a total present meaning is still held in confidence. Postmodern fiction maintains the structural premise of truth by making otherness an absolute in itself, and by reifying that otherness in, amongst other things, death. In the next chapter, we shall look at how the postmodern negative acts as the metanarrative of perhaps the most scriptural literary form - allegory.

NOTES

3 See Dr Laurence Peter, *Quotations for Our Time* (London, Black Cat, 1988) p.150.
4 Though Derrida does not posit a ground to the affirmation of play, there is a value in the new experience of life under the ‘presence of absence’. Affirmation, with all its associations of certitude,
adopts a confidence in the face of absence which allows the subject to appropriate the motif of absence as a vehicle for attacking hierarchy and metaphysics. As Derrida has stated, 'Deconstruction, I have insisted, is not neutral. It intervenes.' (Derrida, Positions, p.93). This intervention is significant because it reinforces the idea that there is not only a fall into the activity of play, but this activity possesses a consciously held purpose and metanarrative order.


See Bernstein, Whistling, pp.264-65.


By 'life-affirming', I mean the attempt to rediscover a proximity to being through rejecting the opaque veil imposed by the concept between the subject and ontological activity. By embracing the active without the desire to rationalise, a route is offered out of the impasse and petrifaction of transcendental thought. Of course, there remains the problem that the codified is often the only access to a moral dialogue with others, and postmodern theories which rely on a self-negating attitude to theory, either through dialectics or irony, overlook the issue of the need for conceptuality in environments where obligation expects itself to be transferable through the merit of its own reasons.

9 See Leonard B. Meyer, 'The end of the Renaissance?', Hudson Review, 16 (1963) 169-86: 'It is to the naive and primitive enjoyment of sensations and things for their own sakes that these artists seek to return. We must rediscover the reality and excitement of a sound as such, a color as such, and existence as such' (p.175).

10 William V. Spanos, 'The detective and the boundary: some notes on the postmodern literary imagination', boundary 2, 1, 1 (1972) 147-68 (p.156).

11 McHale (Postmodernist, p.228) argues that Modernist writers were equally conscious of death yet defied this fate by spinning out narrative existence, even though such an existence could be viewed as pointless, as in the plays of Beckett.


13 By the 'death metanarrative', I do not mean that there is a single mode of apprehending death, common to all human beings. Instead, I refer to death as a physical event that is a general driving force behind the content of ontological reflections.


19 Petterson is especially keen to distance himself from McHale's contention that the autobiographical Vonnegut in Slaughterhouse Five is a 'paper author' (McHale, Postmodernist, p.205), the construction of the fictionality implicit in writing. By placing Vonnegut more in a tradition of 'American black humour fabulists' (Petterson, World, pp.16-19), Petterson lifts Vonnegut away from the 'existentialist scorn' of the postmodern to the 'liberating laughter' of a humanist project.

20 For specific analysis of the chronological contradictions in Slaughterhouse Five, see Charles B. Harris, 'Time, Uncertainty and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: A Reading of Slaughterhouse Five', The Centennial Review, 20, 3 (Summer 1976) 228-43 (pp.239-43).

21 For an extensive examination of the chronology and structure of Slaughterhouse Five, see Monica Loeb, Vonnegut's Duty-Dance with Death - Theme and Structure in Slaughterhouse Five (Umeå, Sweden, Umeå Studies in the Humanities 26, 1979).


23 See Russell Blackford, 'Physics and Fantasy: Scientific Mysticism, Kurt Vonnegut, and Gravity's Rainbow', Journal of Popular Culture, 19, 3 (Winter 1985) 35-44. Blackford argues that the narrative of Slaughterhouse Five 'makes possible doubt about Billy Pilgrim's experiences and, by implication,
the philosophy he bases on those experiences. Once this possibility of doubt is established, many arguments can be advanced to build a case that Billy Pilgrim is insane' (p.39).

24 Sharon Spencer, Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel (New York, New York University Press, 1971). Spencer classes novels such as Slaughterhouse Five as 'spatialized' novels that expands the novel's content beyond its own chronology. 'The “truth” of the total vision of such a novel is a composite truth obtained from the reader's apprehension of a great many relationships among the fragments that make up the book's totality' (p.xx).

25 Donald J. Greiner gives two explanations for the Tralfamadore episodes in Slaughterhouse Five: 1) The pressure of Vonnegut's 'survival guilt' means that aesthetic indirection enables him to bypass any overwhelming emotions which might 'stifle his expression'; 2) 'Taking the other ground, he understates the Dresden horrors dispassionately so that the apparently unconcerned manner communicates his grief.' Though I concede with the argument that Vonnegut's form is partly a concession to his psychological trauma, I would add that the imaginative encounters with Tralfamadore enable the more successful envisioning of a non-linear mode of experience detached from the causal emphasis of an historical model. See Donald J. Greiner, 'Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five and the Fiction of Atrocity', *Critique*, 14, 3 (1973) 38-51 (p.48).

26 See Pettersen, *World*, p.253; 'More than mere simultaneity for its own sake, Vonnegut strives for a Prustian arrest in the flow of time, and ultimately for "and image of life" that could surpass omnipresent death.'


35 For an overview of Vonnegut's convoluted relationship to science and religion, see Pettersen, *World*, pp.59-68.

36 'No respecter of evidence has ever found the least clue as to what life is all about, and what people should do with it. Oh, there have been lots of brilliant guesses. But honest, educated people have to identify them as such - as guesses' (Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*, p.188).


38 The subject that Detweiler describes, a subject in a radical relationship with death, is worth comparing to Mark C. Taylor's idea of the 'dispossessed subject'. Proposing death as 'a force in life rather than the merely tragic demise of life', Taylor goes on to equate the acceptance of death as a precondition for stability: 'The subject who is needy can never achieve satisfaction because of absence (death) in presence (life). Therefore the dispossessed subject accepts the conditions of "incompletion".' See Taylor, *Erring*, pp.145-47.


Bonca makes a similar point about the fallen nature of language in his analysis of Delillo’s *The Names* (New York, Knopf, 1982). Bonca argues that the language which has apparently fallen from presence ‘remains a matter of wonder because, with every utterance, it speaks the mystery of human beings grappling with time and nothingness. And with such a recognition can come the awareness that the human scene is everywhere and always a matter of pity and awe’ (Bonca, ‘Natural Language’, p.31).

John A. McClure sees the romantic content of Delillo’s novels residing in the mystery inherent in conspiracy theories, of which Delillo is a master. ‘He is engaged in tracing a kind of history of romance: challenging the modernist notion that global secularization and “rationalization” would make its production impossible; showing how these very processes produce new sources for romance.’ See John A. McClure, ‘Postmodern Romance: Don Delillo and the Age of Conspiracy’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 89, 2 (1990) 337-53 (p.337).

Tom LeClair has noted that Delillo acknowledges Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death* as a major source behind his fiction. Becker’s central thesis is that the denial of death is a primary motivating factor behind all human activity. See Bonca, ‘Natural Language’, p.31; Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don Delillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1987); Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York, Free Press, 1973).


Tanner, ‘*V.* and *V’2’, p.21: ‘While the endlessly ramifying and superimposed plots of the book defy summary, the general theme of the operation of entropy on every level serves to relate the disparate temporal and geographic material the book contains. Every situation reveals some new aspect of decay and decline, some move further into chaos or nearer death.’

See Thomas Schaub, *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1981) pp.3-4: ‘The reader experiences Pynchon’s fiction as representative of a determinate order which it suggests but which it persistently withholds. This quality - this impenetrability - is intensified by the ways in which Pynchon encourages the reader to suspect that this withheld order is so withheld only by remaining unnamed; that a revelatory unity is present in the text, but without confirmation or recognition.’

Marc W. Redfield, ‘*Pynchon’s Postmodern Sublime*,’ *PMLA*, 104, 2 (March 1989) 152-162 (p.152).


Tanner describes The Whole Sick Crew as ‘hastening the entropic decline of language’, deliberately racing language towards its final condition beyond words. (Tanner, ‘*V.* and *V’2’, p.25).

Taylor regards postmodernism and death as intrinsically connected: ‘Postmodernism opens with the sense of irreducible loss and incurable fault. This wound is inflicted by the overwhelming awareness of death - a death that “begins” with the death of God and “ends” with the death of our selves. We are in a time between times and a place which is no place.’ (Taylor, *Erring*, p.6).

See Joseph Tabbi, ‘“Strung Into the Apollonian Dream”: Pynchon’s Psychology of Engineers’, *Novel*, 25, 2 (Winter 1991) 160-199: “The rocket itself can often seem an almost mystical entity, especially to the various sects and communities within the Zone who worship it as their “Holy Text.” Technology, more than a mode of apprehending the world that modern readers can believe in, is in fact fraught with the mystical and religious qualities that it is generally supposed to have supplanted—our collective adherence to an ideology of progress and scientific discovery having taken the place of an earlier, theological commitment.” (p.160).


Many critics see the threat of the inanimate as the central theme of Pynchon novels, with the power to change the active to the inanimate, the other to the same, residing in bureaucratic and capitalist forms of imperialism. See Ronald W. Cooley, ‘The Hothouse or the Street: Imperialism and Narrative in Pynchon’s *V.*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 39, 2 (Summer 1993) 307-26; Deborah Madsen, *The

59 For an exhaustive examination of Pynchon's application of religious material, see Victoria H. Price, Christian Allusions in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon, (New York, Peter Lang, 1989).


61 See Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1983) p.71.
If the key component of postmodern textuality is the unstoppable play of difference, then it is intriguing that many critics have seen allegory as the most visible embodiment of this condition. Such a claim for allegory could well seem inappropriate to the functions which allegorical literature has adopted throughout literary and social history. Allegory's scriptural origins and Classical adaptations have generally seemed to imbue the allegorical text with a didactic transparency, where the words on the page didactically revolve around a stable referent such as the divine logos or the national identity. Thus John Bunyan, in the apology for perhaps the most famous Christian allegory of all, defends the metaphoric nature of his work:

I find that holy Writ in many places,
Hath semblance with this method, where the cases
Doth call for one thing to set forth another:
Use it I may then, and yet nothing smother
Truths golden Beams.¹

Bunyan justifies his allegorical method in the transcendent 'Truth' of Scripture which holds signifier and signified together in a confident structure of metaphor. In a sense, Bunyan is claiming that his allegory constantly discards its own signifiers as the text opens to reveal the Word behind the sign. With such evident logocentrism in its history, why have critics like Zhang Longxi claimed that allegory has become 'the favourite trope in postmodern criticism'?²
The history of allegory is built out of presence-based assumptions. Philo’s development of the ‘allegorical hermeneutic’ grounded the non-literal interpretation of scripture in the twin doctrines of inspired reading and biblical infallibility, thus enabling the metaphorical to retain its links with the transcendental signified. Now that we are meant to be living under the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, the age of Nietzsche, Freud and Derrida, Philo’s long persuasive model appears to have undone itself in the very textuality of allegory and the infinite play of the metaphoric process. So it is that the alterity of allegory is able to emerge and the concept of the postmodern allegory is born. Yet we must be cautious here, for Philo’s religious voice is not so easily overridden. Despite the positivist appearance of Philo’s literary method, he has also been described as ‘the Father of negative theology’. Philo did not believe that positive statements about God were possible — hence the allegorical model relies on indirection and mediation when discussing God. The significance of Philo for our discussion of postmodern allegory here, is that the aporetic and logocentric are not necessarily exclusive from one another. The alterity found in postmodern allegory essentially acts as the Philonic God - nothing positive can be said about it, but it remains as the totalising force behind the culturally situated act of interpretation.

The focus of this chapter is basically threefold. Firstly, there is the question of originality: is postmodern allegory markedly different from allegory prior to the postmodern epoch? Or is postmodern allegory merely a continuation of a traditional allegorical project under the guise of indeterminacy? Secondly, I shall focus on the alterity of postmodern allegory not in aporetic terms, but as a referential anchor for the allegorical and its cultural priorities. The interpretation of alterity as cultural message instead of elusive trace will be expanded in the third and main part of this chapter.
Here I shall focus on three classic and much discussed postmodern allegories: John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy*, Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*. I shall demonstrate that the ‘otherness’ which haunts these texts is not a common aporia but a negative presence which attempts to retain the didactic ground of allegorical tradition though ostensibly embracing the indeterminate.

**Allegorical alterity and postmodern culture**

Arguably the most determinable feature of all allegory is its conscious intertextuality. Whether it be the Bible, a fable, or an episode in political legend, the allegory is always a text which presents itself in relation to a *pretext*, the prior text or social theme that is the object of and authority behind the allegorical setting. The relation between the text and the pretext is necessarily mobile, for the allegorical text is always incorporating the cultural specificity of the present as it attempts to make the pretext relevant and visible to a particular age. Deborah Madsen claims that allegory’s application throughout oral, biblical and classical history has been an ideal form of textual and social crisis-management. Madsen contends that allegory intervenes in history to defuse new exegetic demands placed upon an authoritative, usually religious, text, by a changing culture:

> at any moment when the textual justification for a particular cultural order was threatened by historical change or by a shift in dominant beliefs, it was to allegorical interpretation that exegetes had recourse, in order to shore up the authority and legitimacy of their sacred book.⁶

Allegory acts as a textual defence whose virtue is the versatility to adapt a supposedly permanent textual foundation to the vagaries of a constantly mutating society. Implicit in allegory’s fortress mentality is the suggestion that the language of the present is somehow fractured and fallen compared to the logos within a pretext such as the Bible.
or Homer. The author of allegory recognises the fallen nature of language, yet seeks to reconstruct its fractures through the authoritative pretextual other.

Madsen, in her examination of pre-Romantic literature, also shows how allegory outside postmodernity has tried to occupy both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ planes of exposition:

Allegorical narratives make a demand to be read both ‘vertically’ and ‘horizontally’. That is, allegorical images require definition in terms of their place within the larger symbolic structure and with reference to their implied relations with cultural structures which exist outside the text (Madsen, Allegory, p.125)

This positioning of allegory across axes of both temporality and spatiality shows how allegory offers itself as an epistemologically superior medium for uniting ideality and impermanence in the alignment of ‘horizontal’ social movement with the ‘vertical’ authority of pretextual icons. It is in this totalising unity that allegory seems most opposed to postmodern literature, especially as allegory seems confident in the letter/spirit division which has been the primary target of poststructuralism:

Allegory constructs a hypothetical fictional reality which is centred upon, and determined by, the ideal. Within the narrative, the broad and general significances of any event are judged in terms of this ideal which is thus tested and proved; the imitation of life on the literal level of narrative coexists with an evaluative principle which gives meaning and purpose to that life. (Madsen, Allegory, p.125)

The ideal context of allegory transforms temporality into a form of eschatological quest, a stretching out towards the final revelation beyond language. There is a sense in which allegory has functioned as a textual mechanism through which the reader can accept a presence behind the visible signifier and a source of reference itself. So when Bede in c.700 was able to say that allegory ‘is a trope in which meaning other than the literal is indicated’, he implied that the text is merely a linguistic window through which pretextual knowledge is seen.

Yet as we saw in Bunyan’s defensiveness, it is apparent that the movement beyond literality can generate an awkward epistemological position. Allegory's
didactic moment lies in intertextual passage, with the allegorical text acting as a literary thoroughfare through which the reader passes to an originary authority and returns from that authority to validate a particular cultural interpretation. However, the pendulum-swing of intertextuality means that the final applicable authority of the allegorical text is displaced from the simple text and pretext division to an indefinable space between these two constituents of the allegory. In short, once text and pretext engage, then it would seem that neither can remain pure in the volatile interpretative activity of *différance*.

A conclusion that can be drawn from allegory's intertextual priorities is that allegory exposes its own indeterminacy. Here the opening for postmodern theory becomes conspicuous. Several prominent postmodernists have seen in allegory the form which most reveals the operations of language theorised by poststructuralism. Paul de Man and Jonathan Culler have both argued that allegory defies the logocentric presumptions of symbolism as its intertextual condition testifies to the lack of an 'original' referent free from the instability of the linguistic play. Culler argues that allegory differs from the expectations of Romantic symbolism because, in Madsen's words, allegory operates by 'stressing the difference between apparent and ultimate meanings, focusing on the "semantic leap" needed to produce meaning' (Madsen, *Allegory*, p.138). Allegory always exposes the text's inability to contain its own meaning and de Man expands this theme in 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' and *Allegories of Reading*. De Man separates the symbolic from the allegorical because:

> Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes language in the void of this temporal difference. (de Man, 'Rhetoric', p.207)

The reference to 'the void of temporal difference' implicitly associates de Man's theorisation of allegory with Derrida's notion of *différance*. Indeed, Derrida's
contention that '[n]othing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply absent or present' is especially relevant to allegorical temporality (Derrida, Positions, p.26). For allegory is caught not only within the différance of its own signification, but its 'present' appears suspended in limbo between the contemporary and the iconic. Allegory reveals the quintessential postmodern form because meaning is vagrant between past and present, transcendence and trace.

Madsen concludes in response to de Man:

The language of allegory is then purely figurative; it is not based upon perception. Rather than attempt to write the self and world through emotion, the allegorical sign refers to previous signs, the text's meaning is derived from other texts, and because the narrative thus exists in a purely linguistic context it reveals an 'authentically temporal destiny', an authentic linguistic self. (Madsen, America, p.139)

Madsen's summation of de Man's theory of allegory is offered with the caution that his reasoning is more applicable to the allegories of modernism onwards than the allegories of pre-Romanticism. Madsen sees indeterminacy as the root of the allegorical form, but she recognises that such an aporetic structure has been managed throughout history, through boundaries of typology and analogy which keep the allegory within the limits of a cultural role. Postmodern allegories, such as Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow and The Crying of Lot 49 and Barth's Giles Goat-Boy, contrast with, say, the early Puritan allegories of the New World, because they centralise the gulf between reference, meaning and signification. Longxi offers similar views when he claims that postmodern allegory differs from other styles of allegory because the postmodern presentation of the 'impersonal nature of linguistic necessity' differs from the 'controlled linguistic construct of the past' (Longxi, 'Historicizing', p.215).

The purpose of this chapter is to dissolve the artificial theoretical boundaries constructed between postmodern allegory and its forerunners. The claim of this thesis is that postmodern alterity is not an inconceivable negativity, but a textual device used
to negotiate the ontological and even epistemological problems of contemporary
culture. Following the lines of Madsen's argument, though to different ends, I would
suggest that postmodern allegory mediates a foundational pretext as a way of
addressing specific social challenges. Proposing these challenges as the instability of
values in a market-orientated, multi-cultural society, what postmodern allegory does is
represent metanarratives through negative discourse and thus move contemporary
ontologies of absence into a traditional metaphysical authority. By keeping alterity
close to tropes of divine presence, the postmodern allegory is thus able to retain its
allegorical role of judging the world and defining its psychology. In this meeting of
metaphysics and alterity, postmodern allegory protects itself against the collapse into
nihilism and futility by making the negative resound with the authority of the absolute,
pretextual other.

So how is alterity constructed in postmodern allegory? As we have seen,
postmodern allegory forces the reader towards intertextual aporiae and textual
difference. Yet the result need not see a literary work floundering in a sea of
indeterminacy. We have already seen in the case of Philo how the apophatic text can
use alterity to signify both a formal structure and a metaphysical presence within a
theological system. It is reasonable to ask, therefore, whether postmodern allegory and
negative theology share a desire for a trans-textual foundation in their constructions of
ambiguity. In another consideration of Philo, Joel Fineman sees allegorical alterity as
a way of fusing absent scriptural origins and the imminent cultural present into an
attestation of the ineffable, yet historical, presence of the divine:

It is as though allegory were precisely that mode that makes up for the distance, or heals the
gap, between the present and a disappearing past, which, without interpretation, would be
otherwise irretrievable and foreclosed.13
The significance of Fineman's argument is that allegory acts as a form that reclaims meaning and the 'presence' of history by its implicit demand for interpretative action and its connection of different time-frames of experience. All allegory contains the inherent impetus towards an interpretation, yet as Fineman suggests, this association is as much productive as it is aporetic in the way the allegory charges us to create meaning instead of suspending it.

Associating postmodern allegory with negative theology is not inappropriate. The fact that allegory questions the bonds of meaning does not necessarily produce an eternally nomadic reader, but instead can offer a conscious interpretative presence, which like the inconceivable God, has deferral as its identity. As I have argued in my introductory chapter, once alterity and indeterminacy are given priority within a narrative schema, then such a priority achieves a certain visibility within the thematic structure of the text. Once alterity is offered as a visibility or awareness, then it becomes something to which the subject must respond. In postmodern allegory, the alterity which exists between text and pretext is not only a demand for the reader to assemble textual meaning. There is the additional demand that the reader, whose ontological isolation is implied by textual structures, uses alterity in the attempt to represent pretextual codes in a contemporary environment. The alterity of postmodern allegory thus becomes a groundwork for social confrontation and a benchmark for subjective interpretation.

However, there is a problem when applying the above theory to actual works of fiction. As I am arguing that alterity is not, in fact, a pure realm of difference, but a visible thematic presence within postmodern textuality, the implication is that alterity can be handled and applied, like any other theme, to direct ideological ends. As the remainder of this chapter will show, the otherness of postmodern allegory is always
packaged and directed by focused narrative priorities rather than a general allusion towards difference. Otherness is quite capable of containing religious, philosophical, nihilistic and linguistic themes as part of an allegorical message. In this chapter, I shall focus on the religious heritage of allegory, mainly because the apophatic within postmodern allegory stays close to biblical and mythological pretexts. Such pretexts are useful because they cement the themes of absence, ontology and value into a metaphysical whole.

For all the charges of logocentricity that postmodernism has raised against religion, the strongly aporetic trends in many branches of theology makes religion an ideal site of return for those who wish to provide indeterminacy with philosophical import. The association of negativity and spirituality in postmodern allegory is natural considering allegory’s religious lineage, hence textual alterity often performs the role of the spiritual logos and transcendental signified. Madsen claims that ‘allegory has intervened in all the most important debates concerning the spiritual destiny of Western civilisation’ (Madsen, America, p.4). Postmodernism is no exception. The interaction of alterity with spirituality questions the extent to which postmodern allegory is a revolution in thought or a retreat into tradition. This will be the main question during my analyses of Barth, Pynchon and Carter.

**John Barth**

Any treatment of postmodern allegory would be incomplete without an appraisal of the novels of John Barth. Barth’s value for this chapter is that he produces a typical postmodern allegory which aims at unsettling the confidence in the stability of textual reference. Yet I shall claim that the otherness which results from this disruption is actually an ontological repackaging of life in a mix of liberal humanism and didactical
negativity. Mainly using *Giles Goat-Boy* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, I argue against John Stark's view that Barth defies thematic priorities in his novels and that, in the case of *Giles Goat-Boy*:

> the reader, after he peels off all the layers of the onion, finds in the last layer only the impetus of story-telling. 14

I do not disagree with Stark over his contentions that the reader discovers 'the impetus of story-telling' in Barth. Such an engine does drive much of the volatile plot, characterisation and reflection in Barth's novels. However, the desire to tell stories depends on a whole system of ontological presumptions which is writ large within Barth's characters as that which both listens and speaks within a meaningful discursive context. Barth's postmodern credentials are questionable, not because he shares the common involvement in the metaphysics of presence, but because he espouses alterity as a first principle which keeps his narrative within the remit of Philo's allegorical hermeneutic.

We start with the acknowledgement that the allegorical play between text and pretext in Barth's novels does appear to create a postmodern 'discourse of the Other' and an alterity which testifies to the absence within the sign. The alterity of Barth's fiction emerges out of what Madsen would describe as the attempt to 'articulate what is atemporally true (the logos) in a temporal mode of representation' (Madsen, *America*, p.145). On this interpretation, Barth clouds the logos with its own allegorical medium of expression and disables transcendental import through the temporality of metaphorical performance. In applying this argument, it is useful to juxtapose the alterity in texts such as *Giles Goat-Boy* to de Man's analysis of allegorisation in Romantic literature and its relation to ontological awareness. According to de Man, when allegory reaches 'the void of [. . . ] temporal difference':

> 14
it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognised as a non-self. It is this painful knowledge that we perceive at the moments when early romantic literature finds its true voice. (de Man, 'Rhetoric', p.207)

I would question whether the separation between self and non-self is as incommensurable as de Man states. The self seems not so much alien to the non-self, but in many ways acts in an adjectival relationship to a kind of pure and nameless being. For as the two ‘selves’ are held in confrontation, the non-self starts to appear as the essentialist motivation for being upon which the temporal succession of the self is built. The otherness of the non-self is the permanent precondition of seeing the self in all its relief and thus it is absorbed back into an ontology of judgement and independence.

The association of self and non-self is what gives alterity an atemporal force that ironically emphasises the continuity of the subject in a postmodern allegorical text. For though critics like Craig Owens have seen allegory as dominated by ‘[a]ppropriation, site specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, hybridization’, such textual features are grounded by their contribution towards the meaning-formation presupposed in the allegorical activity itself.\(^\text{15}\) In *Giles Goat-Boy*, the allegorical emphasis on absence becomes meaningful within itself and thus converts negativity into an allegorical centre. My main goal in this discussion of Barth is to explain the mechanics of this shift and the implications for a theological investigation of postmodern writing.

*Giles Goat-Boy* begins in a confusion of textual multiplicity and fictive self-consciousness. The ‘Publisher’s Disclaimer’,\(^\text{16}\) consisting of five editorial voices questioning both the authenticity and the quality of the subsequent text, initiate a novel where authorial identity seems forever questioned and interpretative security cannot be found. The ‘Cover-Letter to the Editors and Publisher’ signed by ‘J.B.’
(Barth, *Giles*, pp.xvii-xxxi), only contributes to the instability. Far from providing a governing authorial intention, Barth’s ‘cover-letter’ further dissolves the authoritative author within fictionality. ‘J.B.’, a university Professor, describes the encounter with the student Stoker Giles who leaves in his hands *The Revised New Syllabus (RNS)* of George Giles, ‘Goat-Boy’ and ‘Grand Tutor’ of New Tammany College, the allegorical equivalent of the western, capitalist world. J.B. enthusiastically accepts the spiritual content of *RNS*, yet admits that Stoker Giles and New Tammany College do not seem to exist and that the giant computer, WESCAC, which is supposed to have collated and composed the *RNS* manuscript, was not even a technological possibility at that time:

> Acknowledge with me, then, the likelihood that *The Revised New Syllabus* is the work not of ‘WESCAC’ but of an obscure, erratic wizard whose *nom de plume*, at least, is Stoker, Giles; and, again with me, acknowledge further that this is not the only possibility - for as that splendid fellow observed, there are in literal truth ‘other universities than ours.’ (Barth, *Giles*, p.xxx)

As J.B. questions the literalities of the *RNS*, the system of referentiality in the novel seems impossible to contain. For here we have an author who has fictionalised himself arguing over the authenticities of a fictional text, with publishers who are fictional in a situation where the author is both conspicuously present in his artistry yet curiously absent in his status. The admission that there are ‘other universities than ours’, wryly opens up the limitless possibilities of alternative interpretations and worlds and thus seems to prohibit confidence in our own epistemology or judgement.

*Giles Goat-Boy* is thus a text which continually ironises the desire for textual certainty. The very first words of the novel deliberately toy with the trust usually constructed between reader and author in the suspension of disbelief:

> The reader must begin this book with an act of faith and end it with an act of charity. We ask him to believe in the sincerity and authenticity of this preface, affirming in return his prerogative to be skeptical of all that follows it (Barth, *Giles*, p.xxxi)
The ironic effect of this entreaty is that faith in the preface is precisely the thing which
the preface itself disallows. The opening to the novel places the reader in an awkward
position in which the fictional has confessed itself and merged with apparent
pretences to the factual. In such a situation, the role of the novel as allegory appears
insecure in a novel where the distinct relation between the allegory and the world 'out
there' becomes multi-layered and confused. Barth seems to enact Roland Barthes'
proclamation of the death of the author by withdrawing into elusive layers of fiction
and difference. If traditional allegory offers the movement towards the transcendental
signified of the Author, then Barth's postmodernist qualities seem to deny that any
such logocentric presence could be pinned down with certainty.

The 'Revised New Syllabus' is the story of George Giles who, though raised
as a goat by his benefactor Max Spielman, ultimately attains the position of Grand
Tutor, an office of supreme religious and philosophical status. The action takes place
within the New Tammany College, the western half of a giant university which acts as
part of the allegorical conversion of the universe into a university. As Giles searches
for the truth of his origins in relation to WESCAC and attempts to promote himself as
a Grand Tutor, the allegorical references range dramatically through the politics of the
Cold War (represented by the mutually assured destruction policies of WESCAC and
its eastern counterpart, EASCAC), and the ideas of Darwin, Freud, Sophocles and
Dante. Here I am going to focus particularly on Barth's partly parodic, though
ultimately stabilising, treatment of religion. To target religion in Giles Goat-Boy is not
an arbitrary focus. Barth himself, in interview with Heide Ziegler, has asserted that
Giles Goat Boy's central trope is the cycle of mystical disillusion whereby a
spiritually-minded individual is capable of moments of epiphany, but has problems
applying the new insight in a socially complex milieu:
At the end of *Giles Goat-Boy* the hero-narrator’s experience is betrayed, qualified, postscripted, requalified, etc. It’s done comically because I can’t do things any other way. But it’s the comic rendition of something I take quite seriously. To sum up; society is not at the forefront of my literary concerns, but it’s the *milieu* in which the mystic or the hero has to implement the ineffable and which will inevitably falsify, to some necessary degree, the thing he is trying to transmit. Society is the noise in the hero’s signal. ¹⁸

The secondary position which society holds in Barth’s analysis will be important to the progression of this chapter. For the moment, however, this quotation acts as a caution against classing the religious content of the novel as simple parody. Though *Giles Goat-Boy* attests to the difficulty of keeping the spiritual fires burning, it also places the drive towards the ineffable as primary mode of perception that social realism can never quash. What social qualifications achieve is the negating of definitions of the divine. However, *Giles Goat-Boy* keeps negation itself within the boundaries of George’s spiritual journey and so the alterity of the novel retains the figuration of the divine centre. In a sense, Barth makes alterity a metaphor of the ineffable God and thus keeps the allegory moving towards a religious, not a postmodern, pretext. As we shall see, the religious pretexts of *Giles Goat-Boy* are not ultimately mocked by the uncertainties of allegorical alterity, but act as the means by which alterity can be retained within the framework of mystical association.

George Giles, in his attempt to become a recognised Grand Tutor, encounters three main systems of religious thought: Moishianism, Enochism and Beism, respectively representing Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism. The followers of Moishianism (Judaism) are described by adherent Max Spielman as the ‘chosen class’ (Barth, *Giles*, p.29) who adhere to the tenets of the ‘Old Syllabus’ containing the revelations of the ‘Founder’ of the University. Barth gives them historical reference in the persecution of the Moishians at the hands of the ‘Bonifacists’ in the ‘Second Campus Riot’. The Christian allegory surrounds the figure of Enos Enoch, a conspicuous Christ figure, ‘the Shepherd Emeritus who died for his sheep’ (Barth,
Giles, p.29). As one would expect (bearing in mind the Moishian scriptures), the life and words of Enos Enoch are contained within the ‘New Syllabus’, and the novel is littered with didactic quotations from this textual authority and its Moishian predecessor.

Throughout Giles Goat-Boy, Moishianism and Enochism are used to show the instability of the pretext in both allegory and society. Max, when educating George as to the difference between Enos Enoch’s approach to knowledge and that taken by the Moishians, offers two versions of textuality which underpin the allegorical activity of the novel as a whole:

But look here: he told his students Ask, and you'll find the Answer; that’s why the goyim call him their Grand Tutor, and the Founder's own son. But we Moishians say Ask, and you'll keep on asking . . . There's the difference between us. (Barth, Giles, p.29)

The ‘difference between us’ which Max describes is the difference between Christian and Judaic textuality, with the former generally offering the secure pretext of an infallible scripture; while the latter, in its Rabbinical and Kabbalistic forms, offers a pretext which always multiplies and shifts with the performance of interpretation and glossing. If we were to try and distinguish which of these approaches Giles Goat-Boy favours, then we would probably tend towards the latter, as the biblical pretext moves from the hands of its own referentiality into the hands of the character applying the pretext to a given situation. This has important consequences for the way we read Giles Goat-Boy, because we are forcibly presented with the mediation of the pretext in other interpretative layers of textuality. And yet, like Judaism itself, the confrontation with the negative is part of understanding the hyperessentiality of the divine in which alterity alludes to a presence beyond language and concept. Thus, George's journey into spiritual understanding is a deepening series of epiphanies of alterity as he encounters the full force of the negative as centre.
Initially, George's passage to Grand Tutorship is beset by the problems existing between religious pretexts and allegorical ambiguity. For example, George spends much philosophical energy on various interpretations of the phrase *Pass All Fail All*, a conundrum of salvation and damnation which was written on a card hung about his neck when he emerged from the belly of WESCAC as a child. The ambiguity of this axiom makes George's project as Grand Tutor a volatile and frequently ludicrous experience. He initially interprets *Pass* and *Fail* in terms of a radical distinctions and oppositional categories. This divisive perspective leads to a disastrous handling of the 'boundary dispute' — a territorial conflict between the East and West campuses. By forcing the two campuses into rigid separation, George simply escalates the ideological hostility and political aggression. His later perception of *Passage* and *Failure* as indivisible categories made oppositional by a false mind set is equally catastrophic. George's shift towards a holistic philosophy is precipitated by a conversion to Beism, an allegorical version of Buddhism where the binary distinctions of the mind are rejected as impositions onto a seamless and indivisible reality. At the moment George's mother mutters the words 'Passèd are the flunked' (Barth, Giles, p.552), George receives a mystical revelation that explodes his interpretative perceptions:

There in a word was the Way: Embrace! What I had bid my Tutees shuck - false lines in their pictures of themselves, which Bray in his wisdom had Certified - I saw now to be unshuckable: nay, unreal, because falsely distinguished from their contraries. *Failure is Passage.* (Barth, Giles, p.552)

Bray, George's spiritual alter ego and competitor who performs dizzying changes of personae and theology, now becomes a source for George's holistic philosophy. The epiphany which George here receives, pushes deconstructive arbitrarity to its very limits by transforming negativity into a passive mysticism. Yet once again, the translation of such insight into social practice is fraught with impracticalities.
George's celebration of the collapse of binarity leads him to advise Chancellor Rexford, the leader of New Tammany College, to 'embrace nonsense' and merge the east and west campuses together, an ideal which is far from satisfied in the civil disorder resulting from George's new gospel. Max Spielman's observation that passage and failure are a 'trick of the mind' (Barth, Giles, p.562) may be philosophically appealing but the Buddhist pretext, allegorically represented in the sublime unresponsiveness of Sakhyan, is parodied primarily because of its lack of application. As Barth contends, the problem of the religious pretext is in the taking of its message back into a world which cannot sustain transcendence within the temporal and unpredictable structures of existence. This is the essence of Barth's parody of the allegorical form, for the RNS, itself meant to be a religious text, is split by the textual problems of multiple pretexts, none of which seem able to stabilise the play of language involved in translating any religious practice into a compelling transcendence.

By exposing allegorical multiplicity, Giles Goat-Boy reveals the alterity underlying any system of reference. Barth's parodic quoting of various scriptures leads to a heightened awareness of the condition of religious texts as linguistic and temporal objects, whose shape is continually changed by the otherness it cannot contain but which is its aspiration. For example, when Max is educating George on some differences between the 'Old Syllabus' and the 'New Syllabus', the recognisability of the quotations serves only to separate the reader from the pretext as authority:

Now I wanted to know: was I a Moishian?
'Maybe so, maybe not,' Max said. He fetched out his aged penis and declared, 'Moishe says in the Old Syllabus, Except ye be circumcised like me, ye shall not Pass. But in the New Syllabus Enos Enoch says Verily, I crave the foreskin of thy mind.' (Barth, Giles, p.29)
This passage is significant for the way that Max presents textual options as indistinguishable from ontological options. Frank McConnell’s contention that ‘Barth, in an extreme degree, accepts the linguistic nature of man as man’s generative definition’ is an important summation, though, as we shall see, it is far from complete. By presenting the physical and spiritual interpretations of circumcision through parodic quotations, Barth shows how ontological choices are made through adherence to a particular pretextual authority. Yet however textual the problem may be, the absolute nature of the choice means that alterity is preserved as the otherness that is the ultimate goal of the choice. As a result, the pretextual authorities of Giles Goat-Boy always remain within the performative limits of divine alterity, as Barth seeks to explore what he sees the as insistent spirituality of the human condition.

The primary emblem of the allegorical alterity in Giles Goat-Boy is the Founder’s Scroll, the guiding religious text of the University. George’s assignment list, received on entry to the university, asserts that George must ‘Replace the Founder’s Scroll’ and his attempts at accomplishing this task reveal much of the novel’s attention to otherness. When George, led by his mother, Virginia Hector, arrives at the library to accomplish his task, the Scroll is first found to be missing, and then appears from one of the library machines in a shredded state. George’s despair and his goatish hunger overtake him and he proceeds to eat some of the shreds in a literalised comedy of the individual being fed by the word of God. The surviving parts of the Scroll end up in the hands of a Committee whose attempts to piece it together exhibit much about the novel’s philosophy of signification. The Committee recognises that the Scroll has no original towards which the restoration process must work, as a Warden points out to George:
'After the first shock of seeing the Scrolls destroyed, we realised you'd actually given us a unique opportunity. All the texts are corrupt, you know, even these - copies of copies of copies, full of errata and lacunae - but we could never agree on a common reading, and of course the Scrolls acquired a great spurious authority for sentimental reasons, even though they contradict each other and themselves.' (Barth, Giles, p. 663)

The Warden's critique of scriptural infallibility removes the possibility of the primary religious text and seems to move us decisively away from Philo's allegorical hermeneutic. With his emphasis on errata and lacunae, the Warden points towards the aporetic nature of pretextual authority with the 'original' scripture disappearing into the conditions of textual reproduction and interpretative appropriation. Thus the allegorical passage between text and religious pretext is not a matter of unearthing presence but of co-operating with absence.

The crucial sticking point for the exegetical committee is again on the interpretation of the words pass and fail. The committee is faced:

by a practical question about the translation of a single sentence - a mere two words in the original language of the Scrolls. The 'etymons,' as he called them, were the root terms for Pass and Fail, but inflected with prefixes, infixes, suffixes, and diacritical marks to such an extent, and so variously from fragment to fragment, that conflicting interpretations were possible. (Barth, Giles, p. 663)

The recognition that 'conflicting interpretations were possible' over the crucial terms of salvation in the religious pretext, give a remarkably self-conscious moment in the structure of Giles Goat-Boy as an allegory. But as the words pass and fail dissolve into the alterity of différence, the allegorical hermeneutic does not disappear but rather shifts its object of focus. In its pursuit of illustrating alterity, otherness in Giles Goat-Boy becomes not only the rule of interpretation, but also the object of interpretation, thereby closing the text in a centre every bit as defined as Philo's negative God. Barth gives us an allegory which is forever moving in the alterity of its own material and thus the reader is not denied a stable point of textual understanding. What can appear as an inter-textual disruption is actually working as an extra-textual presence, as is shown in a revealing later episode. As George leaves the Committee room to make his
way to the Clocktower, he stops to ask directions from a 'longhaired pallid girl' (Barth, *Giles*, p.666) at an information desk, a girl who is intently reading a book while she gives George his directions. The following eulogy and response are central to the allegorical nature of *Giles Goat-Boy*:

Mild, undistinguished creature, never seen before or since, whose homely face I forgot in two seconds; whose name, if she bore one, I never knew; whose history and fate, if any she had, must be lacunae till the end of terms in my life's story - Passage be yours, for that in your moment of my time you did enounce, clearly as from a written text, your modest information! Simple answer to a simple question, but lacking which this tale were truncate as the Scroll, an endless fragment! ‘-less fragment,’ I thought I heard her murmur as I stooped through the little door she'd pointed out. I paused and frowned; but though her lips moved on, as did her finger across the page, her words were drowned now by the bells of Tower Clock. (Barth, *Giles* p.666)

George initially rejoices in the girl’s directions because she seems to offer the escape from the nebulous confusion of scriptural difference into a moment where there is correspondence between word and thing, intention and object. Yet the repetition of George’s words, itself in fragmented form, destroys any certitude, and returns George and reader once again to the domination of alterity. However, the fact is that the girl herself operates as a visible reification of alterity, an embodiment of the alterity that is dominating the novel. Described in terms of lacunae, she functions as a momentary centre where the aporetic is gathered into a figure whose status and significance is absolute within the economy of Barth’s allegory. In a sense, she is an incarnation of Barth’s god.

Taking all the aporetic elements as a whole, it is tempting to proceed to a wholly postmodern conclusion about *Giles Goat-Boy* as a novel that undermines logocentricity by the alterity present in the allegorical process itself. Yet as we have already seen, the alterity which Barth produces in his fiction does not seem to disrupt the transcendent intentions traditionally associated with allegory.21 Indeed, in *Giles*
Goat-Boy alterity actually stabilises and anchors the allegory. Looking closely at the novel we can see that alterity seems to perform three important functions:

- Alterity becomes the content of an epiphanic moment where the textual nature of reality is perceived and experienced with extra-textual relevance;
- Alterity relies on the absence of God/Author and is deliberately presented by Barth as a spiritual negativity evoked in terms of ineffability;
- Alterity’s spiritual performance is heightened by Barth’s concentration on the effect of negativity on the status of the subjectivity of both characters and readers.

In examining each of these points in turn it should become clear that though Barth has pursued an allegorical form indebted to postmodernity, Giles Goat-Boy is quite logocentric in its philosophical grain. Giles Goat-Boy is dominated by religious ideas on almost every page and its parodic goal seems rather more a reinvention of spiritual expression than the pursuit of theological deconstruction. What the rest of my analysis will develop, is the idea that Barth’s negative strategies all gravitate towards revealing shared alterity as the bedrock of every faith and a motif for religious foundations.

i) Alterity and epiphany

Throughout Giles Goat-Boy, alterity acts as the substance of a revelation about the nature of world and self. Put another way, Barth’s otherness is not the absence of final meaning, but the presentation of absence as the structure of allegorical meaning. This presentation is pursued in the steady dissolution of George’s empirical and linguistic certainties. As George experiences the indivisibility of passage and failure, the resulting tension exposes negativity as a holistic epiphany that totalises the process of linguistic play:
This apophatic moment in George’s development initially appears to be what exposes the indeterminacy of the allegorical form itself. The ‘Answer’, the single transcendent source of the text, is dispersed in the play of signs and thus places the Revised New Syllabus in a fluid, rather than dependent, relationship with the scriptures which form its allegorical basis. Yet the final part of the quotation shows George in the act of labelling the alterity in terms of that which is beyond conception and summation, not as that which is inherent in language itself. Consequently, George’s fear that his ‘mind must crack’ acts as a revelation and as a psychological encounter which focuses alterity on the Same of the metaphysical subject rather than on the other of internal negativity. At this moment, George enters the belly of WESCAC for the last time, a dangerous feat meant to prove his status as Grand Tutor. As George answers the various enigmatic questions put to him by WESCAC, he encounters negativity within the language of satori and spiritual enlightenment:

In the sweet place that contained me there was no East, no West, but an entire, single, seamless campus: Turnstile, Scrapegoat Grate, the Mall, the barns, the awful fires of the Powerhouse, the balmy heights of Founder’s Hill — I saw them all; rank jungles of Frumcntius, Nikolay’s cold fastness, teeming T’ang - all one, and one with me. Here lay with there, tick clipped tock, all serviced nothing; I and My Ladyship, all, were one.

‘GILES, SON OF WESCAC’
Milk of studentdom; nipple inexhaustible! I was the Founder; I was WESCAC; I was not. I hung on those two buttons; I fed myself myself.

‘DO YOU WISH TO PASS’
I the passer, she the passage, we passed together, and together cried, ‘Oh, wonderful!’ Yes and No. In the darkness, blinding light! The end of the University! Commencement Day! (Barth, Giles, pp.672-3)

There is undoubtedly something rather comical about George’s moment of satori, but the purpose of this moment in terms of the structure of Giles Goat-Boy is beyond simple humour. Here George converts the textual alterity he has encountered throughout his quest into the substance of an epiphany. George’s revelation consists of
transferring the aporetic into an holistic theme of the unity of all things. With the 'end of the University' comes the acceptance of alterity as a kind of via negativa, a way of perceiving the world that utilises the aporetic in understanding. *Giles Goat-Boy* strains itself towards allegorical presence; alterity is not a by-product, but a site in which the characters experiment with self-realisation. So in the 'Posttape' (Barth, *Giles*, pp.697-708), where a disillusioned George explains the incapacities of his faith, the effect is not to deny George's epiphany but to make it more faithful to the novel's eagerness to represent the unrepresentable.

The fact that the Posttape finds George at the age of thirty-three and a third, the age of Christ at his death, means that even his disillusion resonates with allegorical transcendence. For by making alterity an epiphanic goal, to be read as the overarching part of the novel's 'message', Barth seems to retain the allegorical emphasis on a transcendent pretext which underpins his perspective on reality. Moreover, the religious pretexts retain their authority by remaining focused on the realisation of the ineffable.

Deborah Madsen interprets George's revelations as the recognition of his own supplementarity, where '[u]nable to make present the "being" it names, the narrative constructs the "supplementary" status of George through the manipulation of textuality' (Madsen, *Allegory*, p.164). Indeed, Madsen understands the 'Posttape' as the emphatic return to the temporality of allegory's form. The narrative of *Giles Goat-Boy*:

is only temporarily centred; the epiphanic moment cannot be sustained just as, and because, transcendental tropes cannot be made present in temporal form: the analogy will always recede into intertextuality. (Madsen, *Allegory*, p.165)

I would agree with Madsen in that the 'Posttape' does signal a return to intertextuality, but it is my contention that the intertextuality contributes towards allegorical stability, not volatility. The intertextual structure of *Giles Goat-Boy* acts like a form of literary
distillation that extracts a pure referent from its many pretexts. *Giles Goat-Boy* has a distinctly postmodern construction, but the text as a whole strains towards presenting a pure form of alterity which has little to separate it from the more traditional spiritual foci of religious allegory. As such the novel’s intertextuality works towards defining an allegorical centre in the negative language of faith.

ii) Alterity and the absent god/author

I have argued that alterity is not to be regarded as a radical emptiness but as a thematic presence which plays different functions according to the milieu in which it operates. More importantly, alterity borrows a shape from the priorities of the surrounding text. So the alterity of, say, Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*, functions as a comment within the novel’s historical theme; and the alterity of Heller’s *Catch-22* is a distinctive disruption in social discourse and understanding. Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* is equally dependent upon the codes of mystical theology. The novel transforms the absence of God and his literary equivalent, the author, into a portentously mystical ontological space. In many ways, *Giles Goat-Boy* fills the hole left by the absent God with an alterity shaped exactly like the God it is replacing. While Barth’s self-conscious literary devices dissolve our certainty as to the status of the author, they simultaneously construct a view of the Author as God, able to create whatever textual worlds he will.

This is conspicuous in Barth’s later novel, *LETTERS*. Issues relating to the interplay of truth and fiction go even deeper in *LETTERS* than in *Giles Goat-Boy*. The author of *LETTERS*, named as John Barth, is a specific character, sharing in the dialogue and actions of characters which are supposedly his creations yet have an equal ontological status in the environment of the fiction. The now familiar result is
the crumbling of epistemological boundaries as the real becomes fictional and the fictional real. Thus the author falls within inverted commas, and becomes an alterity composed of his evident presence and equally evident absence. Yet this position is one of real power, with the author able to move in and out of ontological categories with extraordinary licence. Whereas someone like Fowles renounces his role of deity over the characters, Barth makes himself conspicuous as creator. He does this by establishing his identity in absence, but then denoting this absence as the creative source of the text.

Extending a theological analogy, we can view Barth as a God of negativity, offering himself as the assurance of presence that cannot be adequately revealed through signs. Comparing Barth to God is not an over-interpretation, for in LETTERS there are several moments where the capitalised 'Author' implies either God or Barth. For example, in LETTERS we encounter a (rather familiar) computer named LILYVAC developed by Jerome Bray and his associates, that is intended to automatically produce a revolutionary 'NOVEL' after being supplied with vast amounts of data and philosophy. However, instead of producing the NOVEL the computer expresses itself with a list of apparently random numbers. Bray and his colleagues attempt to plumb the significance of the numbers by experimenting with a Kabbalistic approach to numerical significance, substituting the numbers for letters to see what emerges. Through this process the divine name YHWH is deduced from an anagram of the vowels - IEOUA. What is important here is that the divine name emerges out of production and arbitrariness. As the name of Yahweh proceeds from the random numbers, the presence behind that name seems fundamentally unknowable. Yet as unknowability is an element of the divine anyway, then the alterity of difference and the alterity of God become indistinguishable under the name
of Yahweh. God and absence enter into an absolute relationship with one another and
become the numinous source of language and being. So Irv makes the reference to
Matthew Arnold’s belief that:

\[ \text{God puts a heap of letters into each man’s hand, for him to make what word he will.}^{24} \]

Under this statement, the divine becomes a negative authority as each person gives an
individual coherence to a body of ‘letters’. The Kabbalistic perspective is apt because
within Kabbalism, the religious text is always mutable and protean yet located itself
within the inexplicable alterity of the divine. The same could be said for the novel
\textit{LETTERS}, as the reader is left to piece together its many fragments under the alterity
of the absent Author, though this alterity is framed so clearly that the author keeps his
pre-postmodern authority. Throughout \textit{LETTERS}, the notions of God and author are
highly interchangeable. So Todd Andrews submits himself to the volition of an
ambiguous ‘Author’ when contemplating a car journey with Jane Mack:

\[ \text{John was nagging at the wheel; our Author likewise, or he’d have fetched us straight from}
\text{Long Wharf to Todd’s Point and 12R instead of routing us through the next diversion. (Barth,}
\textit{LETTERS, p.460)} \]

The tension in this comment is that as Barth here speaks of himself as Author, then
confesses himself as a fictional creation, yet the capitalisation phrases the author’s
absence within the mystery and transcendence of the Kabbalistic YHWH. Owing to
such authorial positioning, John and Jane perform their actions against a deep, present
silence that retains the assurance of foundations and which reifies the other.

It seems that the anti-foundationalism of novels such as \textit{Giles Goat-Boy} and
\textit{LETTERS} should be questioned, not least because textual alterity leads back to the
mastery of the author and the mystery of the divine. This places the economy of the
novel firmly within a religious and philosophical content which tends to diminish
social or political significance. Barth raises the allegorical oppositions of East and
West, Student-Unionism versus Informationalism, Grand Tutor versus Dean o'Flunks, but quells social comment by subjugating it with a silencing alterity. If we were to seek out a fictional representation of Barth's philosophy, then it might be Harold Bray's declaration, 'Our Schools and Divisions - what are they but seams in the seamless?' (Barth, Giles, p.402). The transcendentalism of this philosophy runs throughout Giles Goat-Boy, as all social or political material is demonstrative of alterity rather than powered by alterity. All is reduced to an aporetic flatline without material energy or social force. On the whole, this philosophical bent rests upon the independence of human spirituality rather than any sociological perspective.

iii) Barth and the subject.

As we shall see in the cases of The Crying of Lot 49 and The Passion of New Eve, the alterity of postmodern allegory does not, despite its declared intentions, do away with the notion of the subject as a primary impetus for the postmodern novel. Allegory's didactic history has always contained strong expectations of subjective response, from an expanded moral awareness to a greater social insight. De Man's contention that 'allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read' (de Man, Allegories, p.205), does not adequately take account of the positioning of the reading subject within allegorical narrative. De Man argues that works such as Rousseau's Julie are actually allegories of the impossibility of grounding reading in a stable structure of reference and foundation. Therefore, allegory performs inside a specific environment of undecidability. However, this perspective relies on the assumption that a) indecision is what the text is actually about, and b) that the indecision takes place within a conceptual environment, namely a cognitive subject. An allegory of undecidability is still an allegory with its presumptions of a hermeneutic relationship
between the allegorical material and the interpreting subject. Indeed, the only distinction in de Man’s allegory is its *atemporality*, its tendency to place the subjective judgement above material conditions.

Barth’s allegories demonstrate this ontological priority. In the early chapters of *Giles Goat-Boy*, George tries to make sense of the verb ‘to be’ which he overhears in a debate of sexual and political philosophy between two amorous students. His initial confusion of the infinitive with coitus leads to partly comic, partly brutal effects in his rape of his mother, Virginia Hector, in an allegorical correspondence with the myth of Oedipus. The interpretation of ‘to be’ becomes a nagging refrain throughout George’s life, as he tries vainly to match his physical existence with a psychic essence. While George seems to learn that total identity is impossible, the allegory retains a sense of subjective conviction. Barth’s self is represented as a kind of *chora* or *dasein* that has a transcendent and continuous value over experience itself. This Heideggerian type of the self, for all its postmodern inflections, actually questions whether there is anything distinctly different about postmodern allegory from its predecessors. At the heart of traditional allegory is the recognition of a subject whose being is stable enough to convert narrative into a moral or religious theme. Barth himself sees the merit of allegory in its creation of a peculiarly independent subjective space:

> The use of historical or legendary material, especially in a farcical spirit, has a number of technical virtues, among which are esthetic [sic] distance and the opportunity for counter-realism. 25

Here Barth assigns the historical material of his work to a simple use-value, productive of the ‘esthetic distance’ that takes front stage in the operations of his fiction. 26 The distance of which he speaks seems to be a conscious, reflective alterity whereby that which is indeterminable in the allegory does not carry the subject away
from a perception of self, but instead makes the subject aware that self is still the primary constituent in interpretative interaction with the world.

Such a view of being is perhaps more visible in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*. The malleable personality of Henry Burlingame is principally memorable for its astonishing transformations amongst the corrupt and erratic politics of the New World colonies. Burlingame adopts personae without a purpose other than to play the tide of events and live all the varied hues of human identity. At the centre of his exploratory personality is a belief that identity cannot be frozen in rational constructions and permanent categories. He outlines this belief when he mutates back from being the urbane Peter Sayer to the 'true' Henry Burlingame, a transformation which he contextualises for the amazed Ebenezer Cooke.

'Tis but a grossness of perception, is't not, that lets us speak of *Thames* and *Tigris*, or even *France* and *England*, but especially *me* and *thee*, as though what went by these names or others in time past hath some connection with the present object? I'faith, for that matter how is't we speak of objects if not that our coarse vision fails to note their change? The world's indeed a flux, as Heraclitus declared: the very universe is naught but change and motion.²⁷ Burlingame here rails against monolithic theoretical definitions of identity which attempt to freeze object and self into some overarching teleology. Rigorous conceptualisation becomes 'grossness' and 'coarse', lacking the clarity of perception that sees the world in its essential 'flux'. Burlingame's understanding of time is not of a continuity which can be locked in place by linguistic terms, but an experiential flow which the individual must live *within*. Note that this flux does not extend to Burlingame's perceptive integrity: he presents the world as a mutability to which the subject must turn as an interpretative (i.e. allegorical) standpoint.

Fixed identity, in terms of praxis, emerges from *The Sot-Weed Factor* as a textual tyranny whose constant labelling and narrativisation creates a tension between conceptual order and the immediacies of human experience. Henry's life and thought
move away from the notion of identity as a comfort and embrace instead the creative possibilities of sequential living as a pragmatic philosophy of self. Instead of 'writing' a personal narrative which will hold good in all times, Henry recommends an approach to life where the understanding of self is composed within a living mobility:

One must needs make and seize his soul, and then cleave fast to't, or go babbling in the corner; one must choose his gods and devils on the run, quill his name upon the universe, and declare, ' 'Tis I, and the world stands such-a-way!' One must assert, assert, assert, or go screaming mad. What other course remains? (Barth, *Sot-Weed Factor*, p.360)

The universe which Henry delineates is a frequently hostile and unpredictable milieu. Yet Henry's response to such a universe is to take control of the individual's ability to create a self. In this process the subject embraces the fact that, with no intrinsic identity to acknowledge, the individual has a freedom to 'assert' a personality according to his choice. The only alternative would be to allow the 'gods and devils' to choose you, and let an already existing narrative structure take hold of the self. What is interesting is that Henry's philosophy seems to return a certain dignity of humankind through the confrontation between a world that gives no transcendental order and a subject who recognises this condition and forms a conception of living on its basis. Negativity thus becomes an ontological drive. What we see in *The Sot-Weed Factor* are pictures of identity in flux being allegorised around alterity, an alterity whose imitation of allegorical transcendentalism proceeds upon a vision of human self-sufficiency. So the poet Ebenezer Cooke, repeatedly disillusioned in his expectations of an ideal world, declares that 'that which the cosmos lacks we must ourselves supply' (Barth, *Sot-Weed Factor*, p.660). Of this declaration, Manfred Puetz observes:

In sum, the hero turns to the panacea of mythopoesis and creates fictional schemes and mythical worlds around himself which in turn support the very self-concepts from which all interpretations of self and world have sprung. 28
Puetz interprets *The Sot-Weed Factor* not as a postmodern assertion against identity but an actual enforcement of the distinction between self and world in an act of active and conscious mythmaking.²⁹ Under this interpretation, we can start to question the limits of play in Barth's novels. In an allegory such as *Giles Goat-Boy*, there is a deliberate focus upon pretextual instability in the allegorical form; this would appear to be the distinctly postmodern content of the novel. Yet Barth has the allegorical characters *realising* the aporetic conditions of their existence and transferring this realisation into an allegorical and pragmatic centre for the reader.³⁰

Overall, alterity retains the function of the allegorical telos. This function explains why so much of postmodern fiction concerns itself with religious theme and imagery. Postmodern fiction seeks (usually unwittingly) to reinvent the logos as negativity, and religious language provides the models for this reinvention. The postmodern allegories of Barth confirm traditional allegory more than they depart from it by creating an alterity as a mystical rule for interpretation. There is a humanistic aura around Barth's novels which, when combined with a trace of mysticism, provides a spiritual allegory where the topic is humankind and its relation to that which is beyond perception. Such a position severely questions Barth as an exponent of radical postmodern philosophy. Instead, Barth seems much more aligned with a metaphysical perception of self and world which conspicuously relegates social engagement to aesthetic material. *Giles Goat-Boy* being a novel of the sixties, we could perhaps suggest that Barth's exploration of indeterminacy is shaped by the counter-cultural thrust of the late 1960s. We can also see in Barth that an acknowledgement of the other is more than just an epistemological realisation — it can be a spiritual cornerstone of a radically individualistic society. As much as Barth attempts to attack old certainties, we can see the project of trying to stabilise disorder
as a predictable return to the primacy of the self. Moving to Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, we shall see a more coherent attempt to present the postmodern experience through allegory, but again the pursuit of alterity shall turn the novel in a very unpostmodern direction.

**Thomas Pynchon — *The Crying of Lot 49***  

Pynchon’s fictional worlds are ones where *process* is the dominant structural feature and where allegorical priorities are continually readjusted within the flow of causation and textuality. The ontological problems highlighted in Pynchon’s novels often arrive with the attempt to match the external world to a secure concept of self. Oedipa Maas, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, attempts this project when she commits herself to unravelling the mysteries surrounding her ex-lover, the late Pierce Inverarity, to whose estate Oedipa has unexpectedly been appointed as executor. Her quest involves the search for understanding about the Tristero, an underworld organisation which appears to act as an illegal alternative postal service to that of the central government. Instead of Oedipa’s deductive journey leading to conclusion and insight, she finds that the shifting patterns of symbols, metaphors and stories concerning the Tristero build into a rapidly deconstructing text and, for the reader, the allegory of the ‘condition of postmodernity’. Oedipa is consequently faced with an expanding narrative that she is quite unable to control:

> Now here was Oedipa, faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway. With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Tristero, to hold them together.  

Oedipa finds herself trapped within an ongoing act of metaphor. Supplementary information constantly qualifies her relationship to the Tristero and the responsibility of ordering a meaningful narrative becomes an increasingly onerous burden. As
Oedipa moves through the novel, gathering signs which only point but do not define, she discovers that the Tristero is not an independent physical entity, but an impermanent text which shifts and transforms with the introduction of each new sign.

As Oedipa slides through a decentred world, continually rearranging signifiers and signifieds into contingent orders, Pynchon creates an allegory of contemporary epistemology. The contemporaneity of this allegory is that Oedipa's journey of discovery is not towards foundational insight, though, as we shall see, it is dominated by an epistemological rule. Towards the end of the novel, Oedipa arrives at a cross-roads of indecision where the Tristero could equally be a reality, a self-delusion, a hoax, or the appearance of a hoax:

Those, now she was looking at them, she saw to be the alternatives. Those symmetrical four. She didn't like any of them, but hoped she was mentally ill; that that's all it was. That night she sat for hours, too numb to even drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, oh God, was the void. (Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.171)

The interpretation of signs, has produced an unwelcome balance of evidence where all options are equally valid and no single textual route can be closed. This balance is physically experienced by Oedipa in a catatonia, her rigid body the exact match of her frozen interpretative condition. Her speculative diagnosis of mental illness is significant, for the transference of an epistemological dilemma into a psychological threat shows how narrative closure is sought as a reassurance of a definite self in relation to a definite world. Oedipa hopes for mental illness because a collapse in sanity would indicate that her identity is whole but merely suffering, something which when healed would produce a regained clarity of self. Whichever analytic route Oedipa might take, it seems that the process of achieving meaning would start all over again and quickly reach the abyss of infinite possibility.
Thus *The Crying of Lot 49* does not seem to achieve any form of cognitive climax. At the end of the novel, Oedipa attends the auction of lot 49, Pierce Inverarity's illicit stamp collection somehow connected to the Tristero. There Oedipa is eager to unmask the identity of a mysterious bidder who is considered as a possible member of the Tristero organisation. As the auction opens, the novel ends. On the one hand we might presume a revelation beyond the pages of the text and speculate further despite Pynchon's narrative decapitation. Yet, because of the narrative suspensions we have experienced throughout the novel, we also sense that any resolution could not be complete or authoritative. For a conclusion would have to be written backwards into the fabric of the whole text and once again, we would be faced with a bewildering alterity.\textsuperscript{34}

*The Crying of Lot 49*'s allegorical nature is due to the way it seems to take Oedipa on a text-book wandering through all the main epistemological and ontological problems of postmodernity. Oedipa's investigation capably allegorises Baudrillard's simulacrum, Foucault's theories of power and language, Derrida's *différence* and Jameson's 'depthless' society. Yet we could also suggest that *The Crying of Lot 49* attempts the familiar allegorical aim of imparting an ethical lesson, though this is attempted through the alterity resulting from the novel's indeterminate character. In the midst of Pynchon's preoccupation with 'informational entropy' and 'possible worlds', alterity acts with an ethical impetus that ultimately runs away from the social pragmatism that Pynchon tries to propound. This ethical force, coded in terms of absence, relies on the specific modes of religious imagery which permeate the novel. Through the combination of religious motifs and textual aporiae, there emerges a kind of ethical *via negativa*, the utilisation of the absence of God to discover a relation with being and morality. Though Pynchon does not offer a specific
negative theology I shall claim that the combination of the aporetic, the religious and
the ethical form a space which is theological in its manner and which restrains any
indeterminacy within the novel. Pynchon, in many ways like Philo, tries to sew
together the allegorical and the negative in one spiritual weave.

*The Crying of Lot 49* is continually haunted by the biblical pretext, especially
in its concern with the mechanics and possibility of revelation. Oedipa’s first
intuitions of revelation have the effect of sensitising her to the possibilities of the
Tristero:

That’s what would come to haunt her most, perhaps: the way it fitted logically, together. As if
[. . .] there were revelation in progress all around her. (Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.29)

Oedipa’s intuition of revelation is conditional and hesitant, as her revelations always
seem partial and allusive rather than complete and direct. This state of affairs, as we
have already seen, leads her to the ‘void’, a void which constitutes the alterity of a
novel where final truth is absent. Hence the novel’s ending, at the auction of lot 49,
offers the reader only the gesture towards a complete revelation:

Passerine [the auctioneer] spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood
of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel. The auctioneer cleared his throat.
Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49. (Pynchon, *Lot 49*, p.127)

What connects this inconclusive revelation with Oedipa’s first presentiment is the
spiritual imagery. The auctioneer resembles either a priest or an angel, both figures
who traditionally mediate God’s will to the individual. We could say that the
auctioneer mediates negativity itself, representing the infinite scope of the alterity that
Oedipa has realised throughout her investigations. For while the text ends with a
characteristic indeterminacy, there is a persistent play on the numinous qualities of the
negative, especially in the way that religion is used to construct a present ‘void’,
replete with images of sacredness and threat. This spectral ending holds potential for
expanding our comprehension of what is actually allegorised within the novel. The
‘revelations’ of *The Crying of Lot 49*, the individual nuggets of evidence which
Oedipa discovers, do not reveal nothing. Instead, they open a recognition of the
absolute other of intuitive, negative morality and they reveal the alterity that has
absolute jurisdiction over reality.

At several points Oedipa explicitly likens her relationship with the Tristero to
spiritual experience:

> Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chance for permanence. But
then she wondered if the gemlike ‘clues’ were only some kind of compensation. To make up
for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night. (Pynchon,
*Lot 49*, p.81)

Oedipa’s lamentation appears to place the direct Word into the characteristic alterity
of its own absence. Yet as Pynchon presents alterity in terms of religious absence,
then that absence becomes figured in the presence which is lost, as the ‘clues’ which
Oedipa encounters rely on the metaphysical register of the logos. The consequence is
that the alterity of God is still played out as a relation of self to that which is beyond
being. As the logos is treated in terms of the unobtainable, then the divine referent
seems pushed out of being into that which language cannot contain. Once this occurs,
the absence left by God seems to attain a singularity as it is purified from its linguistic
container by the straining to evoke a purity of absence.

The ‘presence’ of alterity as synonymous with the religious logos has several
important functions throughout the length of *The Crying of Lot 49*, all of which seem
to take the role traditionally assigned to the inconceivable divinity. The most
significant function is that otherness brings an awakening of ethical and social
responsibility. For Oedipa, the Tristero leads to a very Christian experience of
marginal societies which ostensibly challenge the reductionism of centralised political
discourse. So, when Oedipa is considering the interpretative possibilities of the Tristero, she thinks that she might:

have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, on to a secret richness and concealed density of dream; on to a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system; maybe even on to a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. (Pynchon, Lot 49, pp.117-18)

At this point, when Oedipa is faced with a world that seems uncontainable within discourse, she also sees a certain hope of liberation from the standardising formulations of officialdom. She gives the impression that she is teetering on the edge of discovering the secret America, one which offers a 'real alternative' to a homogenising existence imposed by centralised language and institutions.

The most poignant moment of this increased awareness of the social other comes when Oedipa goes to the assistance of a destitute old man on the streets of San Francisco. Taking pity, Oedipa guides him to a boarding house and puts him to bed. As he lies there, she prophesies that his life content, 'like the memory bank from a computer of the lost' (Pynchon, Lot 49, p.87), would be extinguished when he burns to death falling asleep with a lit cigarette. With the recognition that the old man's life is comprised of his absence in marginality and his rush towards death, Oedipa:

was overcome all at once by a need to touch him, as if she could hardly believe in him, or would not remember him, without it. Exhausted, hardly knowing what she was doing, she came the last three steps and sat, took the man in her arms, actually held, gazing out of her smudged eyes down the stairs, back into the morning. (Pynchon, Lot 49, p.87)

In this passage, Oedipa seems to be straining to overcome the man's absence, to somehow treat the other not as a social outcast, but as a distinct being who is barred from the currency of official language. Her physical need to touch him acts as an attempt to have an unmediated ethical contact with the needs of the man's body, to
actually approach him without intrusion. John Schad sees this moment as attesting to the opening up of the ethical dimension of the novel:

in pausing, touching and even holding the old man she encounters for once not just another clue, or sign, but the person of the sign - or, if you like, the 'face of the word'. In doing so, indeed, she not only looks into a face that is, for once, not her own but also thereby opens up a profoundly ethical space in the conspicuously post-ethical continuum of California; for when she whispers, 'I can't help ... I can't help,' even while holding and rocking the old, we cannot avoid reading, 'I can't help but help.'

I would agree with Schad in that Oedipa's confrontation with the sailor constitutes an ethical acknowledgement of the 'face of the other'. Like Derrida's ethical descriptions in *The Gift of Death*, Oedipa senses her ethical isolation and absolute responsibility in the face of someone other than herself. Oedipa encounters mortality in her quest for the Tristero in a way that had been previously masked to her. Yet the ultimate absence that death asserts, drives Oedipa into a deeper understanding of how the dominant culture excludes the other and denies its own mortality. The final revelation which Oedipa seeks would ostensibly signal the death of the novel's activity, a sudden cessation of the 'keep it bouncing' philosophy propounded by Pierce Inverarity. As it is, death in *The Crying of Lot 49* is the revelation of absence itself, the absence that exists in social marginality.

Pynchon's use of death alongside the quest for an impossible revelation gives the novel not so much a postmodern ambiguity but an alterity which equals an absolute unknown not to be contained in social formulations. For as much as the novel allegorises the conditions of postmodernity, it also offers alterity as the space in which the impact of mortality can be felt and experienced through the revelation of alterity itself. Thus the mass of religious references that fill the pages of *The Crying of Lot 49* do not seem to be parodic dismissals of ontotheology, but actually channel alterity into an age old fear of mortality and the metaphysical potency of such a fear.
What is the implication of this presentation of alterity in terms of postmodern politics? As we have seen, the alterity of *The Crying of Lot 49* is a peculiarly moral void that exposes social marginality. Indeed, the novel seems to use absence to allegorise the exclusions suffered by a silent number who are severed from the mainstream of capitalist lifestyle. By using the alterity contained in deferred revelation and the absent Word, Pynchon forces a confrontation between self and other which attempts an ethical awareness which combines anti-foundational positioning with the ethical force of the Word. Yet we can start to question the effectiveness of this form of ethics as an assault upon capitalist hegemonies and social deprivation. Most importantly, we must ask whether the particular metaphysical edge to Pynchon’s ethical Other, ultimately negates the challenge which he is able to offer.

John Schad has offered the possibility that *The Crying of Lot 49* is built upon a shift away from Greek metaphysics to Jewish spirituality:

> [since Oedipa, we read, ‘left the Greek Way’, is it possible that she enters what Derrida has called ‘the [Jewish] other of the Greek’? (Schad, ‘Why wait?’ p.262)]

This question has an intriguing potential. Oedipa’s relation with the Tristero seems to hold a deep affinity with Judaic techniques of textual interpretation, as she holds the name of Tristero as a kind of logos in her quest while recognising that this logos forever generates an infinity of meaning. However, the parallels with Judaism stop over the issue of the force of law. Many postmodern texts, *The Crying of Lot 49* included, appear to invoke a Jewish sense of textual otherness yet back away from containing that other within legal, pragmatic codes. This is an unwillingness to transform the Other into the Same. Yet the conceptual grid of legality is not an iron fist that constrains the operation of meaning, but rather the necessity of transferring understandings of otherness into a content of physical experience. What protects many
religions from the criticisms I direct against postmodernism, is that most orthodox
faiths do not stop at a sense of the other, but realise that the other must contain de
facto social and philosophical codes because of its involvement within human praxis.
Thus religious allegory often leads to a *behavioural* lesson, whereas postmodernism, I
would suggest, offers a lesson of *pure philosophy* that wants to remain unviolated by
worldly demands for action. Ultimately, postmodernism holds more purist ideality
than Enlightenment philosophy ever contained.

Turning back to *The Crying of Lot 49*, we can see that though Oedipa is
confronted with social marginality, this exposure is allegorical material *for* alterity
itself. William Gleason has argued that the metafictional nature of the novel guides
the reader to read ‘both diachronically and synchronically’. Postmodern fiction
regularly makes this demand, but what must be understood is that the two
perspectives form a unity in the thematic and structural dominant of the text: alterity.
All roads in the *The Crying of Lot 49* lead to a pure absence that has no legal force
and which runs from understanding the social links that place the excluded subject.
Beneath this absence Oedipa stands as the creator of local meaning, albeit a rather
paranoid subject. Oedipa holds an allegorical centre together by focusing on alterity as
that *under which* the experiential is recognised as existing under lack. Tony Tanner
has argued that Oedipa lives in the impossible world of the ‘excluded middle’ which
contains:

> the possibility of unforeseen ‘diversity’ and irresolvable dubiety. Yet it is into just such an area
> of possible diversity and dubiety that Oedipa has stumbled - and we, as readers, along with
> her. 40

Tanner’s theorisation of the excluded middle naturally betrays itself in the distinction
between Oedipa, the reader, and the ‘area’ of alterity and possibility. The image
Tanner gives us is not of the dissolution of self into infinite meaning, but the
distinction of self in relation to otherness. Oedipa is never able to displace alterity, since that alterity needs to be experienced as a relation to personality before it becomes channelled into ethical responsibility. Thus otherness is not about others, but about the development of an absolute motif.

In many ways, The Crying of Lot 49 relies on a religious voice because the trope of God is essential to the way it voices the ethics of alterity. What prohibits the efficacy of those ethics is that Pynchon seems to stop with the negativity of God without following through to the positivity of the Word. The religious dimension makes the novel truly allegorical, for Pynchon steers us away from nihilistic interpretation by focusing on the resonant profundity of the absent God. Oedipa can be seen as the itinerant prophet in the wilderness who never sees the face of God, the ‘direct, epileptic Word’, but tries to convey a distinctly ethical message. Yet the ultimate problem in Pynchon seems to be that people are pointers towards otherness rather than designating themselves as social subjects. So instead of encountering those who are marginal, we are instead given a metaphysics of marginality which sets others apart from the discourse of capitalism. In a sense, others become imprisoned in a totalised alterity, stranded in their otherness rather than offering a physical challenge to the structures under which they are marginalised.

Such a problem not only characterises much postmodern fiction, but also dominates postmodernity itself. It has always seemed rather trite to accuse postmodernism of establishing its own totality, as postmodernism has always acknowledged that it cannot escape metaphysical terms. Yet, in these days when confidence in postmodern theory seems to find itself on the wane, we no longer seem afraid of offering voices which are not anti-foundational, perhaps because the exigencies of the world around us demand such voices.
Angela Carter — The Passion of New Eve

The Passion of New Eve, like The Crying of Lot 49, is a novel which allegorises the social conditions of contemporary America, though Carter's vehicle is the rather more fantastical setting of an apocalyptic future. Carter's allegory centres on the nature of postmodern gender identity in a world where the Baudrillardian image drains reality of its conceptual life-blood, thus leaving a wan environment of surfaces. Carter demonstrates the alterity within the represented real, to question essentialism and stereotyping in gender identities, with the central character, Eve, disrupting categorisations of male and female. Yet Carter's use of alterity to question essentialism is only part of the way in which she applies otherness. In many ways, The Passion of New Eve is a mythology of alterity, for Carter shows how that which defies boundaries of identity can in turn be reconstructed into a new mythology which enforces its own rigidities and tyrannies. Carter is very aware, perhaps more so than the other two authors in this chapter, that conceptions of otherness act like vacuums which are inevitably filled with other cultural models. I shall argue is that Carter's allegorisation senses the awkwardness of valorising the Other. Carter is caught between a spiritual empathy with alterity that challenges gender discourse and a realisation that 'the other' must take its responsibility for actually creating schisms, categories and divisions.

The Passion of New Eve revolves around Evelyn, a man living in a futuristic, apocalyptic New York ridden with casual violence and aggressive factions. After a disastrous association with a prostitute, Leilah, Evelyn heads off into the mid-Western desert in order to escape the dark existence of the city. While in the desert, he is captured by a cultish group of women who worship an archetypal leader named
Mother, at a place called Beulah. It is in this place that Evelyn is forced through a comprehensive sex-change operation and is thus transformed into the New Eve. Attempting to escape from Beulah, Eve is captured by a sadistic poet called Zero, who runs his own female desert gang with physical brutality and macho egotism. Zero is obsessed with the same figure who has haunted Evelyn/Eve's imagination throughout his/her life, the Hollywood actress Tristessa de St. Ange, whom Zero believes made him impotent through telepathic means during the screening of one of her films. Tristessa is captured and brutalised by Zero in an attack on her dilapidated desert home and it is here that Tristessa is actually revealed to be a man. Zero forces Eve to marry Tristessa and for a time after the eventual destruction of Zero and his coterie, they find themselves in an Edenic relationship in the desolate landscape of the American desert. Their happiness, however, is short lived, as Tristessa is shot dead by the adolescent leader of a child militia. After a journey through a disintegrating America, Eve finally experiences a mystical rebirth in a cave by the sea where, in an intense and convoluted symbolic scene, she undergoes an encounter with evolution, the icons of her journey, and the Mother of Beulah, now old and decaying.

The pretexts of The Passion of New Eve are multiple, yet the novel is allegorically dominated by the land of America itself. America is allegorised as a dark and unstable land crippled by violence and despair, but also containing a definite sense of possibility and expansiveness. 'In the beginning all the world was America' is John Locke's epigraph to the novel, an epigraph which is double-edged in both its New World optimism and its hints of the international domination of American capitalism. Carter tries to do justice to the difficulty of representing America by offering it as other in itself, a place where contradiction, absence and presence live side by side. The 'last days' aura of the novel heightens this sense of internal
otherness, as America finds itself poised on the brink of either desolation or rejuvenation. Richard Brown perceives Carter's America as an 'ambiguous', culturally divided land:

America may be an 'other' to our senses of cultural identity and yet also an 'other self' that may either be represented as a younger and more callow partner or else as that future on whose threshold with increasing eagerness and terror we suspend ourselves.42

Speaking for a British audience, Brown presents Carter's America as a temporal and cultural cleft in identity. Offering both difference and uniformity, inexperience and future power, America appears to have no real place or time from which it can define itself. Like Oedipa's quest for the Tristero, Carter gives us an America that is continually promising to reveal and clarify itself; yet Carter makes clear that the mechanisms of America's extrovert capitalism mean that its identity is always 'suspended' in a confusing mass of commercial representation. Brown's reference to America as the 'other self' is useful in that Carter does seem to offer America as a land where the self can experience its own alterity in a place where borders between the real and the image, the self and the other, are profoundly blurred.

Such an experience of alterity is nowhere more apparent than in the marriage of Tristessa and Eve and their 'honeymoon' in the desert. In this curious scene of holism and idealism, Eve explains a new world of genderless being:

Speech evades language. How can I find words the equivalent of this mute speech of flesh as we folded ourselves within a single self in the desert, under our dappled canopy, on our bed of filthy cushions? Alone, quite alone, in the heart of that gigantic metaphor for sterility, where our child was conceived on the star-spangled banner, yet we peopled this immemorial loneliness with all we had been, or had dreamed of being, or had thought we were - every modulation of the selves - aspects of being, ideas - that seemed, during our embraces, to be the very essence of our selves; the concentrated essence of being, as if, out of these fathomless kisses and our interpenetrating, undifferentiated sex, we had made the great hermaphrodite together, the whole and perfect being to which he, with an absurd and touching heroism, had, in his own single self, aspired; we brought into being the being who stops time in the self-created eternity of lovers.43

The common ground of theology and negativity in postmodern literature is peculiarly apparent in this passage. As Carter searches for descriptions of a genderless state
beyond logocentric categories, her language tips over into terms of theological absolutes: 'concentrated essence of being', 'whole and perfect being', 'immemorial', 'fathomless', 'the being who stops time', 'the self-created eternity of lovers'. The theological priority implicit in these terms is not accidental. Like many of the authors we have seen so far, Carter seems to want to purify the negative as an extra-linguistic ideal that holds the revelatory power of the divine. Alterity here acts as the catalyst of genderless self-discovery that, like God, dominates the horizon of being itself. This euphoric and intense passage is offered as a moment of unity with alterity, when binary models of gender are dissolved into 'mute speech' beyond the 'language' of representation. The desert, an enduring symbol of the absence at the heart of America, becomes a realm of fulfilment that defies the more usual models of its aridity and 'sterility'. It is in this place that Tristessa and Eve dissolve the categorisations of gender into a perfect moment of 'undifferentiated' being. If Baudrillard saw America as the country where 'it is not sex one is looking for but one's "gender'", Carter gives a moment of sight beyond gender where being appears to defy time and representation in a sexual identity which is always deferred.

Yet despite the utopian angle which Carter here gives to difference, she also recognises that the negation of presence need not always be aligned with political or psychological liberation. What makes The Passion of New Eve a distinctive, rather undecided allegory, is that Carter hesitates over the status of the Other that centres the allegorical action. On the one hand, Carter yearns for a world where the categorical and essential are no more, while on the other hand she accepts that such a world may actually be present in some of the cruel side-effects of American capitalism. So even the blissful desert union of Tristessa and Eve is adulterated by the manufactured
reality of Hollywood and its immense power over signification. Eve now sees more in
Tristessa than just his beautification:

The sun had slipped past its meridian and now illuminated him from behind; for a moment, he
seemed to me surrounded in the oblong glory of light which emanates from divine figures - an
aureole or vescica, celestial limelight. 'More stars than there are in heaven,' had been MGM's
motto. This transforming light covered his nakedness like a garment; no, it was his flesh itself
that seemed made of light, flesh so insubstantial only the phenomenon of persistence of vision
could account for his presence here. The habit of being a visual fallacy was too strong for him
to break; appearance, only, had refined itself to become the principle of life. He flickered upon
the air. (Carter, Eve, p.147)

If Tristessa is an allegorical representation of the American nation itself, as is often
suggested in the novel, then this vision of his transfiguration evokes the ambiguities
that exist between national idealism and representational superficiality. The 'celestial
limelight' which Tristessa displays, disrupts notions of where the heavenly ends and
the image commodity begins. Indeed, the light which bathes Tristessa has a double-
edged potential in that it makes him appear airy and transformed yet also seems to
threaten his erasure as he 'flickered upon the air'. Carter shows us that the otherness
of Tristessa may actually issue from a machinery of representation, a Hollywood
composition of identity. On an allegorical level, Carter seems to be saying that
America's alterity is a troubled space for liberation because in many ways it is
grounded in media activity and corporate hegemonies. When such reflections emerge,
The Passion of New Eve is an allegory working within social criticism, a position
broadly in sympathy with the argument of this thesis. Yet Carter still retains the Other
as a spiritual fulcrum where the drive to find identity is not straight-jacketed by
convention and role but by an embrace of absence. Alterity is Carter's uncertain hope.
Thus she seems to float in and out of the postmodern sublime, an interaction that
becomes especially confused when realism takes precedence over messianic hope.
A central battleground of the social and the ideal in *The Passion of New Eve* concerns the meeting of mythology and modern society. Carter's allegory participates in mythological language and pretexts, yet at the same time it extends a critique of myth for the way in which it appropriates otherness and obviates its alterity in patterns of totalising narrative. This critique of myth is not to say that Carter aspires to a mythless society. Myth, as we shall see, still has a vital role. Carter depicts a world where myths are unavoidable in a factional society where groups must forge compelling narratives with which to propagate their theories. So it is that though Carter's work speaks a distinctly feminist project, she is equally aware that myths of the essential female can be just as oppressive as the myths generated by men about women.

*The Passion of New Eve*'s ambiguous attitude towards the nature of the Other, is nowhere more apparent than in her focus upon myth and female otherness. In Leilah, the prostitute whom Evelyn regularly meets and eventually makes pregnant, her Other is not a singular feminine space but the conformity to male sexual stereotypes:

> Her beauty was an accession. She arrived at it by a conscious effort. She became absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror, but she did not seem to me to apprehend the person in the mirror as, in any degree, herself. The reflected Leilah had a concrete form and, although this form was perfectly tangible, we all knew, all three of us in the room, it was another Leilah. Leilah invoked this formal other with a gravity and ritual that recalled witchcraft; she brought into being a Leilah who lived in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection. (Carter, *Eve*, p.28)

Leilah's otherness is her mirrored image, a formal image which she moulds to the visual representation of women presupposed by her clients. With the production of this representation, a third person literally enters the room as the construct of Evelyn's expectations and Leilah's provision for those expectations. Carter's evocation of the 'not-world of the mirror' is significant in terms of the allegorical impact of *The
Passion of New Eve. The alterity of the novel is not the irreducible gap between the text and the pretext but is a social condition in the pretext itself, America. The novel shows us how otherness is socially produced and emerges out of the strategies of image production in late twentieth century Western culture. Her allegorical style is a conscious collection of models and types which even as they yearn towards a freedom in difference, are continually pulled back by the dictates of certain mythologies. Evelyn himself realises this problem shortly after he is physically reconstructed into the New Eve:

I KNOW NOTHING. I am a tabula erasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman's shape. Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman. Now I am a being as mythic and as monstrous as Mother herself; but I cannot bring myself to think of that. Eve remains willfully in the state of innocence that precedes the fall. (Carter, Eve, p.83)

Just as this moment in Eve's nascent consciousness represents a step beyond the essentialism of gender, Carter also makes clear that Eve has become a 'being' who is both a physical ideal, and a person who will soon 'fall' into the constructions which follow upon her physicality. The image of the fall perhaps gives us the strongest clue as to how to interpret Carter's relationship to alterity. Carter seems to distinguish two categories of otherness: 1) the pre-lapsarian alterity of genderless being, and 2) the post-lapsarian otherness resulting from the domination of representational alterity. Keeping this distinction in mind, the word 'Passion' from the title accrues its full significance. For Eve almost becomes an American Christ figure, bearing the sins of a media world in a sinless body. It is this sense of the fall that finally takes The Passion of New Eve away from postmodernism. Carter accepts the implications of a Baudrillardian world but places this against an evocation of a primal alterity that is both spiritual hope and ontological defiance. Once again, we can read the religious
allegory over the postmodern allegory as the postmodern understandings become allegorically illustrative of the absolute Other as a primary, obscured, centre.

Eve's alterity, between totalities of gender, is 'as monstrous and mythic as Mother herself' because she realises that her original otherness will become imprisoned in an constrictive archetype of femininity. David Punter describes Eve's condition when she first looks in the mirror as:

a disbelief that this self-on-view can be taken as a full representation of the person alongside the bitter knowledge that it will be, that at every point the woman is locked into the metaphysical insult of the masculine gaze.\(^45\)

Punter describes the female as imprisoned in the mythologies produced by the 'masculine gaze' and goes on to observe that the hermaphroditic state of both Tristessa and Eve can represent both 'liberation and despair'. Punter's analysis emphasises how Carter uses otherness to demonstrate the practical impossibility of embracing the genuine other outside social constructs. Carter's allegorical America is a place of difference but this difference testifies more to localised structures of myth than an absence which can dissolve gender boundaries.

Such a position would seem to place Carter's sympathies much more in line with Anglo-American feminist theory than the French feminist utilisation of poststructuralism and Kristeva's postulation of the khora. Carter does acknowledge alterity in identity in that the self is never present to itself in any essentialist way, as Eve observes after her encounter with Tristessa:

Masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I am sure of that - the quality and its negation are locked in necessity. But what the nature of masculine and the nature of the feminine might be, whether they involve male and female, if they have anything to do with Tristessa's so long neglected apparatus, or my own factory-fresh incision and engine-tuned breasts, that I do not know. Though I have been both man and woman, still I do not know the answer to these questions. (Carter, Eve, pp.149-50)
The mystery of gender identity is its confrontation with otherness, with that which cannot be known, yet the quotation is under tension from the expressions 'factory-fresh' and 'engine-tuned'. However 'other' Eve's identity may be, she remains beneath the shadow of capitalist production and the question of who controls such a mechanism. In Kristevan terms, Eve is acutely bound between the symbolic and the semiotic, though Carter makes the latter a negative dream and the former a vigorous presence.\(^{46}\) Carter seems aware that alterity may simply mean that each individual is an inessential site of representations over which they have no control. Thus, escape into difference can merely mean switching the myths under which one operates.

The constructed nature of myths is nowhere more apparent than at Beulah, the desert hideout populated entirely by women and commanded by the archetypal Mother. Beulah is described as a place where 'contrarities existed together' (Carter, *Eve*, p.48), yet the Mother is a questionable representative of female otherness. The change enforced upon Eve is not a steady process of education, but a literal psychological and physical manipulation which unites metaphysics and science in an imperious mythology. The Mother is described as 'a complicated mix of mythology and technology' (Carter, *Eve*, p.48) and in Beulah, 'myth is a made thing not a found thing' (Carter, *Eve*, p.56). Carter depicts myth as the transference of a conditional narrative into the appearance of that which is natural and eternal. Such a naturalisation is treated as the root of metanarrative hegemonies, as in Beulah the promotion of female identity soon becomes an act of suffocating totalisation:

One glance assured me that she was sacred. She had been human, once; and now she had made herself into this. This!
Mother has made symbolism and concrete fact.
She is the hand-carved figurehead of her own, self-constructed theology. (Carter, *Eve*, p.58)

Technology has a potent presence throughout *The Passion of New Eve*, most significantly for the way in which it provides the necessary physical accompaniments
that enable myth to be actualised. Eve is impressed by the Mother not for her intrinsic status, but for the power of representation that she commands. In the underworld of Beulah, ostensibly acting as the other of male dominated society, there are equal tyrannies of self in the Mother's massively contrived theology of essential womanhood.

The Mother is rediscovered at the end of the novel as a shrivelled old woman, secreted in a cave on the coast in an attempt to escape America's gathering disintegration. Eve enters this cave in an attempt to see her but, in a richly symbolic scene, she has an intense encounter where she experiences the evolutionary history of the earth. This entire passage has a vivid revelatory dynamism, yet the novel cannot seem to resolve itself:

> I have come home.
> The destination of all journeys is their beginning.
> I have not come home.
>
> I emitted, at last, a single, frail, inconsolable cry like that of a new-born child. But there was no answering sound at all in that vast, sonorous place where I found myself but the resonance of the sea and the small echo of my voice. I called for my mother but she did not answer. (Carter, Eve, p.186)

The archetypal mother remains absent and Eve is faced with an otherness which consists of silence and longing. It is here that Carter evokes the *tout autre* in all its independent force and gravitas. Situated at the end of history, Eve contacts the 'vast, sonorous place' where space, time and identity are utterly, irrevocably silent. In one sense, after the ontological storm she has weathered, Eve does find value and liberation in the subterranean Other. For here Eve experiences the full consciousness of being when placed against a tangible void of silence and alterity. The other is present, Carter seems to say, but it is like a dream that haunts the self despite its frequent obliteration by sensory, social and linguistic intrusions. Carter establishes the
‘reality’ of the other through yearning, but she also accepts the other’s absolute absence and the impossibility of directly contacting its elusive, ineffable presence.

_The Passion of New Eve_ is a novel that gives a double layer of allegory. On the one hand, the novel allegorises the conditions of postmodernity: the collapse of the self, the primacy of the signifier, and the paucity of the metanarrative. This constitutes Carter’s materialist perspective. Yet there is another side to Carter’s allegory that sets it apart from a complete advocacy of the postmodern perspective. Though wary of theories of difference and otherness, Carter nevertheless defers to an absolute alterity in which she sees the promise of a liberty beyond gendered words and signs. That this alterity is unobtainable is unimportant, for like Augustine’s _regio dissimilitudinis_, the fact of being in the land of unlikeness forms a negative reference to the fact that the ineffable is present. There is an underlying yearning in the novel to encounter some kind of metaphysical absence that transcends the surrounding politics of identity. The desert at the centre of America, where Eve and Tristessa come closest to actually overcoming the barriers of gender, is itself described as an ‘arena of metaphysics’ (Carter, _Eve_, p.164). The meaning of the phrase is uncertain, but it seems to involve a combination of the idealistic and the negative familiar to religious discourse. Metaphysical negativity is a constant in _The Passion of New Eve_, as it offers a utopian hope of escaping from totalising social constructions; yet the Other as it lives socially can provide the very material to enable such constructions. Carter hints that a pure Other, free from all representation, is within the possibilities of experience. Thus Carter in _The Sadeian Women_ states:

There is no way out of time. We must learn to live in this world, to take it with sufficient seriousness, because it is the only world we will ever know.\(^4\)
Carter seems to caution us against treating the other in a way that regards the exigencies of time and representation as somehow unreal. Her allegory of America in *The Passion of New Eve* tries to move beyond its own symbolic narrative to show that a world of difference need not imply a world of plurality. At its heart, however, *The Passion of New Eve* moves through its social allegory to provide an allegorical centre other than the United States. The pivot of the novel is alterity itself, reified and understood as an impossibility not because of its absence, but because its presence is unachievable. The distinction is important and it holds true for much postmodern writing. Carter's capitalist criticisms and negative religiosity can be judged as compatible when comparing the novel to my earlier arguments that postmodernism gives the ideal spirituality for the postmodern age. In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter balances the fragmentations of postmodern capitalism with a psychology that takes the negativity of the contemporary and projects it towards spiritual conceptions. By so doing, Carter is able to retain the utopian at the heart of postmodernism, and consequently *The Passion of New Eve* allegorises ideal hope as much as postmodern despair.

In this chapter I have dealt with three allegorical texts whose postmodern style belies deep metaphysical preoccupations. The common thread running through my treatment is that many postmodern allegories, while supposedly unveiling the indeterminacy in the allegorical form itself, turn that indeterminacy into the allegorical centre. Once the negative becomes the centre, then theology enters the picture once again and alterity possesses the narrative metaphysics of the allegorical divine. What we have seen so far in my general argument is the meeting of alterity and the divine in the trope of negativity, something which postmodernism finds useful in keeping a tenor of profundity and meaning in its thought. In the last chapter we saw how alterity
can act as a visualisation of mortality and life beyond physical being. In this chapter, we have seen otherness move into the role of spiritual centre in allegorical narratives. What is being 'revealed' is the way that alterity is performing the descriptive functions of the divine metanarrative, especially the divine metanarrative as conceived in the via negativa. In the next chapter, we shall look at a further appropriation of religious iconography, that of eschatology and the transcendence over history.

NOTES

3 Kevin Hart cogently argues that Derrida's problem with Philo's 'Alexandrian promiscuity' is not with Philo's religious bearings but with the allegorical hermeneutic itself, a textual position that has extended into most other logocentric discourses. See Hart, Trespass, pp.51-8.
7 I recognise that the interpretative relation to the Bible varies enormously across the spectrum of the Judaic and Christian readership, especially in methods of Rabbinical and Kabbalistic interpretation and the readings of Christian mysticism. Here I mean to imply that the biblical pretext is often applied as the text with the absolute proximity to the creator of a determinate signifier/signified bond.
8 Derrida, Of Grammatology, pp.1-74. For a critique of Derrida's letter/spirit division in relation to the Bible, see Ingraffia, Postmodern Theory, pp.167-224.
15 See Craig Owens, 'The allegorical impulse: toward a theory of postmodernism. Part 1.', October, 12 (1980) 59-80 (p.75). Owens argues, in line with Derridean theory, that allegory can be 'conceived as supplement' (p.83). Against this view, I am suggesting that allegory's consciousness of its
supplementarity always keeps its textual multiplicity guided towards metaphysical centres or totalising presences.

17 Heide Ziegler in *John Barth* (London and New York, Methuen, 1987) argues that the world is transferred into a university setting because 'the facts of the universe are translated into language' (p.40). This perspective is useful to interpreting the general thematic of *Giles Goat-Boy* but disregards the spiritually experimental context of the university in the context of 1960s America. Heide Ziegler and Christopher Bigsby (eds.), *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition: Interviews with English and American Novelists* (London, Junction Books, 1982) p.21.


34 Mark C. Taylor describes the impossibility of conclusion in terms of the 'erring nomad', a person whose 'work is less a complete book than an open (perhaps broken) text that never really begins or actually ends' (Taylor, *Erring*, p.13). For an extensive deconstructive reading of Pynchon see Alec McHoul and David Wills, *Writing Pynchon* (London, Macmillan, 1990).

35 John Johnston argues that any final revelation in *The Crying of Lot 49* would be incompatible with the novel's 'semiotic regime' of unravelling signification. Johnston sees Oedipa as a 'blind spot or point of articulation through which two heterogeneous series begin to resonate, without ever exactly corresponding. Such a correspondence always remains a possibility, but the revelation it would imply would also entail a collapse or mutation of the novel's fundamental structure of doubt and deferral.' See

36 Thomas Schaub suggests that the indeterminacy of Pynchon's writing indicates a veiling of meaning rather than its absence: 'The reader experiences Pynchon's fiction as representative of a determinate order which exists but which it persistently withholds. This quality — this impenetrability — is intensified by the ways in which Pynchon encourages the reader to suspect that this withheld order is so withheld only by remaining unnamed; that a revelatory unity is present in the text, but without confirmation or recognition.' See Schaub, Voice of Ambiguity, pp.3-4.


38 Schaub also lists 'the realization of loss and death' (Schaub, Ambiguity, p.39) as further revelations of the Tristero. Such would support the argument of my previous chapter that postmodern fiction frequently involves itself with final ontological questions of mortality.


40 Tony Tanner, Thomas Pynchon (London and New York, Methuen, 1982) p.73.

41 cf. John Dugdale, Thomas Pynchon - Allusive Parables of Power (London, Macmillan, 1990) p.142: 'The Tristero is only initially a social phenomenon. Its discovery is a religious experience, which gives access to the sacred. The Tristero (because coincidences are miraculous, because miracles are the intrusions of other worlds) is literally another world.'


46 Maintaining the Kristevan reference, we might say that Carter denies the physical relevance of an écriture féminine but accedes to its existence as a negative ideal. Though Kristeva associates the Platonic Khora with the figure of the mother, Carter's Mother is a creator of symbolic force over semiotic activity. Nonetheless, I feel that both Carter and Kristeva share the pursuit of a primal alterity through underlining the alterity that is obscured by the symbolic process. For sources, see Toril Moi (ed.), The Kristeva Reader (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986).

Chapter 4
The Retrospective Other - Postmodern History and Fictional Transcendence

[H]istory stops here, and we see in what way: not for want of people, nor of violence ... nor of events. . . but by deceleration, indifference and stupefaction. History can no longer outrun itself, it can no longer envisage its own finality, dream of its own end; it is buried in its own immediate effect, it implodes in the here and now. Finally, we cannot even speak of the end of history, because there is no time for it to reach its own end. Its effects accelerate, but its progress ineluctably slows down. It will come to a standstill, and fade out like light and time on the edge of an infinitely dense mass.

Francis Fukuyama may have somewhat overstated the case when he described our arrival at the 'end of history', but the apocalyptic sentiments in his world view are far from uncommon in postmodernism. In the opening quotation, for instance, Jean Baudrillard pronounces history as having finally run itself aground in 'deceleration, indifference and stupefaction', where history becomes nostalgia and the present is trapped in signs. So is the grand historical narrative now obviated within a society that radically compresses history into the Now of representation and the apathy of the commercial signifier? For Baudrillard, as the past becomes processed through 'the power of media diffusion' (Baudrillard, '2000', p.19), the sense of future progress on which history has traditionally relied disperses into a signifying process which constantly reiterates immediacy over teleological vision. Baudrillard's postmodernity is an empty eschatology where history runs out of its ability to construct meaning, and is unable to project a theology of ends beyond late-capitalist representation.

The apocalyptic voice of Baudrillard is not a solitary one in postmodernism. Nicholas Zurbrugg in *The Parameters of Postmodernism* introduces what he terms the
‘B-effect’ as postmodernism’s common declaration of the death of history and the collapse of temporal progression:

According to this mythology, all postmodern discourses, be they borrowed from past, present, or future, appear ‘doomed, doomed to fail,’ while every postmodern penseur, be that person a professor, poet, or punk, seems fated to perceive his or her present as a condition affording ‘no future’ (to employ punk rhetoric) or ‘the loss in Post-modernism of the sense of future’ and ‘a sense that nothing will change and there is no hope’ (to cite Jameson’s formulation). 4

Zurbrugg places Jameson and Eagleton at the forefront of this social pessimism with such theorists as Belsey, Brecht, Bürger, Baudrillard and Barthes (hence the ‘B-effect’ title), following closely with further prophecies of the loss of a significant future or meaningful retrospection. 5 Throughout this chapter, I intend to qualify the idea that postmodernism is a period which has neither a sense of history nor a relation to futurity. I shall do this not by signalling the advent of a postmodern optimism, 6 but by showing how postmodernism uses the alterity of ‘absent’ history to make a possessive transcendence of history itself. Most importantly, I shall claim that postmodern historical fiction often pursues a thoroughly metaphysical eschatology in which it evokes the absolute otherness that comes with the end of time itself. Postmodern strategies of language are positioned both outside the temporal process and at the end of the temporal process and thus create a form of negative messianism. My fictional evidence will mainly be provided by novels from Umberto Eco, Peter Ackroyd and Toni Morrison. As we shall see, the strategic relations these writers have to history are quite distinct. Yet they all engage with the notion of historical alterity to emphasise how much we are implicated in the content and construction of the past through the necessary actions of narrating our existence. In so doing they all summon different kinds of religiosity which display wholly un-postmodern tendencies towards total historical realisation.
From the perspective of postmodernity, the pre-modern world can seem one of great temporal simplicity. The pre-postmodern world contained all the teleological metaphysics required to develop a history from a definable past and a predictable futurity.\(^7\) Cause and effect, the correspondence between reality and sign, the integrity of the Cartesian subject, and the striving towards a univocal social direction in Marxist and Christian philosophy, all enabled the construction of totalising historical perspectives.\(^8\) Life for the historical narrative since 1960 has been somewhat more difficult. With the advent of French poststructuralism’s attack on presence, Fukuyama’s historical finality, and Baudrillard’s radical theorisation of the sign, history has in many ways lost the directional promise where the unknown future is focused by the educational provision of the past. In postmodernism, history stops in the very medium of its expression: the written text. To quote David Bennett:

> History, to borrow Fredric Jameson’s term, has become ‘depthless;’ the past as a referent has been effaced, time has been textualised, leaving only representations, texts, pseudo-events, images without originals: a spatial, rather than temporal, order of simulacra.\(^9\)

The history that Bennett describes is not a realm of temporal artefacts waiting to be unearthed, but a site of ‘images without originals’. Turning to Jameson again, this compacting of all history into a radically superficial present results in a ‘pastiche’ whose sole capability is ‘to imitate dead styles’ without the confidence or expectation of historical veracity.\(^10\) This postmodern history is negativity, a region of alterity where the signs of the present are our only contact with a history which is always other.

The overall effect of postmodernism upon historical dialogue may well appear to be fundamentally destructive, for postmodernism’s preoccupation with textuality can erode the surety required for reaching any sort of extra-textual historical presence. Postmodernity frames the past as an alterity or an otherness which is forever absent,
an absence deriving from events which are lost and never to be retrieved in themselves. However, we can question whether a history underpinned with alterity really presents us with such a contrast from more traditional historical methodologies. History has to a certain extent always been based on absence, if only the absence of acknowledged ignorance. Historians as far back as Thucydides have recognised that history is irrevocably bound up with epistemological loss and fundamentally concerned with the need for a reconstructing narrative on the basis of fragments. Indeed, going back to the Stoics, we find a distinctly postmodern sense of time in the concept of aion. Aion, in distinction to the sequential time of chronos, is what Andrew Gibson calls ‘the unlimited past and the future of incorporeals’. Gibson relates these two views of time to Deleuze and Guattari’s double sense of contemporary time: on the one hand a formal, measured temporality and on the other, a time ‘independent of matter’ (Gibson, Towards, p.180), a time of expanse and alterity. The Stoic roots of these ideas of time indicate that the wariness of linear history was not unfamiliar to pre-modern cultures, cultures who nonetheless saw history as more than just a flat montage of surfaces. The only real difference in postmodernism is that narrative is held more consciously as a permanent qualification of general epistemological securities. But once again, I find the qualification provided by alterity to be quite limited in its effect. As postmodern epistemology draws our attention ever more to the present by confirming the past as alterity, then alterity seems reified as the essence of history itself and becomes the essential fabric of all history past and present. In addition, historical alterity emboldens the interpreter in his possession of history. By locating history as an open space, defined by the contemporary rather than by preceding factual obligations, the historian suddenly gains a peculiar power to define history without an initial ethical or social obligation.
To hang negativity over an historical narrative is to refer that narrative to a continual trace of a past which haunts us in our historicising, but never achieves full presence. So as alterity dominates the historical narrative, we see that postmodern history places alterity as a teleological origin: all history confirms the transhistorical absence. To summarise:

i) Postmodern history makes us conscious of the past as alterity;

ii) Alterity becomes the dominant figure over history itself;

iii) Consequently, postmodern history becomes in practice the recovery of transhistorical alterity.

What we see in postmodern history is a rhetorical rejection of totalised history while actually giving alterity a prodigious non-temporal force. As such, alterity is accepted as the primary constituent of history rather than a social ideology within itself. Postmodernism centralises the absence of past events as the foundation of historical narratives. Moreover, under this atemporal positioning, individual creativity seems to become the hazardous benchmark of the historian. If history is alterity, then the narrator of that history is under no methodological obligation except to the unearthing of aporia or relating historical events to that aporia. In this case, the actual content of history becomes obsolete as interpretative favour switches to the aporetic centre, a problem that Huyssen was conscious of in his perception of American postmodernism:

The problem with postmodernism is that it relegates history to the dustbin of an obsolete epistémé, arguing gleefully that history does not exist except as text, i.e., as historiography.

Huyssen is sensitive to the fact that once history becomes textuality then postmodernism effectively achieves a free-floating temporality that compresses everything into a signifying present. Once that occurs, then the historical narrative is
always a philosophical telescope trained exclusively on the otherness inherent in the past.

An important qualification must be made here. My criticisms of postmodern history do not ignore some of the valuable questions that contemporary theory has directed towards the complacencies of some historical narratives. A history based on narrative alterity can force us into recognising the genealogies of our discourses and being aware of how narration and physical conditions are inseparable. (One need only think of the narratives of the colonising nations and how these were able to impose the qualities of 'foreignness' on to the colonised peoples and reinforce the idea of the right to rule.) The absence underlying postmodern history can act as a caution that history is always under construction. Yet the practical value of this critical consciousness seems rather burdened by its insistence that textuality and absence are the end of history. For what postmodern history generally achieves, and achieves well, is a discussion of the nature of history, yet its aporetic conclusion prohibits it from proceeding to an experiential judgement. As such, postmodern history remains within the jurisdiction of a timeless metaphysics.

The paradoxical coexistence of atemporal and temporal histories appears to be a typical problem within postmodernism. In Derridean terms, history is the oscillation between repetition (of the socially established texts of history) and alterity (in the recognition that history is subject to textual difference). Postmodern historians, by saying that the past and the narrative are both based in the negative, actually seem to offer alterity as access to the condition of history in its purest realisation. As we see how this confident proposition translates into fiction, it shall be evident that though many postmodern techniques of style or theme confuse linear historical presumptions, the alterity which emerges actually emphasises a seamless interaction with the past.
The basis of much of my argument in this chapter is that postmodernism tends towards a transcendent view of history rather than the radical temporal siting which it is commonly perceived to be. Once again the magnetism between ontotheology and postmodernism makes itself felt. Jameson may have charted the switch from history to historicism, but he needs to consider the metaphysical structures that support this shift. Postmodernism presents a negative eschatology wherein the primordial absence is brought to its impossible full consciousness in the contemporary age. Attending postmodern conceptions of alterity is the premise of coming to consciousness, of moving beyond history to a locus of play where the subject conceives of the alterity that has always been. Once positioned in such a place, alterity is read across all history as the primary authority behind being, knowledge, power and time itself. Such a transcendental status gives negativity the function (and often appearance) of the full presence that it is meant to question. But most importantly, transcendental alterity must perform linguistically and conceptually within a pre-existing frame of reference, the most ideal being the concept of the divine. The use of religious imagery to package postmodern history is not simply a matter of convenience. By lending alterity the force of the ultimate metaphysical presence, then alterity is able to achieve the ontological and ethical force that many of its practitioners believe that it contains. Thus at ground level, postmodern history is an attempt to realise an eschatology of the end of time and give itself the authority to read all history as otherness.

Negative history will always struggle to attain an ethically responsible framework. It could be observed that postmodern culture’s predilection for nostalgic forms of history is all part of capitalism’s control of negative expectations on the part of the consumer society. By this I mean that a nostalgic repackaging of history creates
idealisms which are implicitly recognised as absences, contemporary manifestations of a *recreated* time. The fact that these golden moments did not exist in such simplicity is actually essential to the avoidance of those social and historical complexities which are always inimical to a nostalgic product. Under such an interpretation (and leaving aside any questions of nostalgia as psychological necessity), treating history as absence rather than presence means that narratives of the past operate a bolder licence to meet consumer demand. Self-conscious nostalgia is a logical expression of postmodern history. A past dominated by both absence and transcendentalism can easily produce a history that is empty of any implicit authority outside of the contemporary user of that history. So it is that alterity must be judged by what it creates rather than what it represents. In the following analysis of several works of fiction, I intend to show how historical or retrospective narratives utilise negativity as a reified presence as a way of taking off beyond temporal bounds into a realm of static spirituality.

**Umberto Eco — The Name of the Rose**

Brian McHale, leaning on Dick Higgins’ reclassification of modernism and postmodernism, describes *The Name of the Rose* as a novel which straddles the ‘cognitive’ and ‘postcognitive’ modes of fiction. Such a siting of Eco’s most famous work would seem to be faithful to a novel which insists on creating multiple suspensions between the epistemological and ontological dilemmas of a free-playing text. However we try to reconcile these dilemmas, there is no denying that the historical slippages of *The Name of the Rose* challenge the issue of how narrative play alters historical being and historical knowledge. Straddling as it does the medieval and the contemporary and playing to all sections of popular and academic readership, *The
Name of the Rose not only makes a demanding read but indicates a postmodern time in which alterity comes to full consciousness in our readings. What I intend to show in this section is how Eco combines historical writing and factuality with an acute comprehension of the epistemological insecurities of the postmodern world. The result, however, is that Eco actually repeats a teleology of alterity in which absence comes to an Altizerian fullness in the novel’s schema. In fact, eschatology would be a more accurate term to apply than teleology, for Eco relies on the theme of emergent religious apocalypse to unveil the absolute presence of alterity. As such, Eco’s pretension to postmodern parody is only part of the story of his works.

Describing postmodern history as ironically framed by a silent past, Eco contends that history does not exist beyond the practice of reconstruction:

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognising that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.20

Eco makes the observation that postmodernism is always ironic because pursuing its own theoretical positions would result in an inability to speak.21 Thus speaking in parody preserves ‘irony, metalinguistic play, enunciation squared’ (Eco, Reflections, p.67) in the background of all discourse. Eco’s use of irony tends towards Charles Jenks’ positive concept of the ironic as something that facilitates the growth of meaning rather than its suppression or negation.22 Yet Eco would do to be mindful of the fact that ‘silence’ is discussed as the terminal centre, the final place, of any metalinguistic awareness. In a sense, Eco uses irony as an admission of the alterity at the heart of language. This alterity actually forms the ground for the eschatological drive in The Name of the Rose. As we shall see, The Name of the Rose gives itself to drawing all time to a point of realised alterity in which the historical detail of the novel is overcome by the postmodernist eschatology of the absolute other.
The epistemological construction of *The Name of the Rose* at first appears to transpose the logos of history into all the lack of the Derridean trace. The motif of the labyrinth, a common figuration of postmodern identity, hangs heavily over the text. The Aedificium, the monastic library/maze at the architectural centre of the novel, mirrors Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the 'rhizome' with all its sense of deconstructive irregularities and multiple dynamisms. Eco's 'rhizome labyrinth' is a place of texts with 'no centre, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite' (Eco, *Reflections*, p.57). Such a labyrinth alludes to the idea that the book is always without thematic conclusion or structural transparency because of the intrinsic condition of textuality itself. The irony is that the library, where wisdom and truth might be deemed to be held, is the very place that undoes the epistemological security of William of Baskerville's attempts to unravel the various deaths that are plaguing the abbey in north Italy. William interprets all the deaths as corresponding to the prophecy of the seven angels contained in the Book of Revelation (8:6—10:10). The rhizomatic world that he enters, however, means that William ultimately finds his methodology undone by the randomness and arbitrariness of a world without inherent meaning. Indeed, William eventually realises that the failure of his deductive method in defining Jorge as murderer implies that the life of the sign is not something to be resolved in definitive causalities:

I arrived at Jorge pursuing the plan of a perverse and rational mind, and there was no plan, or, rather, Jorge himself was overcome by his own initial design and there began a sequence of causes, and concauses, and of causes contradicting one another, which proceeded on their own, creating relations that did not stem from any plan. Where is all my wisdom, then? I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe.

William realises that causality is expansive and omni-directional rather than linear. His verdict that the universe is without order fires him into a world represented by the rhizome labyrinth which has just burned to the ground. The annihilation of the library
gestures towards the absence that was the very principle its textuality was based upon.

With its destruction, William is left in a universe where reality shifts with the existence and non-existence of the texts by which it is defined. Eco makes a metalinguistic extension of this position by then having William anachronistically quote from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

> 'The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless. Er muoz gelichesame die leiter abewerfen, sòer an ir ufgestigen ... Is that how you say it?'
> 'That is how it is said in my language. Who told you that?'
> 'A mystic from your land. He wrote it somewhere, I forget where. And it is not necessary for somebody one day to find that manuscript again. The only truths that are useful are instruments to be thrown away.' (Eco, *Rose*, p.492)

As William speaks Wittgenstein to his assistant Adso, the historical framework of the novel dissolves into Eco’s metalinguistic preoccupation. Eco takes his medieval history and compresses it into the textuality not only of the present, but of all time. Taking the full potential of the prefix in the word ‘metalinguistic’, I would argue that what Eco achieves is a reduction of all history to the principle of textual alterity. Alterity thereby achieves a transcendental import by being an historical constant which once realised cannot be undone. The eschatological location of *The Name of the Rose* is at the end of historical presence, as the novel negates history in the totalisation of textual alterity.

This argument can be made somewhat clearer by reconsidering William’s logical problems. Joan DelFattore argues that the failure of William’s deductive powers comes from his confusion between ‘universals and particulars’. William’s confounded logic comes, DelFattore contends, from William’s incompatible combination of the rational methodologies of Roger Bacon and William of Occam. William’s of Baskerville’s most persistent error is his attempt to make the murders at the abbey fit into the apocalyptic pattern of the seven woes described by John of...
Patmos. William tries to use Jorge as the causal explanation of the murders, yet comes to realise that Jorge only follows the apocalyptic sequence because William's model inspired him to do so (Eco, *Rose*, pp.469-70). When this is understood, William's quest for individual causal links to the murders is thwarted, for he sees that determinable activity need not be reduced to a single action or unique provenance. Thus William's attempts to enter the *finis Africae* are initially hindered because he tries to interpret the inscription above the mirror in the Aedificium according to principles of symbolic extension rather than treating the words as things in themselves. His initial approach to deciphering what 'the first and the seventh of the four' (Eco, *Rose*, p.319) actually means, is based upon making a metaphorical connection between the words and an external world. The realisation that the phrase is to be treated *de dictu* and not *de re* (Eco, *Rose*, pp.457-8), may lead to access into the *finis Africae*, but there is the accompanying awareness that the life of words may be of such a nature as to destabilise all confidence in external reference. Thus it is that Eco draws attention to the way that *The Name of the Rose* is a work proceeding not from a singular act of creation but from a process of textual borrowing and montage.

The result of William's epistemological plight is that the reader is made aware of the textuality of any empirical approach to causality. Consequently, *The Name of the Rose* constantly refers its history to the inescapable play of language, as the novel is composed as a world of texts which is inseparable from the world of events and reference. The monk's theological contentions are always conducted in terms of conflicting textual authorities and the words of the novel itself, so the preface illustrates (Eco, *Rose*, pp.1-5), are not the direct contact with the mind of an author but a process of deferral and translation. As Adso comes to realise, the cultural
‘world’ of the library is not a collection of individual commentaries on reality but a vast intertextual labyrinth which is in constant motion and mutation:

Until then I had thought each book spoke of the things, human or divine, that lie outside of books. Now I realised that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke amongst themselves. In the light of this reflection, the library seemed all the more disturbing to me. It was then the place of a long, centuries old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another, a living thing, a receptacle of powers not to be ruled by a human mind, a treasure of secrets emanated by many minds, surviving the death of those who had produced them or had been their conveyors. (Eco, Rose, p.286)

Adso’s perception of the library hints at Barthes’ theories of intertextuality and the death of the author. Adso recognises himself to be in a world of scripts and language rather than in a world of absolute self-presence, a place where the author is secondary to the interpretative afterlife of the text. As this becomes a common theme throughout the novel, the historical data we encounter are more about a topography of narrative and representation than about the possibility of contacting the actual events of a past age. William and Adso are essentially led from their own period into a postmodernity of textual slippages and thus they do not belong to the time of medieval Europe, but to the end-times of postmodern temporality. In effect, the medieval illustrates the postmodern and the postmodern becomes all history in an eschatology that takes the reader to the very limits of interpretation. Turning our attention to the apocalyptic emphasis of The Name of the Rose, we also see how the coming of postmodern alterity is an historical moment of peculiar theological resonance.

The Name of the Rose is haunted by the imminent end of history. The perceived order of the monastery is constantly threatened by the apocalypticism within its own theology and the social chaos feared outside that theology. Adso’s visions and lustful inclinations, the seismic presence of John of Patmos and the murders of the emotionally tortured monks, are elements which race the novel towards the final disintegration of the cultural compass that is the library. As the library has defined
the conceptual perimeters of the monks, the conflagration at the end of *The Name of the Rose* signifies the literal end of the world and the metaphorical revelation of the textuality of *all* worlds. McHale sees the destruction of the library as the dual collapse of the medieval world and our own text-conscious, postmodern world:

Thus the destruction of the library is in this sense doubly apocalyptic, involving the (metonymic) destruction of the ancient world at the same time as the (metaphorical) destruction of our world, the postmodern world. (McHale, *Constructing*, p.162)

I would question McHale's contention that the burning of the library destroys the postmodern world. Rather, I would suggest that the end of *The Name of the Rose* is actually a moment signifying the *birth* of the postmodern as the books of the library are reduced to textual fragments. However, McHale's observation about the doubleness of Eco's apocalypse is useful because it hints at the dual function of apocalypse as something that destroys but also something that reveals. Apocalypse usually comes as the end of revelation, the end times in which death and disintegration expose the essential forces of justice, divinity and spirit. If we use the destruction of the labyrinth as a symbol that our own age is perched over the void, then we must pay due attention to this double function of apocalypse and ask ourselves what is *disclosed* about postmodernism through the burning of the library?

Lois Zamora's analysis of the treatment of apocalypse in *The Name of the Rose* is distinctive because within the destructive eschatology of the novel she also sees the various apocalyptic religious factions as the historical forerunners of our own age:

In Adso's final, skeptical analysis on the pessimistic side of apocalypse, and in the political uses of the apocalyptic visions by the religious groups that populate the novel, Eco dramatises the subversive uses of apocalyptic ideas which by 1327 had begun to propel the medieval world toward the modern age. (Zamora, 'Apocalyptic Visions', p.34)

Zamora gestures towards the disclosive sense of apocalypse as the way that apocalyptic traditions generated new narratives and new histories that re-evaluated the individual's place within social order. The prophets of apocalypse always stand in a
marginal relation to society and consequently seem more able to expose and reveal the social structures to which they do not belong. But what also occurs through Eco's apocalyptic history is the full revelation of difference within history. The destruction of the library and its build-up in themes of religious apocalypse combine to give a fictional eschatology in which the logos of History is ostensibly destroyed and the full presence of linguistic alterity is revealed. Thus I would argue that the alterity revealed through *The Name of the Rose* is actually given the absolute status of the divinity of the last times. For the apocalyptic otherness of realised alterity gains eternal authority by revealing itself as the essentiality behind all historical events. Through this reading, the apocalyptic theologies of the novel appear not merely as an illustrative environment for Eco's linguistic ideas, but a necessary container for conveying the historical transcendence that comes with a postmodern eschatology.

Nowhere is this more allegorically apparent than when Adso collects the 'lesser library' from the blackened shell of the monastery in the aftermath of the fire. As Adso collects the fragments of various ancient texts, he comprehends that though they are a product of chance without any overarching purpose, they still provide a locus for the act of narration and the consciousness of narrative limits:

> The more I re-read this list the more I am convinced that it is the result of chance and contains no message. But these incomplete pages have accompanied me through all the life that has been left me to live since then; I have often consulted them like a oracle, and I have almost had the impression that what I have written on these pages, which you will now read, unknown reader, is only a cento, a figured hymn, an immense acrostic that says and repeats nothing but what those fragments have suggested to me. (Eco, *Rose*, p.493)

Common to many postmodern deliberations on fragmented narrative, the importance of what Adso says is not the messages derived from the fragments but the highlighting of the fragmentation as the totality of meaning. *The Name of the Rose* emerges as a negative apocalypse in which threatened historical destruction reveals real historical alterity. Graham Swift demonstrates a similar thematic in *Waterland* where the
expectations of nuclear Armageddon, the end of history, focuses attention on the way Tom Crick constructs his personal history and his world view. Tom's view of historical presence is the blend of a temporal alterity with a belief in the reconstructive content of narrative:

What do you do when reality is an empty space? You can make things happen - and conjure up, with all the risks, a little Here and Now [. . .] Or, like the Cricks who out of their watery toils could always dredge up a tale or two, you can tell stories. 32

The 'empty space' of reality may well produce the impetus towards new narratives, but the telling of stories must always be subjected to the absolute presence of absence in history. Thus it is that the 'Here and Now' of postmodernism also acts as a past, present and future in terms of its jurisdiction over interpretation and epistemology. The apocalyptic imagery in The Name of the Rose makes the reader aware of living at the end of a linguistic eschatology that channels us into a deep relationship with the alterity behind narrative. In a novel where the secular and the religious are unified in eschatological expectations, Eco uses history to take us into the Other that has reached its fullness in our own age.

The propensity towards giving alterity a theological privilege over temporality is equally apparent in Eco's famous novel, Foucault's Pendulum. Foucault's Pendulum thrives on the interface between a Kabbalistic spirituality and a contemporary apophaticism. In the novel's opening meditations upon the pendulum itself, Casaubon lays the groundwork of a Toranic eschatology that transfers the aporetic fulcrum of the pendulum into a dominating mystical principle:

In the beginning He created a point, which became Thought, where all the figures were drawn. He was and was not, He was encompassed in the name yet not encompassed in the name, having as yet no name other than the desire to be called by a name. . . . He traced signs in the air; a dark light leapt from His most secret depth, like a colorless mist that gives form to formlessness, and as the mist spread, a burst of flames took shape in its center, and the flames streamed down to illuminate the lower Serifot, and down, down to the Kingdom.

But perhaps in that simsum, that diminishment, that lonely separation — Diotavelli said — there was already the promise of return. 33
From contemplating a pendulum that remains beyond time and motion, Casaubon steps into a theological perspective reminiscent of Altizer's reflections on the divine absence. The *deus absconditus* is here characterised not only by its emanations based in the Kabbalistic doctrine of *sefirot*, but also by the 'promise of return' that proceeds from the attempt to finally absorb divine negativity. The proximity of postmodern alterity and negative theology is such that *Foucault's Pendulum* takes alterity as eschatological promise with the *simsun* of God providing the vacuum that necessitates the drive for spiritual return. It is Diotavelli who later reveals the nature of this drive when he considers the infinite process of searching the Torah for meaning:

> By rearranging the letters of the book over the centuries, we may someday arrive at the original Torah. But the important thing is not the finding, it is the seeking, it is the devotion with which one spins the wheel of prayer and scripture, discovering the truth little by little. (Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, p.33)

At the heart of Diotavelli's perspective upon the Torah is an energy that leads alterity towards expectations of conclusion and union. Arguably alterity in postmodern fiction achieves a source of 'devotion' that grounds linguistic activity in the promise of negativity itself as ontological authority. In both *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, time seems to act as that which obscures atemporal alterity. Thus both these novels effect their own Kabbalism, where words and meaning are continually rearranged to produce an active and emergent otherness that is sensed through historical activity, yet always projected beyond history itself.

Here is postmodern fiction at its most theological. Apart from giving contemporaneity extraordinary power over the historical past, postmodernism treats history like an archaeological dig in ontological ground - alterity is unearthed piece by piece until its whole structure is visible. This mysterious negativity then becomes an historical godhead, the fundamental presence in all historical periods to which we now
have privileged access. So as alterity presents the absence of a 'real' past, it then comes to stand for the disclosure of the 'genuine' history of narratives in alterity.\textsuperscript{34} On this basis, postmodern relations with history are a matter of transcendental expansion across textual time rather than the constriction within contemporary limits. Thus alterity is reified as the condition which underpins narrative, and therefore history, itself; for negativity comes to represent the consciousness that history is always being written in narration. Alterity is the very condition of the construction of the past.

The problem that we are starting to see emerge is that postmodernism has indeed retreated from conventional landscapes of history, but the new territory it occupies is not one of fragmentation and historical pluralism. Instead, postmodernism has turned alterity into an historical master-trope that makes the past a servant of negativity. It does this by giving alterity the theological quality of transcendence and thus makes the other a metanarrative authority of extremely potent scope. As we move on to Peter Ackroyd's novel \textit{Hawksmoor}, we will find that the spiritual resonance of this powerful other of history achieves an even greater force of influence.

\textbf{Peter Ackroyd — \textit{Hawksmoor}}

Peter Ackroyd's novel \textit{Hawksmoor} differs centrally from Eco's \textit{The Name of the Rose} because the interaction between past and present is an explicit theme rather than an implicit dialogue. \textit{Hawksmoor} is constructed upon a metaphysical conversation between two historical moments: a dark eighteenth century London, and the London of the twentieth century. The two ages are sewn together through a wealth of sinister coincidences, parallel plots and the repetition of words and phrases across the chapter divisions and the representative centuries.\textsuperscript{35} The protagonists are Nicholas Dyer and Inspector Hawksmoor, characters belonging to the seventeenth and twentieth centuries
respectively. Nicholas Dyer, a Druid and prominent architect, is based upon Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661-1736), an architectural assistant to Christopher Wren and John Vanbrugh. Dyer is commissioned to build seven churches in London (the historical Hawksmoor was actually commissioned for only six), churches which in the twentieth-century attract a mysterious series of child murders connected ironically to a ghostly figure called ‘the Architect’ whose ‘name is Legion’. Inspector Hawksmoor’s job is the investigation of these enigmatic and sinister killings. The satanic mood surrounding the Architect is ably supported in the novel by a whole series of underworld philosophies and theological aberrations. Not the least of these is Dyer’s druidic persuasion, consisting of an irrepressibly dark view of human nature which leads him to the murder of a tramp and one of his colleagues.

Dyer’s celebration of violence and putrefaction chisels out a clear anti-Enlightenment philosophy opposed to the rationalism of Wren, Vanbrugghe and their respective academy:

This mundus tenebrosus, this shaddowy world of Mankind, is sunk into Night; there is not a Field without its Spirits, nor a City without its Daemons, and the Lunatics seek Prophecies, while the Wise men fall into the Pritte. We are all in the Dark, one with another. (Ackroyd, Hawksmoor, p.101)

Dyer’s judgements on social order play constantly within metaphorical shadows and psychological darkness. He perceives a society where the genuine human condition is always that beneath the surfaces of reason and science, a netherworld where spirits, corruption and vice constantly haunt the peripheries of progressive theories. Thus his building project is not so much concerned with the creation of a conspicuous architecture but with constructing subterranean labyrinths ‘where the Dead can once more give voice’ (Ackroyd, Hawksmoor, p.16).

The sinister qualities which pervade Dyer are transferred into the investigation by Inspector Hawksmoor of several child-murders around, or underneath, Dyer’s
churches three centuries later. Hawksmoor, whose presence is prophesied to Dyer by a Bedlam lunatic (Ackroyd, Hawksmoor, p.205), is soon embroiled in cases where causality and intellect become subservient to dark intuitions and superstitions. The metaphysical links between Dyer and Hawksmoor are rigorously pursued by Ackroyd: Dyer and Hawksmoor both work in Scotland Yard and their assistants are Walter Pyne and Walter Payne respectively; Mrs Best is Dyer’s landlady and Mrs West is Hawksmoor’s neighbour, and phrases, themes and incidents are shared across the centuries.\textsuperscript{38}

Steven Connor has argued that Hawksmoor offers a challenge to the processes of narrative and history themselves, by evoking the fictionality implicit in the historical activity:

The novel does indeed construct an elaborate series of coincidences and uncanny recurrences between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, which accumulate in a disturbing way to unsettle expectations of linear cause and effect and the coherent relations of past and present. Rather than being a given, external fact, time becomes subject to artifice and fictional patterning, and thus able to fold over itself, and to flow backwards as well as forwards.\textsuperscript{39}

Connor treats Hawksmoor as a novel which disrupts standard constructions of history and narrative by its tendency to work against the grain of linearity. As time loses a unidirectional purpose, then there remains a model of time which depends on spatial time rather than a succession of causal moments: \textsuperscript{40}

The novel sets recurrence against irreversibility, proposing against a developmental view of history a spatialised view which sees history as occurring all at once. (Connor, English Novel, p.144)

The ‘spatialised view’ of history which Connor describes is a fundamentally postmodern space where the reader becomes aware that narration is the act of expanding time in the absence of any extrinsic causal direction. Yet Connor does not accredit Hawksmoor with postmodern status. Connor concedes that Hawksmoor is postmodern in sympathy in that it challenges assumptions of linear time (Connor,
English Novel, p.145). However, he places the novel more in the traditions of modernism because, in the words of Avron Fleishman, it lifts 'the contemplation of the past above both the present and the past, to see it in its universal character, freed of the urgency of historical engagement'.

Connor seems right to translate the extreme consciousness of time into a critical distance from time. Ackroyd's text certainly confuses linear time, but its history is such that it allows the readers to propel themselves beyond the activities of narrative to a numinous, effectively eternal place where they can transcend the constraints that narrative history places upon them. For instance, Hawksmoor has two passages where the standard format of the novel changes into dramatic dialogue, complete with a list of dramatis personae (Ackroyd, Hawksmoor, pp.174-81, pp.194-5). Both passages enforce the presence of textuality, the open admission that what we read is the technique of narration rather than the history itself. Yet as one passage belongs to Dyer's world and the other to Hawksmoor's, the effect is to reduce both periods to a condition in which aporetic textuality delimits historical periods in favour of an homogenising negative interpretation. Standing outside time, the reader thus totalises the consciousness of textual worlds in the making, a process that actually searches for the freedom to transcend time and realise alterity as the essence of time and history.

For a novel supposedly imbued with a postmodern style, Hawksmoor relies heavily on a metaphysical influence and manner. The mysticism of Hawksmoor could simply be a supernatural deepening of the detective genre, an interpretation supported by the fact that the novel ends without conclusion or rational direction.

However, Hawksmoor's theological content, like that of The Name of the Rose, serves a vital function in constructing a negative metaphysics of time. As we have seen, Ackroyd's attempts at enforcing a postmodern history fail because the mechanics of difference
dissolve time frames into a seamless play and reify alterity as the absolute within history. The apocalyptic and chthonic subject matter of the novel affect its negating linguistic strategies by making alterity commensurate with the metaphysical ‘cloud of unknowing’. Postmodern fiction has the unusual trait of turning to religious frames of reference to present alterity and indeterminacy. As I have argued, this is because the effect of the encounter with an abstracted negativity is essentially dependent upon spiritual tradition. In *Hawksmoor*, the purpose of the theological framework that Ackroyd uses seems to be the bonding together of disparate time frames in an interactive metaphysical mystery. Yet as the novel also bonds the two periods together in postmodern fictional observations, the alterity of difference and the alterity of the divine cease to be separable, as both become trans-historical forces.

Thomas, the ill-fated schoolboy, provides us with further illustrations of this blending of the religious and the postmodern when he redefines his school history classes:

In History class (which was known to the children as the ‘Mystery’ lesson), for example, he liked to write down names or dates and watch the ink flow across the spacious white paper of his exercise book. (Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor*, p.29)

Mystery and history reach equivalence here, as mystery is that which is always other than the facts and the data of past moments. Ackroyd develops this association through Thomas' text-book writings. Thomas jots down the ‘facts’ that comprise the core of conventional history-making, yet his attention is not on the events and people but on the action of writing itself and the white space beneath and between those words. Thus, the connection of history with mystery comes from a literal representation of history as trace: the words on the page act as the presence of historical writing upon the fundamental absence of the blank page. Like Eco, Ackroyd brings the negative into a literal feature of history, a page to be viewed which keeps
alive the consciousness of absence. What is more, the privileging of absence in the novel actually becomes the solution to the fictional mysteries. The mixture of detective novel and metaphysical reflection combine once again to assert an eschatology that reaches fulfilment: alterity becomes the alpha and omega of the fictional action. This is illustrated as Inspector Hawksmoor tries to piece together a causal model of the last few hours of one of the murdered children:

The chain of causality might extend as far back as the boy's birth, in a particular place and on a particular date, or even further into the darkness beyond that. And what of the murderer, for what sequence of events had drawn him to wander by this old church? All these events were random and yet connected, part of a pattern so large that it remained inexplicable. He might, then, have to invent a past from the evidence available — and, in that case, would not the future also be an invention? It was as if he were staring at one of those puzzle drawings in which foreground and background create entirely different images: you could not look at such a thing for long. (Ackroyd, Hawksmoor, p.157)

Hawksmoor apprehends that the causal resolution of the murders is impossible because of all that is absent in any history. The way he partially resolves this problem is crucial to the way we see alterity as functioning within postmodern historical narratives. Hawksmoor realises that he might 'have to invent a past from the evidence available'. All too often in postmodern criticism, the emphasis is placed on the narrative mobility of the indeterminate rather than the fact that the indeterminate has absolute rule as a governing principle of interpretative activity. Hawksmoor suggests that narrating history is a construction self-consciously pursued under the hegemony of alterity. The effect of this may be to force our narratives into the open to reveal their content and choice, but this is always performed under the judgement of the atemporal other. Postmodern fictional history does not signal textual free-play, as such history is anchored upon an otherness that qualifies and emasculates past and present in its domination of the limits of narrative. When Hawksmoor says of his predicament 'you could not look at such a thing for long', he is speaking the same sentiments which are behind William's resigned comment to Adso at the end of The
Name of the Rose: ‘There is too much confusion here’ (Eco, Rose, p.493). Both William and Hawksmoor understand that a conventional model of causality is no longer acceptable. The encounter with the negativity is overwhelmingly numinous: it threatens to crush sanity, words and time into an immense silence. Hawksmoor’s need to look away, like a dark, secular version of Moses’ glimpse of divine glory, is effectively an encounter with an absolute that is indefinable but all-powerful over the nature of historical direction and understanding.

In Hawksmoor, we see an equivalence between the numinous and the aporetic that is enormously important in understanding postmodernism’s ambiguous politics of history. Useful to understanding this equivalence is Thomas Docherty’s consideration of the poststructuralist sense of time and value as an opposition to the Enlightenment teleology of Leibnizian ‘Optimism’:

According to Optimistic philosophy, the meaning of an event is not immediately apparent, as if it were never present-to-itself: its final sense - to be revealed as the necessity of goodness - is always deferred (to be revealed under the sign of eternity) and thus always different (or not what is may appear to the local eye caught up in the event itself). The major difference between deconstruction and Optimism is that Optimism believes that the final sense lies immanently within an event, whereas deconstruction consistently warns against such metaphysical notions.44

I would argue that postmodernism and Optimism are perfectly commensurable, especially when seen through postmodern historical fiction. Deconstructive history retains both the ‘immanence’ and the ‘sign of eternity’ contained within the Optimistic philosophy by giving alterity a full presence over, above and within contingency. For in novels such as The Name of the Rose and Hawksmoor, alterity is immanent and central within every inflection of historical content - it is in effect a temporal constant. Hence, the negative performs as the ‘sign of eternity’ and makes the shift from a secular/philosophical frame of reference to a theological principle. Hawksmoor straddles theology and poststructuralism because they occupy the same
historical territory. Dyer’s instinctive supernaturalism is based on the rejection of Enlightenment reason in preference for a sense of the vacuity beneath experience and time. He propounds a mysticism fundamentally inscribed upon the aporetic, as his metaphysical debate with Sir Christopher Wren makes clear:

You speak of Experience, I replied [Dyer], and hold it to be consistent with Reason? At this he nods sagely. But may it not be that Experience is inconsistent with Reason: the Gulphe in which Truth lies is bottomless and it will wash over whatever is thrown into it.

He shakes his head as the Candle falters and then flares up: This is but a windy Conceit of Knowledge, Nick, a Maze of Words in which you will lose your self. (Ackroyd, Hawksmoor, p.146)

Whatever the persuasions of Wren’s counter-argument, Hawksmoor remains allied to Dyer’s negative intuition of experience and history. It is interesting that Wren sees Dyer’s theology as a ‘Maze of Words’, as if a dark mysticism is the result of language detaching itself from external reference and solid meaning. My sympathy for many of Wren’s contentions is limited, but his accusation that Dyer is exercising a ‘windy Conceit of Knowledge’ could well be applied to postmodernism itself. Postmodernism verbally detaches itself from the metaphysics of history, but this detachment is a linguistic sleight-of-hand as transcendence slips in through the back door of theological reference. Hawksmoor is postmodern in its historical technique, yet the alterity it unveils is dependent upon theological themes to give it the aporetic eschatology that dominates postmodern language. For postmodernism is messianic to its core. What has returned is the fullness of the Other that has been previously hidden in historical teleology. Postmodernism privileges itself as being able to gain access to the alterity not only of our own times, but of all those that precede ours.

Toni Morrison — Beloved

In switching our attention to Toni Morrison’s Beloved, we target a specific ethical possibility that historical alterity produces within narrative. For rather than giving
negativity as a general engagement with historicising processes, Morrison moves towards an alterity that potentially reconstructs the absent narratives of those suppressed under colonialism and slavery. Like the fiction of Rushdie, *Beloved* slips indivisibly between metaphysical and realist worlds, yet unlike Rushdie, Morrison has a more specific location than that of the siteless 'international writer'. Instead, Morrison uses the play between the 'spiritual' and the 'real' to make a representational, and ethical, space in which suppressed black history can emerge. In my analysis of *Beloved*, we shall again see what appears to be the elements and style of a postmodern history. Yet Morrison avoids the excessive apophaticism of much postmodern fictional history by using the negative as a reference to cultural content rather than cultural indetermination, thus achieving what Andrew Levy has called 'communal solutions to the issue of unspeakability'.

*Beloved* poses several challenges to conventional history which are familiar within the context of postcolonial writing. The presentation of the histories of Sethe, Paul D., Denver and Beloved are fragmented tales moving through many non-linear retrospectives which dissociate her narrative from the monologic histories of an imperial Western project. *Beloved* opens up histories not known and racial questions not answered. Much of this dynamic revolves around the return of Beloved herself, the child whom Sethe, a slave in the American South, killed in order to prevent her from spending a life under the brutal slave-ownership of the Schoolteacher. The confusions which abound about whether Beloved is a ghost, a reincarnation, an impostor or simply a deluded woman, do not lead to a simple confrontation with ontology, but actually show how ontological concerns are inseparable from acts of historical existence. Morrison does not evoke an abstracted alterity that dominates historical content through the figure of Beloved, but a testimony to a presence that has
been obscured and suppressed by particular historical events. *Beloved* is a conspicuously metaphysical novel in its construction and characterisation. Yet rather than making its supernaturalism a buttress for absolute alterity, its metaphysics instead allude to psychological and social realities which have been produced by concrete historical events. Postcolonial writing, as we shall see in my final chapter on Salman Rushdie, tends to avoid the negative excesses of postmodern writing by making absence something through which one passes to arrive at a cultural and material message. By keeping a material root, Morrison is able to use alterity as a tool for gaining access to historical understanding. In such a way, Morrison shows that the spiritual negative can have an immense physical significance for those on whom negativity has been forced.

In *Beloved*, the absences underlying the narrative emerge from the question of what voices have been negated by the cultural actions of colonisation. An instance of this revisionist consciousness comes when Sethe remembers her childhood days at Sweet Home. The following recollection comes after the party organised by Grandma Suggs resulted in the social ostracism of Sethe and her family by the local community:

Sweet Home was a marked improvement. No question. And no matter, for the sadness was at her centre, the desolated centre where the self that was no self made its home. Such as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like.47

Sethe’s experience of self-consciousness is negative, yet it is not built upon any necessary difference that classifies all individuals. The absence of self that Sethe experiences is rather the concrete absence of a cultural ‘map’ that would enable an ontological orientation within a social history and place.48 When even her children are removed from her by slavery, the result is a ‘desolate centre’ where the ability to narrate one’s existence is left in ruins by the suppression of cultural and linguistic
vehicles on which that narration depends. The association between ontological absence and cultural acts is essential to distinguishing Morrison's use of the indeterminate from that of postmodern authors. Morrison's alterity is a literal absence in historical time - it is something that has been negated or removed from cultural experience. Thus alterity points not to a primacy in itself, but to a history behind a specific moment of negation. Rafael Pérez-Torres has noted that 'multi-cultural' texts such as Beloved focus more upon the particularities of social power than the generalities of philosophical alterity:

In large part, the reason classically postmodern texts move away from connection with socio-historical reality is their commitment to the hermetic isolation of the aesthetic object. By comparison, multicultural texts place in the foreground the relation between language and power. In order to understand alterity and decentralization as historically grounded phenomenon rather than reified fetish, a critical postmodernism needs to take into account the profound relationship between language and power that multicultural texts address. The accusation that postmodern texts perform 'the hermetic isolation of the aesthetic object' is broadly in line with the general premise of this thesis. Pérez-Torres looks to contemporary multicultural literature as a form which does not make alterity a privileged centre, but which seeks the negative in the context of social power. By so doing, alterity can fade in and out of the critical process without being the anchor for the debate and without taking away the confidence in presence and the metanarrative.

Morrison shows us how the absences that underpin the enslaved black identity are achieved through the white's reconstruction of the blacks as pure referents and not as a self-signifying community. The punishment beating of Sixo by Schoolteacher strikingly illustrates the narrative relation between the oppressor and the oppressed. Sixo is beaten not so much for his theft of a shoat, but for the rational defence of his actions. The schoolteacher sees this defence as a usurpation of his role as a centre for linguistic control:
Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers - not the defined. (Morrison, Beloved, p.190)

The schoolteacher's response to Sixo's reasoning achieves a localised act of historical negation. As Sixo's epistemological being is denied, so his language is cut off from possessing any historical authority over a cultural context. During the more even-handed treatment at the hands of Mr Garner, Sixo partly presumes that his language is a universal medium of reference. Yet the Schoolteacher's beating consigns him to the condition of the 'defined' because language is not to be separated from the physical power conditions that enable the whites to acts as 'definers', the possessors of referential, and therefore narrative, control.

Beloved's basic premise is that the oppression of a particular culture is performed in the negation of that culture's power to narrate; once a culture's narratives are dominated, then that culture can quickly lose its social and individual being. In place of the eroded culture comes self-perpetuating modes of ideology which attempt to naturalise the new social relations which have been created. This is realised by Stamp Paid when he considers the potency of the jungle motif in a culture of slavery:

But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them from that other (livable) place. It was the jungle the whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. (Morrison, Beloved, pp.198-9)

The power of definition that the slave-owners possess is capable of turning their representation of the jungle into a socially persuasive motif. In this quotation, Morrison's metaphor surrounding jungle ecology and ideological growth shows how representation and reality become indivisible when the signifying process is hegemonised by a particular group. Beloved demonstrates, if anything, that historical knowledge is a Foucauldian site of power in a world where narration and signification are the central arena for cultural control. As history, therefore, is never
free from ideology, the fragmentary construction of Beloved becomes much more understandable as showing the difficulties of memory when absences have been forced upon a culture's ability to narrate its own history.

Yet as much as the gaps and voids of Beloved represent the effect of oppression, Morrison also seems to be offering a signature of resistance in the way negativity is used. For as the novel highlights the aporia of narrative in the stories of Sethe, Denver, Beloved and the Sweet Home men, the novel becomes an act of reclaiming and reconstructing a cultural and historical identity. The novel itself constantly dismantles the architecture of white cultural narration by showing that the spaces it creates are not places of signifying truth, but signs of historical omission. With this exposure of the basis of western colonial history, Beloved starts to advance the possibility that a new cultural history can be recovered and created.51

Sethe herself is often seen to be torn between the unspeakability of the past and the need to form a history of events. This situation becomes particularly acute with the reappearance of Beloved as an adult. With this metaphysical confrontation, Sethe is bound by the demand to frame her reasons for killing Beloved into some sort of contextual and historical evaluation. Attempting to do this is shown as a process fraught with danger, as Sethe becomes enervated by the sheer scale of the psychological demands generated by the act of renegotiating a tormented historical repression. Yet the presence of Beloved gives a dramatic gravity to the novel as she stimulates the narration of a history that has previously been left unspoken. Her ethereal yet forceful presence drags a whole collection of historical ghosts into the present, ghosts which are given being through acts of memory. This narration focuses Sethe's sense of being with the need to find a cultural voice, as is apparent when she
talks to Beloved about the earrings given to her by Mrs Garner, the wife of the slave-owner:

But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the event itself, or her thirst for hearing it - in any case it was an unexpected pleasure. (Morrison, Beloved, p.58)

The moods of plenitude and discovery in this quotation hint at the self/cultural-consciousness that accompanies the systematic recovery of absent histories. As the dialogue between Sethe and Beloved expands and becomes more confessional, there emerges a potential reconciliation of historically dispossessed individuals with their social memories. One of the most poignant moments of such temporal rediscovery in Beloved, comes when Sethe elicits Beloved’s admission that she is the daughter that Sethe felt herself forced to kill:

Tell me the truth. Didn’t you come from the other side?
Yes. I was on the other side.
You came back because of me?
Yes.
You rememory me?
Yes. I remember you.
You never forgot me?
Your face is mine. (Morrison, Beloved, p.215)

The word ‘rememory’ used here by Sethe is a crucial element in understanding the reclamation of absent historical narratives. Rememory is not equivalent with ‘remember’, but suggests a re-presentation of the original incident of memory, in this case recalling the mother-daughter relationship that was denied Sethe and Beloved because of inhumane social prohibitions. The seamless presentation of the voices in this quotation, without speech-marks or authorial intervention, contributes to the interpersonal unity in Beloved’s reassurance that ‘Your face is mine’. For the repossession of memory seems to bring a shared identity and communal shape with regard to the past which they inhabited and Sethe and Beloved merge in a narrative which is both individual and general. Linden Peach defines the operation of
‘rememory’ in the physical embodiment of memory across lines of time and individuality:

Sethe’s healing and rebirth can only begin when she has knowledge and understanding of the absent narratives. The novel hinges upon what is called rememory, the basic concept of which is that memories have a physical existence beyond the minds of the individuals in whom they originate: it is possible to bump into and inhabit another person’s memory. (Peach, *Morrison*, p.101)

Peach’s notion of rememory is appealing because it gives Sethe’s tragic memories the capacity to be both individual and representative: individual in that Sethe’s memories originate in particular moments of her experience and representative as her memories seem capable of becoming the content of a broader history of social identity. Morrison makes clear that the absences of Sethe’s life, absences of family, tradition and self, can be filled by recreating narrative memories which are simultaneously communal and specific (Peach, *Morrison*, pp.101-102).

However much the character of Beloved represents the potential for ‘healing’ in Sethe’s life, there is also an ontologically disruptive quality about her presence (Sage, *House of Fiction*, pp.183-85). The reappearance of Beloved as a possible reincarnation of the child Sethe killed, is not incongruous in a novel which opens under the presence of the poltergeist spirit that haunts house 124. Beloved herself is cast in ambiguity. Peach lists three plausible explanations for Beloved, all of which are textually supportable:

1) She is the ghost of Beloved returned in physical form;
2) She is a mistreated black-girl who, having escaped from her captors, places her own self and experiences into those of Sethe’s;
3) She is a representative figure of all blacks who suffered under slavery. (Peach, *Morrison*, p.102)
Peach concludes that neither definition is wholly accurate or self-sufficient, as the signifier ‘Beloved’ constantly slips and flows between the definitions (see Cornwell, *Fantastic*, p. 207). Consequently, Beloved always remains an enigmatic figure on the borders of metaphysics and social comment. What does such ambiguity achieve? Why is Beloved’s ‘song […] just outside music’ (Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 60)?

So far in this thesis, we have seen alterity working as an absolute principle, mainly through acquiring the metaphysical functions of the trope of God. Morrison’s *Beloved* is centrally preoccupied with metaphysical themes, but in her case the guiding motif is the ghost. How does this infinitely lesser form of supernatural being contribute towards the politics of absence in the novel? With much postmodern metaphysics, like the activity of the negative theology, deconstruction and difference are used as teleological energies that push towards an encounter with the supremacy of alterity itself, its priority over all other significations. Thus the linguistic other acts as an ineffable god. Yet in *Beloved*, the alterity of the absent past is literally figured in a ghost, a supernatural being from the *past itself*. Morrison’s alterity is not a total absence of past reality but the revisitation of a time that has already been. This distinction is crucial because it demonstrates how Morrison is more concerned with a tangible encounter with the past rather than a philosophical speculation upon the Other. *Beloved* is a metaphysical novel. Yet the metaphysics of the novel have a materialist ground in the historical activity of the black cultural memory, and thus Morrison’s characters live with the ghosts of real events and people and not the infinite deferral of presence. Accordingly, *Beloved* can not be read in terms of a negative theology but of an affirmative theology. The novel affirms that there are many metaphysical ghosts in history, especially the history of oppressed peoples, but these ghosts are referents to a past that has been and not the ‘eternal contemporaneity’
of the postmodern world. William R. Handley’s analysis of the ghost in *Beloved*, though tending towards a very postmodern privileging of alterity, argues that the metaphysical absences of the novel are significantly bound up with cultural and historical actuality:

> The figure of Beloved is Morrison’s attempt to bring to presence a lost child, to fill the incalculable metaphysical space inaugurated by the historical facts of loss during the Middle Passage and slavery.52

Morrison’s *Beloved* escapes the transcendentalist bias by using absence as an absence of cultural events or self-recognition and not a final absence that governs all mental and social phenomena. As we shall see in my final chapter on Rushdie, the mixing of the metaphysical and the material is a way out of the impasse of postmodern transcendentalism, especially when this mix recognises both the human centrality of metanarratives and the grounded nature of these metanarratives in social reality. *Beloved* revolves around metaphysical absence, but at its heart it is an absence built into a time, experience and historical actuality that are not subservient to the idealisms of postmodernism.

This is a fundamental difference between the postcolonial writer and the postmodern writer, with regard to metaphysical and cognitive principles in history. The difference has been lucidly summarised by Diana Brydon:

> Perhaps the clearest difference between a post-modernist practice and a post-colonial practice emerges through their different uses of history. As Hutcheon points out, ‘[h]istoriographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the reality of the past but its textualized accessibility to us today’ (1988a: 14). Without denying that things happened, postmodernism focuses on the problems raised by history’s textualised accessibility: on the problems of representation, and on the impossibility of receiving truth. Post-colonialism, in contrast, without denying history’s textualised accessibility, focuses on the reality of a past that has influenced the present.53

What the postcolonial achieves that the postmodern cannot is a rootedness in material history without the insistent embarrassment over presence, be that presence social or spiritual. In this environment, alterity becomes part of an historical act rather than an
historical totality. The uncanny quality Beloved evokes comes from her summoning of past events into present existence. Beloved represents both a figure of actual black experience under slavery (therefore acting as a sign of the past), yet her ambiguous status in the contemporaneity of the novel places that past in the constant need for present negotiation. The effect of Beloved's temporal status is an alterity which is a direct presentation of the lost (past) narratives of black identity and the need to reclaim those narratives in new (present) voices and historical awareness. Seen in this light, Beloved moves through alterity to history as it exposes the operations of cultural oppression.

Beloved exhibits the 'writtenness' of history. The void of black history under slavery is not a fundamental alterity, but an absence of the ability to narrate under certain power structures. Thus the alterity within Beloved acts as a political movement against the way history has been scripted. So, when Morrison actually gives the white slave-owners a voice, in the scene where the schoolteacher and colleagues find the escapee Sethe with the child she has just killed, the focus is not on what is being said but on the voices that are being prohibited:

Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else. You'd be feeding them maybe, holding out a piece of rabbit in your hand, and the animal would revert - bite your hand clean off. (Morrison, Beloved, pp.149-50)

The animal metaphor employed here develops itself out of the 'silence' imposed upon the enslaved person's voice. The silence attests to the act of silencing perpetuated by the slave owner on those whom he controls. Thus Morrison's inclusion of this oppressive voice makes absence a signal that a history of experience is there, but not the opportunity to frame that history in a culturally specific narrative.
We have seen in Morrison's novela way of taking absence as a metaphysical
given without moving into the atemporality of postmodern history. With Foucault's
radical relativisation of history and the subject, postmodernism has ostensibly
embraced anti-metaphysical attitudes towards time. Yet I have argued that these
attitudes veil a profound reliance upon figurations of eternity for describing the rise
and apotheosis of alterity throughout history. In his essay 'The Postmodern Paradigm
and Contemporary Capitalism', Joe Holland describes the postmodern sense of time
as 'dialectical' in which 'the new future emerges to challenge the present, but it
remains a future rooted in the past'. The result of this dialectic is what Holland calls
a 'holistic spiral' that 'recalls the prophetic biblical view of history' (Holland,
'Paradigm', p.19). That Holland has arrived at a theological model from postmodern
time is not surprising. Postmodernism's biblical qualities lie in its sense of time as a
totality speaking in the present, with the various critics and interpreters who are in
touch with alterity acting as prophets and sages of negativity. We have already seen in
Morrison's Beloved that the metaphysics of absence need not always lead to the
transcendentalism of postmodernism. In my final chapter, I shall give exclusive
attention to Salman Rushdie as someone who blends metaphysics, absence and
metanarratives in a way that does not give way to a rather futureless theorising of
alterity. Holland describes the dialect as a defining principle of postmodernism. I shall
now argue that dialectical activity can actually take us away from postmodern theory
to a philosophy with a greater potential than that offered by much contemporary
theory.
NOTES


3 Baudrillard's perception of the immediacy of the postmodern signifying process is comparable to Ihab Hassan's notion of immanences, where 'history becomes derealised by media into a happening'. See Ihab Hassan, The Postmodern Turn (Columbus, Ohio State University, 1987) pp.84-96.


6 This is Zurbrugg's purpose in his offering of the 'C-effect' as a corrective to the 'B-effect', with John Cage as its key representative. See Zurbrugg, Parameters, pp.9-14.

7 Here I am not suggesting that the pre-1960s western culture was one of standardising historical linearity. Theological models of interpretation have generally demanded an extremely plastic relationship to time, though in Western religions these are often driven by the engine of a purposive divine will. It should also be remembered that in this century Modernism laid much of the foundations of postmodern historicity. Raymond Williams in The Politics of Modernism (London, Verso, 1990) pp.167-9 points to the emergent rejection of linear history in the tenets of early Formalism, whose tendency towards 'eternal contemporaneity' sounds very familiar in a postmodern context.

8 The priority I have given here to the epistemological qualities of historical narratives in no way excludes the fact that such narrative strategies have often found economic, cultural and military roots in the colonial psychology. Following Edward Said's argument in Culture and Imperialism (London, Vintage, 1993) that 'nations themselves are narrations' (p.xiii), I would see the development of empire as one of the most important linchpins in historical totalisation, though it remains to be seen whether historical consciousness can have an alternative to totalisation.


10 By 'traditional', I am referring to any historical method that attempts to discern historical direction in a determinist chain of verifiable cause and effect. My blanket category absorbs a multitude of approaches from the church Fathers' attempts to perceive a divine linearity, through to the empiricist method of the Enlightenment and a Marxist dialectic.

11 Thucydides' famous history of the Peloponnesian War is underscored in Book 1, Chapter 1 with the admission that 'I have found it impossible, because of its remoteness in time, to acquire a really precise knowledge of the distant past or even of the history preceding our own period'. See Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, trans. by Rex Warner (London, Penguin, 1972) p.35.

12 We can see this tendency in Linda Hutcheon's idea of 'historiographic metafiction', which tends to place historical content beneath the self-aware negotiation of absence: 'In both historiographic theory and postmodern fiction, there is an intense self-consciousness (both theoretical and textual) about the act of narrating in the present the events of the past, about the conjunction of present action and the past absent object of that agency.' See Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism (London and New York, Routledge, 1989) p.71.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that the post-colonial project in regard to history is 'to engage the medium of narrativity itself'. Their vision is enlightening because it does not alienate description and event from one another, for 'historical narrativity is that which structures reality itself'. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (London, Routledge, 1995) p.356.


Derrida recognised such a tendency in 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' where he defends himself against the incorporation of deconstructive absences into the shape of a negative theology, a conversion based on what he calls 'the becoming theological of all discourse'. See Derrida, 'Speaking', in Coward and Foshay (eds.), Derrida, p.76.

For a discussion of Jencks' irony as opposed to Hassan's more negative sense of the ironic see Margaret Rose, The Post-Modern and the Post-Industrial (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp.44-47.

See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987).


Significantly for my argument here, Eco has referred to his mixing of figures from different periods as contributing to the creation of a 'transworld identity'. I would take this further and suggest that he presents a 'trans temporal identity' for the postmodern subject who naturally totalises the principle of a negative absolute. See Umberto Eco, 'Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy in a Metanarrative Text', in The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts (Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1979) pp.200-60. See also McHale, Constructing, pp.152-4.


Delfatore understands that William 'implicitly rejects the notion of a collective, universal pattern resembling Carl Jung's theory of synchronicity, which posits the simultaneous occurrence of meaningful equivalences in heterogeneous, causally unrelated processes' within which the acts of individuals fall into place in a macro pattern that the individuals themselves do not conceive, consent to, or even recognise' (Delfatore, 'Theology and Detection', p.87).

See McHale, Constructing, p.155.

See Allen Thiher, 'Postmodern Fiction and History', in D’Haen and Bertens, History, p.15: '[L]anguage, in its autonomy can, however, allow writers the luxury of pretending to accept the superior teleological naure of history, but often only so that writers can subvert this pretension in derision and parody.' Thiher sees most postmodern writers as falling into this category.

For an extensive treatment of the theme of apocalypse in its medieval and modern context see Louis Parkinson Zamora, 'Apocalyptic Visions and Visionaries in The Name of the Rose' in Inge, Naming, pp.31-47.

Theresa Coletti views the alterity of The Name of the Rose as emerging from Eco's negotiation of medieval semiotic theory and the resultant dialogue with 'cultural determinism': 'For it [The Name of the Rose] is, I believe, as part of a "dialogue between the past and the present" that the medieval semiotics of The Name of the Rose is most appropriately viewed. In order to pose the possibility of such a dialogue, we must first acknowledge what we have come to know as the "alterity" of the irrevocably distant medieval past as well as the inescapable cultural determinism that shapes our readings of that past.' See Theresa Coletti, Naming the Rose - Eco, Medieval Signs, and Modern Theory (Ithaca, NY and London, Cornell University Press, 1988) p.30.
For in extensive review of the historical parallels and references see Luc Herman, 'The relevance of history: Peter Sloterdijk and Peter Ackroyd', in D'Haen and Bertens, *History*, p.112.


The labyrinths of *Hawksmoor* differ from that of *The Name of the Rose* because Dyer's underground mazes seem to represent the lack of textual explanation in the darker regions of the human psyche, whereas Eco presents us with the excesses of textual consciousness.

See Herman, 'Relevance of History', p.106.


My conception of spatial time is indebted to Jameson's idea of the 'spatial peculiarities of postmodernism as symptoms and expressions of a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multi-dimensional set of radically discontinuous realities'. See Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping' in Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L. (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988) p.351.


Herman relates the use of the detective genre and supernatural themes to the promotion of the populist appeal of *Hawksmoor*: 'In order to suggest the occult dimension of the churches, Ackroyd has not only created an historical frame from which their special characteristics can be derived, but he has also used the detective-story, which is the popular vehicle of a puzzle bearing overtones of evil.' (Herman, 'Relevance of History', p.117).

Allen Thiher claims that postmodern fiction treats history in four ways: as a linguistic construct, a parody of logocentrism, as collective fantasy and as an ethical confrontation. *Hawksmoor* seems to cross all these categories by showing that negativity and responsibility for historical narratives effect a mutual qualification without the hegemony of one party over the other. See Thiher, 'Postmodern Fiction and History', pp.9-13.


Andrew Levy, 'Telling Beloved', *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, 33, 1 (Spring 1991) 114-23 (p.120).


Rafael Pérez-Torres, 'Knitting and Knotting the Narrative Thread - Beloved as Postmodern Novel', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 39, 3 and 4 (Fall/Winter 1993) 689-707 (pp.695-96).

See Said, *Culture*, p.6: 'I have kept in mind the idea that the earth is in effect one world, in which empty, uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist. Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings'.

Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison* (London, Macmillan, 1995) p.94, gives a genealogical context for the act of reappropriating the black narrative: 'In some respects Beloved draws upon the black aesthetic discourse of the 1960s in which, as Butler-Evans points out, narratives as oppositional or alternative texts posited self-reconstruction and redefinition through deconstructing Western assumptions about blackness.'


Cornwell argues that 'Beloved has no identity and this is the whole point' (Cornwell, *Fantastic*, p.207). He sees the vacuous quality that hangs over Beloved's narratives as representing the simultaneous loss and repossession of black narratives in all their fragmentary nature.

Peach raises the important point that Beloved does challenge the racist epistemology that the blacks have neither memory nor reason (Peach, *Morrison*, p.101).

Chapter 5
Salman Rushdie: Dialogue and the Transcendent Aesthetic

Any attempt to map the terrain of postmodern/religious interaction in fiction will find it fruitful to address Salman Rushdie as one who inhabits a difficult borderzone between the sacred instinct and the secular drive. ‘There’s a hole inside me where God used to be’, said Rushdie in an interview with Gerald Mazorti,¹ and it is this spiritual void that informs or illustrates much of the political content and stylistic quality of Rushdie’s novels. However, in Rushdie’s case I shall not proceed to file his work along with those authors whom I have suggested as closet negative theologians. In contrast to such metaphysical incongruities, I shall claim Rushdie as someone who applies religious themes to offer a more politically and philosophically satisfying route out of the indecisive battle of postmodern multiplicity and Enlightenment metanarratives. Making parallels with Bakhtinian theories of dialogism and heteroglossia, I will interpret Rushdie’s fictional encounter with the divine as an ethical form of conversation that vigorously engages with social realities rather than transcending them in a discourse with the other. Neither straying towards radical individualism nor inscribing monolithic political theories, Rushdie paints a world in which multiple metanarratives and pluralities are not set in unceasing play, but are bound together in social necessity. Moreover, the spirituality inextricably woven into Rushdie’s style and content is not dominated by a tendency towards religious parody,
but by the desire to show that the realities of individuals' lives must always rely upon metaphysical and metanarrative ideas.

The dialogic nature of Rushdie's fiction is apparent from the first page of a novel such as Midnight's Children. Saleem Sinai's attempts to contain and phrase his narrative are unsettled by a multitude of voices, personalities and histories 'jostling and shoving inside me', an entire world seemingly speaking and arguing within one individual. Saleem's epic bonding of national and personal history is never the solitary expression of one detached from the world, but of a character whose flight from 'absurdity' revolves around his never-ending interaction with faces, countries, languages and cultures.

That many critics should have understood Rushdie's work in terms of Bakhtinian dialogue and heteroglossia should come as little surprise. The colours, zones and worlds of Rushdie's fiction seem to echo Bakhtin's preoccupation with the 'polyphonic' voice as an opposition to the 'monologic' dogmas that freeze discussion into inflexible creeds and canons. Mark Edmundson sees the 'many different realities' in Rushdie's novels as espousing a Bakhtinian carnivality that distinguishes Rushdie from the more philosophically anxious tones of much postmodern writing. Similar critical voices include Philip Engblom's analysis of Midnight's Children as a dialogic novel, M. Keith Booker's reading of Rushdie's 'fall' into Bakhtinian heteroglossia, and D.J.Enright's conclusion that The Satanic Verses is 'copious in thesis and antithesis, but [...] synthesis hovers beyond it'. In such critical opinions, there is often a conscious link between Bakhtin and theories of the postmodern, especially finding common ground in the repositioning of meaning as an eternally deferred quality. Yet I shall argue in this chapter that though the connection between Rushdie and Bakhtin is a legitimate one to construct, the implication that this makes
Rushdie into an archetypal postmodernist is far from secure. Though there are many aspects of postmodern theory, such as Derrida’s deconstruction and Lyotard’s belief in positive language games, that can be associated with Baktinian concepts, Bakhtin ultimately seems to promote notions of epistemological presence and sociological reality at odds with the postmodern incredulity towards the metanarrative. The first part of this chapter will be devoted to a Bakhtinian analysis of Midnight’s Children in order to dissociate Rushdie from the negative obsessions of much postmodern writing and show him as proposing a much more satisfying and rounded perspective of the conflict of the monolithic and the plural. Of paramount significance to my arguments will be Rushdie’s increasing preoccupation with the importance of religion as a phenomenon that, though sometimes dictatorial and cruel, actually affirms ethical and spiritual values that must be accounted for in any humane social policy. Particularly in The Satanic Verses, I shall demonstrate how Rushdie’s dialogic structures seek out a middle ground between the iconoclastic potential of the secular and the ethical individuality of the sacred.

Bakhtin, Rushdie, and Midnight’s Children

Most of Bakhtin’s work issues from the belief that we only come to a consciousness of ourselves through the confrontation with another outside of ourselves. In ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’, Bakhtin claims with a partly Levinasian resonance that as we face the other, the fact that we can see them and their world in a fullness unobtainable to them means that we comprehend them as unique and singular beings in the world. This comprehension, in a rather Hegelian inflection, in turn comes back to us as a deducted vision or ‘gift’ of ourselves as situated individuals:
This other human being whom I am contemplating, I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back. . . are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes. [...] to annihilate this difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person.

This ever-present excess of my seeing, knowing and possessing in relation to any other human being, is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world.7

The term that Bakhtin applies to this encounter between self (author) and other (hero) is ‘aesthetic event’: the moment when the meeting of two consciousnesses produces not only a recognition of ‘uniqueness and irreplaceability’, but also a sense that I can never be in complete understanding of myself, as I cannot see myself as I am seen by the other. Thus in Bakhtin’s later Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, he would praise Dostoevsky’s ‘new authorial relationship to characters which respects the open-endedness of subjective consciousness’ (Morris, Reader, p.7). The step from ontological philosophy to Dostoevsky’s literature is made because Bakhtin saw in the novel form an aesthetic environment in which the continual confrontation between self and other can be maintained and vocalised without dialogic cessation. By vocalising the multitude of internal and external narratives, and their interaction, the characters of fiction become defined more through the ‘aesthetic event’ of interdependence than through an isolated self. Thus on every level, Bakhtin denies solipsistic and self-reliant theories with the determination that artistic, linguistic, ethical and social consciousness only gains being through the encounter between two or more subjectivities.

Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children is a novel consistent with this facet of Bakhtin’s philosophy. The narrator of the novel, Saleem Sinai, is not a character who supports a subjectivity independent of his act of narration, but who is continually negotiating his own identity through interaction with the demands of others or the metaphors of nation. Saleem is visible to himself only amongst others. The
Scheherezade-like motivation to his reflections indicates that the existence of his narrative is continually fuelled by and supported by the listening ear. The most visible listening ear is Saleem's wife, Padma. Saleem initially presents Padma as the 'useful critic', the face that looks over his shoulder and urges on the pace and direction of the narrative. Throughout the novel, Rushdie makes us aware that Padma is not simply an irritation or distraction for Saleem, but the other who contributes to the manner in which Saleem constructs his existence in narrative form. Padma's desire for linearity over the erraticisms of Saleem's writing style, affects the way he historicises himself and subsequently the way he expresses his own self-awareness:

But here is Padma at my elbow, bullying me back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next: 'At this rate,' Padma complains, 'you'll be two hundred years old before you manage to tell me about your birth.' [...] Fighting down the proper pride of the successful story-teller, I attempt to educate her. 'Things – even people – have a way of leaking into each other,' I explain, 'like flavours when you cook. Ilse Lubin's suicide, for example, leaked into old Aadam and sat there in a puddle until he saw God. Likewise,' I intoned earnestly, 'the past has dripped into me... so we can't ignore it... '[...]

...And certainly Padma is leaking into me. As history pours out of my fissured body, my lotus is quietly dripping in, with her down-to-earthery, and her paradoxical superstition, her contradictory love of the fabulous[.] (Rushdie, Midnight, p.38)

Saleem sees Padma as part of a world of the more popular linear and sequential narrative; she is culturally visible to him in a way that she is not to herself. Yet the collision between the two fictional strategies, I would suggest, does not produce a conflict of chronological techniques. Rather, what occurs is a meditation upon how individuals 'leak' into one another, how consciousness and identity shift when in the company of an alternative presence to one's own. Saleem, in comprehending Padma against the backdrop of 'what-happened-nextism' (Rushdie, Midnight, p.39), expands his own narrative horizons through acceptance of social demand. The product of his interlocution with Padma is not the rigid separation of the narrative of fragments from the narrative of linearity. Rather, Saleem accepts the gift of heightened self-
understanding that Padma gives and so returns his narrative to a pragmatic social foundation. Ultimately, Saleem realises that his narrative has to perform for others.

The interaction between Saleem and Padma is redolent of Bakhtinian philosophy because of the way that Saleem, as in the influence of Ilse Lubin and Naseem Adiz on his grandfather Aadam, has a self composed through contact with another's world. Once that world is withdrawn, being starts to enter an unnatural and entropic condition. So when Padma temporarily leaves Saleem because of the clash between his obsessive writing and their conjugal sex life, he finds his physical and narrative existence threatened:

It has been two whole days since Padma stormed out of my life. [. . .] A balance has been upset; I feel cracks widening down the length of my body; because suddenly I am alone, without my necessary ear, and it isn't enough.

[. . .] How to dispense with Padma? How give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle-laden omniscience? How do without her paradoxical earthiness of spirit, which keeps - kept? - my feet on the ground? I have become, it seems to me, the apex of an isosceles triangle, supported equally by twin deities, the wild god of memory and the lotus-goddess of the present . . . but must I now become reconciled to the narrow one-dimensionality of a straight line. (Rushdie, Midnight, p.149-50)

The ontological rift experienced by Saleem upon Padma's absence runs through both his physical body and his narrative confidence. Padma is 'necessary' because without an audience and interlocutor, Saleem loses the communicative rationale of any narrative act.9 Not only that, but the nature of Padma's expectations and demands maintains Saleem's style and content within the broad social framework of Indian diversity, instead of descending into the 'one-dimensionality' of a non-dialogic presentation. Later in the novel, when Padma returns to Saleem, Saleem finds himself more and more dependent upon her approval as 'what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe' (Rushdie, Midnight, pp.270-71).
Interpretations of Padma’s role in *Midnight’s Children* vary considerably, especially according to her perceived political comment. Timothy Brennan has argued that Padma is a figure of Indian authenticity, presenting ‘popular aesthetics’ as a counterbalance to Rushdie’s excessive cosmopolitanism. Alternatively, Nancy E. Batty’s Padma has a potentially tyrannical function in her attempt to draw Saleem away from his constant deferrals and digressions, as Batty makes clear that Saleem’s fragmented method is a way of showing up how power is wielded by the authors of social fictions. Brennan’s interpretation seems a little unwieldy for *Midnight’s Children*, as he appears to see Rushdie on some kind of universal cataloguing project similar to Lifafa Das’s claims for pan-Indian representations in his street side-show. Padma does expand the range of social reference in Saleem’s narrative consciousness, yet her dialogic voice presents her as more than a mere token of cultural popularism. In particular, Padma urges the recognition that linearity and closure are essential when a narrative moves from solitary reflection to social communication. I would also argue against Batty’s implicit suggestion that Padma’s demands for linearity are opposed to Rushdie/Saleem’s politically worthy deferrals. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the act of deferral is not necessarily the refusal to turn the Other into the Same. Deferral can equally be the non-acceptance of the social situatedness of a particular individual and the reality that they inhabit. Rushdie, however much he assaults metanarrative complacencies, insistently reinforces the fact that pluralism is a reality for some which others do not inhabit. Padma’s role in *Midnight’s Children*, I would suggest, is not to demonstrate the deficiency of linear narrative, but to show Saleem in the *specific* fragmented social condition within which he lives. Returning to Bakhtinian language, Saleem faces Padma as one confronting a socially different other. This other then expands Saleem’s consciousness of his strategies for
representing self-hood from the context of his own historical, economic and political location.

Of course, Saleem’s metaphoric identification with the experience of post-Independence India makes Midnight’s Children more than an autobiographical fiction. Saleem’s unique telepathic gift and, later, his emotionally sensitive sense of smell, bind him within the birth pangs and history of the Indian nation from the Independence Day celebrations, through conflicts such as the Sino-Indian and Indo-Pakistani wars, into Indira Gandhi’s state of emergency and subsequent sterilisation programme. The identification that Saleem makes between personal and national history is complete:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I’ve gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each ‘I’, every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you’ll have to swallow a world. (Rushdie, Midnight, p.383)

Speaking here after his forced sterilisation, Saleem seems to make claims of an almost messianic grandeur. Yet a closer look at this quotation subdues interpretations of any potential omniscience. Saleem claims that he contains a ‘world’ because an identity is necessarily comprised of the people and events one absorbs in forming one’s consciousness. Thus Saleem emphasises his lack of exceptionality, for each person of India has no identity apart from the ‘multitude’ he or she has encountered.

In this light, Saleem’s frequent claims that he has literally caused the traumatic events of Indian history are more understandable. His insistence on being linked to history ‘both literally and metaphorically’ (Rushdie, Midnight, p.238), suggests history consists of not only what happens to us (the literal), but also of what narratives are devised to describe events and movements (the metaphorical). Saleem’s ‘unreliable narration’ clearly evokes the sense of our fictions, and the fictions of
others, closing the gap between the literal and the metaphorical by generating history in both its textual expression and its physical actuality (as a causal principle of future events). However, like Bakhtin’s theory of the provenance of consciousness, Rushdie does not understand such history emerging from the product of a single mind, but from a radical encounter with others that changes the nature of our perceptions about self and world. Saleem’s telepathic gift is an ‘aesthetic event’ through which he comes to a greatly enhanced awareness of the social and narrative differences of many other worlds:

At one time I was a landlord in Uttar Pradesh, my belly rolling over my pajama-cord as I ordered serfs to set my surplus grain on fire . . . at another moment I was starving to death in Orissa, where there was a food shortage as usual: I was two months old and my mother had run out of breast milk. I occupied, briefly, the mind of a Congress Party worker, bribing a village schoolteacher to throw his weight behind the party of Gandhi and Nehru in the coming election campaign; also the thoughts of a Keralan peasant who had decided to vote Communist. My daring grew: one afternoon I deliberately invaded the head of our own State Chief Minister, which was how I discovered, over twenty years before it became a national joke, that Morarji Desai ‘took his own water’ daily . . . I was inside him, tasting the warmth as he gurgled down a frothing glass of urine. And finally I hit my highest point: I became Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister and author of framed letters: I sat with the great man amongst a bunch of gaptoothed, stragglebeard astrologers and adjusted the Five Year Plan to bring it into harmonic alignment with the music of the spheres . . . (Rushdie, Midnight, p.174)

Saleem’s inhabitation of various members of the Indian population seems to aim at a totally representative range of social incorporation, stretching as it does from the starving peasant to the Prime Minister. What is significant about this passage for my argument here, especially my relation of Rushdie’s fiction to Bakhtinian theory, is that Rushdie’s telepathic movement within the Indian people is a sociological journey that is as much about grounding individuals within real social and physical spaces, as it is about the narratives that they project about their reality. Just as Bakhtin/Voloshinov rejected formalism, structuralism and psychoanalysis on the basis of their perceived distance from sociological engagement, Rushdie veers away from reducing his telepathic hosts to narrative speculations by dwelling on their physical practices and concrete situations, such as the mother’s lack of breast milk and the stomach-churning
description of Desai's drink of urine. Rushdie has the admirable ability to make the individual representative of social positions without losing his individuality or allowing his physical reality to be dispersed by his reflections upon narrativity. The multiple characters that Saleem encounters are always individuated by their particular social setting, and with each meeting between Saleem and the Other, there is an expansion of social comprehension as much as narratological questioning. Saleem proves Voloshinov/Bakhtin's contention that 'the individual consciousness is a socio-ideological fact' (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, Marxism, p.12), purely by the distinction of his consciousness within an arena of many socio-ideological dialogues. In this sense, as we shall see, Rushdie begins to go against the grain of postmodernism by grounding dialogicity in social reality and not a primary alterity.

Exploring the full possibilities of the term 'dialogue' in Bakhtinian theory, can further clarify Rushdie's relationship with social realism, and also start to expose the broader issue of Rushdie's ethical foundations and the significance of religion in the functioning of these foundations. For just as Bakhtin saw in the dialogic process an ethical content set against the tyranny of 'monologic' forms of discourse, so Rushdie hints at dialogue as a moral process grounded by a distinctive balance of social and spiritual awareness.

Bakhtin and Voloshinov defined the dialogic as discourse taking place within the melting-pot of continual, never-ending sociological interaction. As we have already noted, Bakhtin considered Dostoevsky's literary characters as exemplary illustrations of this type of subjectivity and interactive consciousness:

Dostoevsky portrayed not the life of an idea in an isolated consciousness, and not the interrelationship of ideas, but the interaction of consciousnesses. [. . .] In Dostoevsky, consciousness never gravitates towards itself but is always found in intense relationship with another consciousness. Every experience, every thought of a character is internally dialogic, adorned with polemic, filled with struggle. [. . .] It could be said that Dostoevsky offers, in artistic form, something like a sociology of consciousness. [. . .]
Every thought of Dostoevsky's heroes (the Underground Man, Raskolnikov, Ivan, and others) senses itself to be from the very beginning a rejoinder in an unfinished dialogue. Such thought is not impelled towards a well-rounded, finalized systematically monologic whole. It lives a tense life on the borders of someone else's thought, someone else's consciousness. (Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 32)

The 'sociology of consciousness' which Bakhtin observes in Dostoevsky's fiction originates in the perception that meaning is an infinitely interactive dialogue between individuals, that prohibits the conceptual freeze of a 'systematically monologic whole'. Existing in 'a tense life on the borders of someone else's thought', dialogic discourse is the meeting ground for multifarious strands of social meaning which merge into new directions and modify individual consciousnesses. The never-ending futurity of this process is not a problem for Bakhtin. Rather, he understands dialogicity as a security against 'unitary perceptions of truth' (Morris, *Reader*, p. 15). So in his essay 'Discourse in the Novel', Bakhtin coins the now much used term 'heteroglossia' to label language as multiple, shifting ideological currents that disperse the attempt to imprison meaning within single codes and which ensure 'the possibility of a free consciousness' (Morris, *Reader*, p. 16). It should be noted that Bakhtin is arguing for dialogicity not as a practical alternative to monologic discourse, but as the condition of language itself; monologic discourse is simply the erroneous and imperious quest to stop dialogic movement.

*Midnight's Children* is a novel whose fabric is woven into fundamentally dialogic patterns of narrative content and form. Indeed, all Rushdie's novels play amongst a plenitude of 'possible worlds', mixing genres, languages, religions, geographies and political creeds into a mishmash of interactive elements in which no one voice reaches a privileged authority. Saleem Sinai's very identity is dialogic. Even as a child, especially because of the propitious moment of his birth, Saleem is enveloped by a vigorous debate concerning the significance of his presence:
Even a baby is faced with the problem of defining itself; and I'm bound to say that my early popularity had its problematic aspects, because I was bombarded with a confusing multiplicity of views on the subject, being a Blessed One to a guru under a tap, a voyeur to Lila Sabarmati; in the eyes of Nussie-the-duck I was a rival, and a more successful rival to her own Sonny (although, to her credit, she never showed her resentment, and asked to borrow me just like everyone else); to my two-headed mother I was all kinds of babyish things — they called me joono-moono, and putch-putch, and little-piece-of-the-moon. (Rushdie, Midnight, p.130)

Saleem is not a still point at the centre of this confusing array of attempts at definition. Rather, Saleem is a dialogic site, a container for a 'confusing multiplicity of views' that are in a mutable relationship with one another. Adulthood provides no diminution of Saleem's ontological debate, as the number of personalities within him expands with each newly introduced dialogic element. Even his name ceases to be a monologic source of reference detached from dialogic activity:

Our names contain our fates; living as we do in a place where names have not acquired the meaninglessness of the West, and are still more than mere sounds, we are also victims of our titles. Sinai contains Ibn Sina, master magician, Sufi adept; and also Sin the moon, the ancient god of Hadramaut, with his own mode of connection, his powers of action-at-a-distance upon the tides of the world. But Sin is also the letter S, as sinuous as a snake; serpents lie coiled within the name. And there is also the accident of transliteration — Sinai, when in Roman script, though not in Nastaliq, is also the name of the place-of-revelation, of put-off-thy-shoes, of commandments and golden calves; but when all that is said and done; when Ibn Sinai is forgotten and the moon has set; when snakes lie hidden and revelations end, it is the name of the desert — of barrenness, infertility, dust; the name of the end. (Rushdie, Midnight, p.305)

Postmodernists and deconstructionists may see in this passage a formal confirmation of the inclusion of Midnight's Children into the category of the postmodern, an inclusion supported elsewhere by Rushdie's statement of theoretical empathy with the likes of Lyotard, Rorty and Foucault. Saleem's exposition of the various potential meanings in his name suggests an allegiance with deconstruction's insistence on the loss of a permanent, metaphysical signified. Saleem's name, and identity, shifts amongst a plethora of cultural and linguistic material that would find its only cessation in death, the desert. By implication, it is in the monological conclusion of epistemological mutability that life is negated, life both real and metaphorical. Thus when Saleem is concussed by the silver spittoon during the bombing of Pakistan, the subsequent loss of all previous history and influences and his restoration 'to innocence
and purity' (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p.343) results in his becoming the unthinking Buddha and the human tracker for the persecution units of West Pakistan. It would seem that Rushdie fears conclusion and the absence of mutability because of the physical and ontological violence implicit in metanarrative philosophy.

And yet, despite Rushdie's evident promotion of pluralism, I do not concede that this makes him classifiable as a postmodernist writer. I return to my argument that Rushdie's compatibility with Bakhtin's theory of the self and the dialogic has little to do with postmodernism. As should have become apparent by my insistence on Rushdie and Bakhtin as sociological writers, the key difference between Bakhtin's dialogic and postmodern deconstruction is that Bakhtin does not relinquish the acceptance of determinable presence and social reality, even though those meanings and realities are mutable. The sociological grounding of Bakhtin's theories results in an understanding of meaning as a communal product which lays a genuine claim to reality within the 'normative' elements of a community group:

Each individual creative act, each utterance, is idiosyncratic and unique, but each utterance contains elements identical with elements in other utterances of the given speech group. And it is precisely these factors – the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical factors that are identical and therefore normative for all utterances – that insure the unity of a given language and its comprehension by all the members of a given community (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, *Marxism*, from Morris, *Reader*, pp.26-7)

Though Voloshinov/Bakhtin may be rather overstating the case when insisting on an 'identical' and 'normative' core to speech, their argument is valuable on two counts. Firstly, linguistic meaning is rooted in the social experience of a particular community; it is not free-floating or absent. Secondly, the dialogic is compatible with 'the unity of a given language and its comprehension by all the members' because meaning mutates in accordance with contextual/linguistic shifts in the actual life of that community. Thus meaning remains in connection with a reality comprised of both individual perception and sociological condition. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist
argue that it is Bakhtin's firm grip on the social that contrasts him with the deconstructionist:

A close bond exists between the sense that I have of myself as a unique being and the being of my language. This view, with its heavy investment in the personhood of individuals, is deeply implicated in the Western humanist tradition. It is at the opposite pole from another current view of language, called 'Deconstructionist,' which holds that no one owns meaning. The very conception of meaning, to say nothing of persons, invoked in traditional epistemologies begins by illicitly assuming a presence, whose end Nietzsche announced when he let it be known that God had died in history. Bakhtin holds the contrary view that we own meaning, or if we do not own it, we may at least rent meaning. Personalists maintain that the source of meaning is in the unique individual. Deconstructionists locate meaning in the structure of the general possibility of difference underlying all particular differences. Bakhtin roots meaning in the social.17 Clark and Holquist distinguish Bakhtin from deconstruction through the issue of the ownership of meaning. Bakhtin suggests that we possess, or 'rent', meaning, because the fact that we forge linguistic cohesion in a socio-ideological community means that our sense of meaning has a purchase in the reality of our social context. This meaning is in a constant dialogic flux, but the debate will always move in relation to the social foundation or the physical consequences of altering that foundation.18 The virtue of Bakhtin's theory is that it manages to admit pluralism and flux without consigning meaning to infinite play, absence or trace. Meaning and reality are very much presences in Bakhtin's work alongside an implicit urging of the reader to embrace this fact and look upon the dialogic as a perspective through which to recreate the world.19 From being a process, dialogism becomes an attitude that responds to all utterances as moments of social importance, even as it cautions against the 'monologic' word.

Rushdie fits into this scheme in several distinct ways. Whereas postmodernism in a sense pre-judges multiple perspectives on reality as indicating the absence of sure meaning, Rushdie seems more intent on showing the concreteness of different realities in their social and narrative context.20 As we saw with Saleem's telepathic inhabitations, each individual reality was linked to definite relations of power, social positioning and cultural inheritance. While Rushdie does expose the way that
ideologies and mythologies shift and change, he equally demonstrates that these shifts are located in some externality and cultural locale. This is acutely evident in Saleem's frustrated attempts to organise the Midnight Children's Conference into a unified body. The more Saleem seeks a common purpose out of the MCC, the more he is confronted by incompatible voices that speak from different communal realities:

[Among the philosophies and aims suggested were collectivism — 'We should all get together and live somewhere, no? What would we need from anyone else?' — and individualism — 'You say we; but we together are unimportant; what matters is that each of us has a gift to use for his or her own good' — filial duty — 'However we can help our father-mother, that is what it is for us to do' — and infant revolution — 'Now at last we must show all kids that it is possible to get rid of parents!' — capitalism — 'Just think what business we could do! How rich, Allah, we could be!' (Rushdie, Midnight, p.228)

The list of alternatives for the Midnight's Children goes on until they become, in Saleem's words, 'the essence of multiplicity' (Rushdie, Midnight, p.229). From this blurring into a representation of pluralism I would not argue, however, that Rushdie consigns the MCC to the postmodern condition. By making the connection between individual voices and their representative schools of thought, Rushdie extends beyond the individual to the communal context. It is precisely because of the ideological context, because the voices already have social/philosophical locations, that the MCC struggles for unity; its dialogic activity must negotiate distinct socio-economic roots. Rushdie seems to be saying that reality does not go away just because some of us recognise many versions of it. Hence Saleem can never escape participation in political violence or national conflict, because his perceptions are always in dialogue with those of others who perpetrate such terror and dissension. More than anything, Rushdie indicates that no man is an island.

What is the message that emerges from Saleem's fragmented, comprehensive and disorganised narrative? Taking a negative perspective, one could read Midnight's Children as the inevitable failure of a secular, pluralistic project in the Indian
subcontinent because of incommensurable political, religious and social realities. The character of Shiva would be the most memorable figurehead of this reading, denying as he does the existence of any ‘third principle’ above ‘money-and-poverty, and have-and-lack, and right and left’ (Rushdie, *Midnight*, p.255). In this dualistic world, all that exists is a conflictual and Darwinistic state of affairs that swamps the weaker voices of moderation and tolerance with the voices of the powerful. Bakhtin himself, for all his optimistic attitude towards dialogism, understood that power and hierarchy drew forth very present dangers in the transfer of communication and meaning. Yet there is another way of reading the novel. Bakhtin’s reasons for celebrating dialogism centred upon two factors: 1) human beings can take a certain responsibility for constructing society because meaning is produced somewhere between social conditions and individual creativity; and 2) the acceptance of heteroglossia as opposed to monologic systems of meaning produces ‘the conditions for the possibility of a free consciousness’ (Morris, *Reader*, p.16). Both of these benefits result from the dialogic liberation from ideological slavery. Several critics have, with some justification, pointed to such arguments as recklessly optimistic, even naive. However, moving my argument on somewhat, such social sanguinity has a peculiar relevance to what can be seen as the ethical politics motivating Rushdie’s work, a politics that makes some surprising engagements with the language of faith.

**Rushdie’s transcendent aesthetic**

In his essay ‘Is Nothing Sacred’, Rushdie embarks on a quest to achieve what he terms ‘a secular definition of transcendence’, a quest motivated by speculation on whether art can act as ‘the third principle between the material and spiritual worlds’ (Rushdie, *Homelands*, p.420). His answer to this speculation is an emphatic ‘yes’, and he
proceeds to give a quite mystical clarification of what he understands as constituting
the transcendent:

What I mean by transcendence is that flight of the human spirit outside the confines of its
material, physical existence which all of us, secular or religious, experience on at least a few
occasions. Birth is a moment of transcendence which we spend our lives trying to understand.
The exaltation of the act of love, the experience of joy and very possibly the moment of death
are other such moments. The soaring quality of transcendence, the sense of being more than
oneself, of being in some way joined to the whole of life, is by its nature short-lived. Not even
the visionary or mystical experience lasts very long. It is for art to capture that experience, to
offer it to, in the case of literature, its readers; to be, for a secular, materialist culture, some
sort of replacement for what the love of god offers in the world of faith. (Rushdie, Homelands,
p.421)

This little quoted passage contains ideas that could question either wholly or in part
much of the content of Rushdie criticism, and also forge an important link with the
Bakhtinian optimism which we have just noted. Rushdie describes the capacity for
the 'human spirit' to momentarily lift out of the immediate experiential context in a
holistic epiphany of the nature of life and being. Rushdie does not argue, like Bakhtin,
that a person can attain a totally free consciousness; he has too firm a grip on the
manifestations of cultural coercion to go that far. Yet Rushdie's vision of the role of
art as the preserver of the transcendent experience has interesting connections with
that liberating goal of Bakhtinian dialogism.

Bakhtin sees the dialogic, of which art (particularly the novel) is the most
prominent medium, as leading to liberation from monologism. This liberation consists
in being able to possess the process of meaning and somehow raise oneself above the
snares of ideological imprisonment. Like Rushdie in the quotation above, Bakhtin
presumes that human beings can partly or temporarily detach themselves from their
environment and somehow see the whole of a landscape instead of the part which they
immediately inhabit. I would suggest that Midnight's Children and the majority of
Rushdie's work contains an excessive dialogical element as a way of reproducing this
transcendent experience while remaining attached to social realities. The dialogic
interaction taking place within Saleem Sinai enables him, and us as readers, to experience the ‘freedom’ of seeing the social constructs that comprise the Indian subcontinent. Rushdie and Bakhtin share the attempt to provide a vantage point over monological narratives and, by implication, draw the reader into a detached ethical consciousness of ideology and power. Both Bakhtin and Rushdie cling closely to social realities, but they also attempt to show that being aware of dialogicity produces a liberty to discover the fullness of oneself as a human being and the capacity to generate more humane systems of meaning. Of course, this is a position fraught with dangers, and Rushdie makes clear how easy it is to construct one’s own monologisms or be ‘trampled’ into ‘specks of voiceless dust’ (Rushdie, *Midnight*, p.463). But always at the heart of Rushdie’s fiction is the sense that the permission to speak and the acceptance of dialogic identity and politics is a definite hope for valuing individuality and generating acceptance. This blend of social realism and human creativity, of multiple voices and overarching metanarratives, is a much more convincing fictional strategy than the abstract encounter with otherness, not least for the fact that Rushdie maintains our responsibility to concrete situations. Other postmodern writers, as we have seen, can lead us away from the confidence in meaning and presence and place us in a thematic wilderness of mystical non-action. Rushdie, though engaging centrally with the theme of religious belief, does not draw us into a vague negative mysticism. It is to the whole debate of Rushdie’s exposition of religion in *The Satanic Verses* that I shall turn now. For I would argue that Rushdie does not set up religion to be simply knocked down by a secular aggression towards metaphysical narratives — my argument is almost the opposite of that. In Rushdie’s fictional worlds, religion not only exercises massive psychological magnetism, but it is also essential in evoking his transcendent aesthetics, revaluing
ideas of human spirituality, and developing non-secular resistances to authoritarian and oppressive architectures of language.

The Satanic Verses and the politics of faith

The Satanic Verses is now Rushdie's most famous novel, though unfortunately not primarily because of its literary merit. The violent reception of the book by large sections of the international Muslim community, fuelled a turbulent debate on the relationship between literary representation and social interpretation, especially on the possibilities of discourse between apparently incommensurable value systems. Amongst the many things swept to one side in the furore was what I shall go on to describe as the spiritual politics of Rushdie's work. For it is my argument that far from simply parodying religion's social and theological expressions, The Satanic Verses is a novel that also advocates spirituality as an essential factor in a humane ethics and an important corrective to the domination of secular materialism. Granted, Rushdie is no writer of religious orthodoxy. But, as his public conversion to Islam indicates, the world of faith holds a powerful draw on Rushdie that emerges through a peculiar and invigorating blend of the sacred and the secular.

Prior to his 1990 conversion to a certain level of Muslim orthodoxy, Rushdie balanced his non-religious position with a firm scepticism towards any theory that sought to sound the death knell of the divine. Returning to his essay 'Is Nothing Sacred', we see Rushdie countering William H. Gass's unrepresentative and smug exposition on the finality of God's demise with a broadening of cultural perspective:

I have some difficulty with the uncompromising bluntness of this obituary notice. It has always been clear to me that god is unlike human beings in that it can die, so to speak, in parts. In other parts, for example India, God continues to flourish, in literally thousands of forms. So that if I speak of living after his death, I am speaking in a limited, personal sense.[.] (Rushdie, Homelands, p.417)
We have already witnessed the way that Rushdie insists on situating ideology within cultural realities, and here we see him firmly relativise his own lack of religious faith with the reality of the divine for large sections of the world’s population. To say that God is dead, Rushdie seems to argue, can repeat the intellectually patronising attitude of imperialism by judging the reality of others as of a somehow rationally substandard quality. However, Rushdie goes much further than just saying that the author of fiction must be capable of *faithfully* representing the world of the believer. Later in the essay, Rushdie develops a series of aesthetic ideas which not only misalign him with postmodern ideas, but also distinguish him from those writers whose metaphysical imagery, as we have seen, results in a distancing from adequate social representation and an unwitting advocacy of capitalist materialism.

Much of ‘Is Nothing Sacred’ develops an impassioned statement of the democratic function of the novel, after which Rushdie briefly engages with the literary theory of Carlos Fuentes. It is here that Rushdie touches upon the deepest sentiments of his own literary practice. For Fuentes, says Rushdie:

> poses the question I have been asking myself throughout my life as a writer: *Can the religious mentality survive outside of religious dogma and hierarchy?* Which is to say: Can art be the third principle that mediates between the spiritual and the material worlds; might it, by ‘swallowing’ both worlds, offer us something new—something that might even be called a secular definition of transcendence?

> I believe it can. I believe it must. And I believe that, at its best, it does. (Rushdie, *Homelands*, p.420)

The two poles of Rushdie’s theory are ‘the spiritual and material worlds’, poles which become hegemonic and oppressive if they become absolutes within themselves. Instead, Rushdie desires a ‘third principle’ to provide what is in effect a synthetic middle, able to regulate the dialogic interaction between the oppositions of the physical and metaphysical. This middle, this zone of dialogic moderation, Rushdie labels the ‘religious mentality’, which is, as we have seen, a mentality that seeks
through such things as art and literature an encounter with transcendence. Yet this transcendence is not simply a momentary step outside of experiential consciousness. Rushdie's reference to the transcendent as 'some sort of replacement for what the love of god offers in the world of faith' (Rushdie, Homelands, p.421), suggests it is more than psychological illumination. The love of god tends to represent, for the believer, a redemptive possibility (or promise) and a non-material context for the interpretation of the traumas and joys of existence. Rushdie's wholly un-postmodern 'transcendence' is a move 'beyond dogma' into a place where the full content of human personality has the room to move and question itself partially outside of its context and thus, like Bakhtin's 'free consciousness', is able to attain a manner of redemption from monologic slavery. It is vital to a sound interpretation of Rushdie's work to bring this spiritual aspiration into the critical equation and to realise that for Rushdie, religion gestures towards essential principles of human contentment and self-comprehension.

Just how essential can be seen in Rushdie's following valuation of historical religion:

It is important that we understand how profoundly we all feel the needs that religion, down the ages, has satisfied. I would suggest that these needs are of three types: firstly, the need to be given an articulation of our half-glimpsed knowledge of exaltation, of awe, of wonder; life is an awesome experience, and religion helps us understand why life so often makes us feel small, by telling us what we are smaller than; and contrariwise, because we also have a sense of being special, of being chosen, religion helps us by telling us what we have been chosen by, and what for. Secondly, we need answers to the unanswerable: How did we get here? How did 'here' get here in the first place? Is this, this brief life, all there is? How can it be? What would be the point of that? And thirdly, we need codes to live by, 'rules for every damn thing'. The idea of god is at once a repository for our awestruck wonderment at life and an answer to the great questions of existence, and rule book, too. The soul needs all these explanations — not simply rational explanations, but explanations of the heart. (Rushdie, Homelands, p.421)

The sermonic overtones of this passage help us to contextualise Rushdie's later spiritual conversion. Yet apart from filling out a chronology of Rushdie's religious life, this passage presents several themes vital to the exposition of his work. For Rushdie, the 'religious mentality', the 'third principle' and the 'transcendent', all seem to denote a desire to preserve human experience as an irreducible quality by
accepting the partial ability to question life from outside its material surroundings. Religious sentiment, Rushdie explains, already has the philosophical vehicle for making this step. Furthermore, Rushdie argues that 'rational explanations', the explanations that Rushdie appears to group with 'secular materialism', are inadequate by themselves. On the foundation of these contentions, Rushdie's literary project appears to be not the rejection of materialism or metaphysics, but the attempt to capture the humanistic elements of religion in a principle that ethically and aesthetically mediates between the physical and the spiritual. Thus when Rushdie refers to 'people's spiritual needs' (Rushdie, Homelands, p.422), he turns attention towards abstract human requirements that only a certain kind of religiosity can satisfy. Postmodernism itself has attempted to provide this religiosity in its language of sublimity and negation. In so doing, postmodernism builds its project upon metaphysics, though its insistence on indeterminacy and deferral has made a metaphysics of limited options when it comes to matters of social interpretation.

With Rushdie the social possibilities are somewhat broader. I am not claiming that Rushdie advocates the primacy of the metaphysical over the physical. I am suggesting though, that metaphysics and materialism are equal bedfellows in Rushdie's ethical and political strategies and he seems to feel that each must be present to assure an ethical mode of dialogue that blends the social with the individual. Rushdie's search for a religious mentality 'beyond dogma' in his fiction, is an attempt to find a politics of human spirituality in which the transcendent becomes a corrective balance to the monologic qualities of secular materialism. In The Satanic Verses, we will see Rushdie's most determined creative visualisation of these dialogic ground rules. For alongside a genuine critique of religious intolerance, Rushdie uses the Islamic faith to demonstrate the ethical transcendent within material history.
A common critical opinion of *The Satanic Verses* is that it is a novel that wrenches the sacred into the secular. A very partial selection from Rushdie's critical essays would ostensibly provide some first-hand evidence to support this opinion, though Rushdie's statements of his secular location are usually followed by assurances that *The Satanic Verses* 'is by no means always hostile to faith' (Rushdie, *Homelands*, p.396). All too often, *The Satanic Verses* is cast as a novel that has moved away from the possibility of faith in a secular world. Opinions as to the level of commitment to secularism vary. Stephanie Newell sees *The Satanic Verses* as 'a secularised version of Islam' that deconstructs all tropes of omniscience, whatever their bias. Timothy Brennan argues that giving a critical priority to the Islamic theme in *The Satanic Verses* is somewhat misplaced, because the novel is actually more concerned with the conditions of secular England than with theological ruminations. At the extremity of opinion about Rushdie's secular credentials is Pierre François (whom I will examine later in more detail), who theorises *The Satanic Verses* as Rushdie's almost hateful rejection of religious transcendence and equally vigorous espousal of a materialist philosophy.

I would argue that situating Rushdie purely within a secular outlook is a mistake of some breadth, not only because of Rushdie's suspicion of secular versions of reality, but also because of his empathy with theological transcendence as a way of reaffirming individualistic politics. In a recent discussion, Rushdie is very clear about his position on secularism when questioned whether he envisaged the possibility of secular Islamic states:

> First of all, can I say I don't think secularism is any kind of magic wand. I think there are examples right now of the failure of secularism. I think one of the places you could point to is Algeria. It's possible to say that the reason why people went rushing towards the FIS was because of the bankruptcy and corruption and failure of the old secularist ruling classes. So, I don't see it as some kind of automatic good, because there are plenty of secular societies which are corrupt and immoral.
Rushdie is keen to distance himself from an automatic allegiance to the secular by illustrating how it shares the same vulnerabilities of any system of social organisation. Rather than targeting a specific object for vilification, Rushdie seems to operate a critical principle of exposing any system, religious or secular, that operates through unjust or oppressive hegemonies. Thus religion is by no means the primary object of Rushdie’s dissent, as he makes clear in an interview for Channel Four’s Bandung File:

> It seems to me completely legitimate that there should be dissent from orthodoxy, not just about Islam, but about anything - from Conservative politics, that's a kind of orthodoxy under which we all live at the moment, it's important that there should be dissent from that. If radical politics were the orthodoxy in this country I think it would be important that there should be dissent from that too. (Appignanesi and Maitland, Rushdie File, p.29)

Rushdie’s advocacy of a critical politics is non-exclusive; all social phenomena come under its remit. This simple point is important because it exempts religion from being the centre at which Rushdie fires all his critical arrows. More particularly, we can start to free Rushdie’s treatment of faith from being emblematic only of totalisation. As I shall now argue, the representation of Islam in *The Satanic Verses* is as much about celebrating religious/humanistic transcendence (defined according to Rushdie’s terms) as it is about a Foucauldian stripping away of the media of power.

Before turning to such positive elements of Rushdie’s religiosity, acknowledgement must be given to what cautions, concerns and protests Rushdie does level against spiritual ideologies and theocratic societies. By historicising the genesis and early days of the Islamic faith in *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie is able to depict the passage that religion can take from an individualistic, experimental spirituality interacting with its environment, to a theological monolith that stifles creativity and plurality. In a broad reflection upon theocratic nations, *The Satanic Verses* shows the suppressions that can become endemic when church and state form an imperious One.
Through the world of Gibreel Farishta’s dreams, we are treated to a replaying of Muhammed’s receipt of the divine revelation through the Archangel Gibreel. About the status of this dream-history I shall say more later, but Rushdie clearly passes thematic comment upon the way that the incipient Islam expands to exercise an all-pervasive repressive influence. We are first introduced to the figure of Mahound as the leader of a small and alienated religious group in the city of Jahilia, the city’s name meaning the ignorance of the pre-Islamic period as defined by Muslim theology. Mahound is intent on converting Jahilia from its polytheistic brand of religion to the monotheistic worship of Allah, an intention that brings him into friction with Abu Simel, the Grandee of Jahilia, who considers the adaptability of polytheism as much more conducive to State survival and social contentment. Though the political ruthlessness of Abu Simel generates little endearment to his ideology, his fears of Mahound’s growing significance are sympathetically echoed within the politics of the novel. When the State poet, Baal, attempts to reassure Abu Simel of Mahound’s insignificant following, the Grandee is little comforted:

No, Abu Simel reflects, the boy Baal was wrong, these men are worth our time. Why do I fear Mahound? For that: one, one, one, his terrifying singularity. Whereas I am always divided, always two or three or fifteen. [. . .] What kind of idea am I? I bend. I sway. I calculate the odds, trim my sails, manipulate, survive.29

What kind of idea am I? This question, either literally or implicitly, is the novel’s key refrain. For Abu Simel, it is the monologic focus of Mahound’s beliefs that he finds so disturbing, the way that malleability becomes anathema and that change according to fortune is prohibited. Abu Simel’s strength is located in his recognition of historical temporality and local contrast, and as such he is able to be ‘divided’ amongst multiple personalities and needs. Alternatively, Mahound’s strength is in his (initially only perceived) permanence and his restrictions upon diversity and change. Mahound’s religion is in direct contrast to Rushdie’s recommended ‘theology of doubt’
(Appignanesi and Maitland, *Rushdie File*, p.29), as it disallows the presence of questioning and open difference. We can thus say that Rushdie sees a psychological limitation and ideological violence inherent in religious fundamentalism. Such potentials are clearly represented in the figure of the Iman, an exiled ruler from the Middle East who, while living out his exile in contemporary London, dreams of returning and imposing the tight boundaries of Islamic rule. The Iman espouses a vitriolic hatred of temporality and history, instead eulogising the static commandments of Koranic revelation:

> History is the blood-wine that must no longer be drunk. History the intoxicant, the creation and possession of the Devil, of the great Shaitan, the greatest of the lies — progress, science, rights — against which the Iman has set his face. History is a deviation from the Path, knowledge is a delusion, because the sum of knowledge was complete on the day Allah finished his revelation to Mahound.

(Rushdie, *Verses*, p.210)

The bedevilled history against which the Iman is implacably opposed represents in his eyes the denial of the complete and eternal Word of God. Conceptual foundations of the West — 'progress, science, rights' — mean nothing to the Iman except corruption and ephemerality.

Under the shadow of fundamentalism, *The Satanic Verses* reconstructs the origins of Koranic revelation, if only through the dream landscapes of Gibreel Farishta as he pursues his delusional life in the English capital. Through this reimagining of Islamic history, Rushdie unsettles the notions of scriptural permanence implicit in some, but not all, Muslim theologies. For Mahound's handling of the early revelations from Gibreel is beset by vacillations over the correspondence between his revelatory material and his desired social effect, especially in his ambiguous rationalisation of the Satanic Verses themselves. These verses, which proclaim the inclusion of three female deities from Jahilia in an Islamic pantheon, are accepted then later rejected as proceeding from Satan rather than Allah. Mahound's internal debates, leading up to
the initial public affirmation of the verses, disrupt the assurance in divine, infallible truth when the time, place and society of Jahilia intrude into Mahound's deliberations.

Lat, Manat, Uzza... can I call them angelic? Gibreel, have you got sisters? Are these the daughters of God? And he castigates himself, O my vanity, I am an arrogant man, is this weakness, is it just a dream of power? Must I betray myself for a seat on the council? Is this sensible and wise or is it hollow and self-loving? I don't even know if the Grandee is sincere. Does he know? Perhaps not even he. I am weak and he's strong, the offer gives him many ways of ruining me. But I, too, have much to gain. The souls of the city, of the world, surely they are worth three angels? Is Allah so unbending that he will not embrace three more to save the human race? — I don't know anything. — Should God be proud or humble, majestic or simple, yielding or un-? What kind of idea is he? What kind am I? (Rushdie, Verses, p.111)

At this moment when God's identity seems suspended and obscured, when Mahound attempts to balance practical social conditions with his religious message, the dangers of authoritarian and repressive narratives are somewhat refused by the mixing of human doubts with spiritual concerns. The value of this moment is that unlike the Iman's desire to purge history from religion, here Mahound's faith is intricately intertwined with historical conditions. Owing to such a positioning, Mahound's consciousness is circumspect and self-conscious, considering his own location in relation to others as an important part of the spiritual equation. The same effect is achieved when the scribe Salman later slips his own variations into Mahound's dictation of the Koran, variations which go unnoticed for some time. By destabilising the Word through words and placing it in an ambiguous status between God and man, the novel seeks to relocate religious sentiments and revelations beyond the autocratic and atemporal. The consequences of failure to achieve this condition are most visibly depicted in Mahound's later return to Jahilia in 'the Name of the Most High, the Destroyer of Men' (Rushdie, Verses, p.373). The effect on Jahilia, usually a place of vital, interactive commerce, is one of dreadful psychological austerity:

The city of Jahilia was no longer built of sand. That is to say, the passage of the years, the sorcery of the desert wind, the petrifying moon, the forgetfulness of the people and the inevitability of a process had hardened the town, so that it had lost its old, shifting, provisional quality of a mirage in which men could live, and become a prosaic place, quotidian and (like its poets) poor. Mahound's arm had grown long; his power had encircled Jahilia, cutting off its
life blood, its pilgrims and caravans. The fairs of Jahilia, these days, were pitiful to behold. (Rushdie, Verses, pp.259-60)

The monologic theology eventually adopted by Mahound operates through a severe limitation of cultural diversity. The carnivalesque and fluid nature of Jahilia’s social and commercial life grinds to a halt under the imposition of a dogma that disallows ideologies not aligned with the fundamentalist creed. Rushdie’s emphasis on the crushing effects of the ‘prosaic’ and ‘quotidian’ explains the authoritarian metanarrative as a clamp upon the imaginative faculties and, by implication, social creativity and liberty.

So Rushdie’s warning about fundamentalist religion is emphatic: once revelation is detached from the uncertainties of its human origins, then it becomes a monologic repression that negates plurality and mutability. Yet from this warning we must be cautious about establishing general relations between Rushdie’s strategies of literary disruption and his overall perspective on religion. On such critic who makes this mistake on an impressive scale is Pierre François in his essay ‘Salman Rushdie’s Philosophical Materialism in The Satanic Verses’. Associating himself, and Rushdie, with a tradition of materialist philosophers such as Feuerbach, Comte and Sponville, François argues that The Satanic Verses sets up a dialectical process in which the material clashes with the spiritual before finally triumphing in the last chapter when Saladin Chamcha is reunited with his father and native India, and when the neurotic and fragmented Gibreel Farishta commits suicide.

My contention is that ‘counterpoint’ is a structural scaffolding erected by Rushdie to, ironically, bolster up an idealist line of thought which he detests, whilst ‘dialectic’ is his material-grounded device for, first undermining idealism (in the first eight chapters) and, secondly, expunging it (in chapter 9) from the novel’s fabric. (François, ‘Materialism’, p.305)

François’ application of the dialectic is almost the exact opposite to my claims for it in this chapter. Whereas I argue for the dialectic as Rushdie’s means of engendering a
humanistic 'transcendent' between the material and the spiritual, François sees the dialectic as relentlessly moving towards the eradication of faith and idealism.

François cites as proof for his argument the episode in the novel where the orphan girl Ayesha leads a group of pilgrims towards Mecca, a pilgrimage that terminates in the drowning of the faithful after they walk into the Red Sea believing that it will part for them. For François, this act is Rushdie's exposé of religion's delusional mind set and of a certain psychology that involves a 'withdrawal from life into dreams of liberating death' (François, 'Materialism', p.313). Yet with some close examination of the episode in question, François' argument seems erroneous in the extreme. Far from exemplifying a dialectic 'God-bashing' (François, 'Materialism', p.318), the depiction of Ayesha's pilgrimage seems to be more involved in cautioning against an over-materialist interpretation of events. A key moment comes after the pilgrims have drowned themselves and detectives are sent in to unpack the sequence of events and reduce that sequence to a forensic explanation. Yet however materially conclusive the physical evidence seems to be, the detectives are still disquieted by the testimony of the few surviving pilgrims:

Sri Srinivas, too, swore by the goddess Lakshmi that he had seen the parting of the Arabian sea; and by the time the detectives got to Mrs Quereshi, they were utterly unnerved, because they knew that it was impossible for the men to have cooked up the same story together. Mishal's mother, the wife of the great banker, told the same story in her own words. 'Believe don't believe,' she finished emphatically, 'but what my eyes have seen my tongue repeats.'

Goosepimply CID men attempted the third degree: 'Listen, Sarpanch, don't shit from your mouth. So many were there, nobody saw these things. Already the drowned bodies are floating to shore, swollen like balloons and stinking like hell. If you go on lying we will take you and stick your nose in the truth.'

'You can show me whatever you want,' Sarpanch Muhammed Din told his interrogators. 'But I still saw what I saw.' (Rushdie, Verses, pp.504-5)

Typical of much of his treatment of the miraculous, Rushdie is at pains to unsettle an overtly materialistic interpretation of religious events. From the defence of the MCC's supernatural gifts in Midnight's Children, through the clairvoyance of the police chief Talvar Ulhaq in Shame, to the physical transformation of Saladin
Chamcha in *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie provides a balance of realist and metaphysical evidence that dilutes materialist interpretations and leaves the spiritual world intact as the reality of others. Thus the CID men are confronted with the fact that ‘it was impossible for the men to have cooked up the same story together’, an evidential detail that binds them into a ‘goosepimply’ half-world somewhere between the material and the metaphysical. By creating such ambiguity, Rushdie also evokes his literary transcendent in a situation that must alternate its reasoning between contextual inside and spiritual outside.

Contrary to Françoís’ argument, the Ayesha episode is Rushdie’s attempt to dialectically move beyond *any* form of reductionism into an aesthetic transcendent which affirms the material, but also ‘transcends’ it in a religious moment which is, because of its strangeness, ‘beyond dogma’. The magic realism of Rushdie’s writing is an arena for the dialectical encounter between radically different worlds, yet the ground rules for the performance of the dialectic seem to be a belief that the material and transcendent must be in equal balance for the synthesis to be a non-oppressive one.

Even in the last chapter of *The Satanic Verses*, which Françoís imagines as driving the last nail into the coffin of faith, there are voices that preserve the metaphysical/material blend essential to resist repressive hegemonic poles. One such voice is that of the poet Bhupen, who in defence against Swatilekha’s theory of ‘grand narratives’ protests that religion should not be reduced to a simple ideological tyranny:

> But these narratives are being manipulated by the theocracy and various political elements in an entirely retrogressive way.’ Bhupen said: ‘We can’t deny the ubiquity of faith. If we write in such a way as to pre-judge such belief as in some way deluded or false, then are we not guilty of elitism, of imposing our world-view on the masses?’ Swatilekha was scornful. ‘Battle lines are being drawn up in India today,’ she cried. ‘Secular versus religious, the light versus the dark. Better you choose which side you are on.’ (Rushdie, *Verses*, p.537)

Swatilekha’s either/or positioning is exactly what Rushdie assaults throughout *The Satanic Verses*. Bhupen’s argument is that religion is not an unwelcome bolt-on extra
to a natural secularism, but is the reality of Indian culture and psychology, a point which Rushdie repeatedly makes in *Shame*. Bhupen’s positioning against the aggressive dichotomisation proposed by Swatilekha aligns itself with Rushdie’s aversion to monologism and turns the last chapter away from the anti-idealism proposed by François. Even events such as the impending death of Saladin’s father, which draws Saladin back into the world of his original cultural and national roots, directly evoke sentiments that cannot be wholly reduced to socio-economic factors or examples of national situation:

Salahuddin [. . .] marvelled, also, at how beautifully everyone behaved in the presence of the dying man: the young spoke to him intimately about their lives, as if reassuring him that life itself was invincible, offering him the rich consolation of being a member of the great procession of the human race, — while the old evoked the past, so that he knew that nothing was forgotten, nothing lost; that in spite of the years of self-imposed sequestration he remained joined to the world. Death brought out the best in people; it was good to be shown — Salahuddin realized — that this, too, was what human beings were like: considerate, loving, even noble. We are still capable of exaltation, he thought in a celebratory mood; in spite of everything, we can still transcend. (Rushdie, *Verses*, p.527)

Remembering Rushdie’s definition of the transcendent as ‘the sense of being more than oneself, of being in some way joined to the whole of life’, an experience which he also speculates as occurring at the moment of death, we can read Saladin’s ponderings on death as significant within Rushdie’s artistic philosophy. Saladdin perceives a sense of holism and community, an ability to ‘transcend’ the ideological apparatus in which human identity is frequently imprisoned. Again, I repeat my contention that this emphasis on transcendence does not mean a dismissal of the significance of the material and the social. What Rushdie seems uniquely able to achieve throughout many of his works, is the emphasis on social and spiritual needs as part of the same package, and the transcendent lies between these two poles as a potential aesthetic, even moral, bedrock for a balanced dialogicity.
What conclusions can we draw about Rushdie’s peculiar brand of Islam in The Satanic Verses? Firstly, I would argue that Rushdie historicises Islam by describing it in the fullness of its human, social and political origins. In so doing, the distance established between the human and divine is closed and a genuine dialogue can take place between apparently incommensurable worlds. Secondly, religion is a useful theme for presenting Rushdie’s definition of the transcendent. Through emphasising, not necessarily advocating, religious presence, Rushdie counteracts an exclusively materialist interpretation of his work and indicates that material considerations to a certain degree always involve metaphysical judgements. Thirdly, Rushdie wants to demarcate the religious urge in general from fundamentalist forms of faith in which the church and the state merge. His novels are by no means antagonistic to all faith, only towards faith that imprisons the dialogic process. What unites all three positions is not any latent association with negative theology. Instead, Rushdie tends more towards affirmative religion, for he sees the ideas of god and metaphysics as vital processes of realising social projects in metanarrative ideas. Without the spiritual, Rushdie appears to say, materialism would become too inhuman and without the material, the spiritual would become too purist.

The fact that all the Islamic passages in the novel are dreamed by the psychologically deteriorating Gibreel Farishta may attract the charge of over-interpretation to my basic arguments. Couldn’t it be said, as many have, that the dreams of angelic status suffered by Gibreel — dreams that lead to his suicide — are more especially about the fragmentation of the migrant psychology than a re-exploration of Islamic history? Certainly the confusion Gibreel experiences as divine messenger, plus the way that his cinematic background distorts his encounters with
Mahound, all suggest the output of a delusional mind. Yet Gibreel seems to represent more than purely his migrant disintegration.

Just as Gibreel and Saladin’s respective roles of angel and devil are shown to be far from watertight, thus denying the schismatic separation of good and evil, so Gibreel’s dreams disallow the detachment of faith from those who practice it. Rushdie has said that the intention behind the dream sequences ‘is not to vilify or “disprove” Islam, but to portray a soul in crisis, to show how the loss of God can destroy a man’s life’ (see Rushdie, Homelands, p.399). Rather than make an assault upon faith, Rushdie indicates that his goal is an insertion of the human into the religious without the human becoming the opponent of the religious. Remembering that Rushdie sees migrancy as a common human condition, Gibreel seems to have the role of writing migrancy into religion, making faith more universal by reinvestigating its humanity. Thus Gibreel’s dreams are able to attain a relevance apart from the confines of his specific visions. It is, in fact, because of Gibreel’s dreams that the novel is able to revalue religion by demonstrating faith as part of a human spirituality rather than being imposed on humans from without. In this technique of contextualising the religious, Rushdie saw little that was offensive:

The odd thing is that I didn’t think it was any kind of disrespect. In fact I thought of it as the opposite, as a way of making accessible and human something that was otherwise inaccessible and remote. Formulaic if you like. Putting it in a modern language, I think, was just a way of rethinking it, and clearly rethinking it was one of those things that I chose to do. (Rushdie, ‘Interview’, p.62)

Rushdie’s ‘rethinking’ of Islam transfers religion from the absolute to the comprehensible; thus, by projecting Islamic history through Gibreel’s dreams, the human and the fallible are accepted as participants in religion both at its source and in its subsequent practice. Though Rushdie is certainly on no proselytising mission, his rewriting of Islamic history in The Satanic Verses strives towards a dialogic style that...
asserts the importance of materiality and spirituality as a total package in forming a humane politics that understands its own limits. I have chosen to focus exclusively on Rushdie in my last chapter, because I believe that he, unlike many so-called postmodern authors, affirms a brand of spirituality that is firmly linked to the material world and the human, unlike the negative brand of theology that emerges from the metaphysical pursuit of alterity. His specialist sense of aesthetic transcendence does not seek to defer all meaning and render all things unstable under an ineffable difference. Instead, Rushdie seeks to ground his work in a dialogic play that affirms the necessity of spiritual and material needs as essential to the relevance and politics of that play.

If Rushdie is so keen on resisting the monologic, it might be argued that I am accrediting his work with a closure that he purposefully resists. I certainly concede that Rushdie is hostile to making meaning an ideological hostage set apart from change and fluidity. To strike a balance with Rushdie's fragments and multiplicities, however, we must do justice to his equal tendency towards confirming the necessity of acts of closure in narrative. In Midnight's Children Saleem's reflection that 'Everything has shape, if you look for it. There is no escape from form' (Rushdie, Midnight, p.226), comments on the way that Rushdie sees narrative and society locked into a continual act of developing forms and closures which give the world the shape of reality. This idea is also developed in Shame, most vividly illustrated in the influential narratives manufactured by Bariamma, Raza Hyder's grandmother and overseer of Bilquis Hyder's infidelity. The social myths that she spins are not mere stories to be responded to, but are somehow bound up with the creation of new social realities:
such stories, were the glue that held the clan together, binding the generations in webs of whispered secrets. Her story altered at first, in the retellings, but finally it settled down, and after that nobody, neither teller nor listener, would tolerate any deviation from the hallowed, sacred text. This was when Bilquis knew that she had become a member of the family; in the sanctification of her tale lay initiation, kinship, blood. 'The recounting of histories,' Raza told his wife, 'is for us a rite of blood.' (Rushdie, Shame, pp. 76-7)

Bariamma's stories transform themselves from being evolutionary narratives to being kinds of social scripture, reference points by which the individual is able to find wider location in a social milieu. Though there is undoubtedly a hint of hegemonic threat behind 'the hallowed, sacred text', Rushdie makes clear that social reality, in this case a family unit, is closed by specific acts of narration that become indistinguishable from actual material and cultural conditions. Moreover, while Rushdie's characters do attest to multiplicity and plurality, often they equally insist that closure is a social necessity that need not imply the end of social change and cultural possibility. This is realised by the mountaineer Allie Cone in The Satanic Verses, as she understands that her mystical encounter on Everest, an experience beyond all forms of representation, is in inadequate basis for living:

> You find the nothingness wrapping you up, like a sound. Non-being. You can't keep it up, of course. The world rushes in soon enough. What shuts you up is, I think, the sight you've had of perfection: why speak if you can't manage perfect thoughts, perfect sentences? It feels like a betrayal of what you've been through. But it fades; you accept that certain compromises, closures, are required if you're to continue. (Rushdie, Verses, p. 296)

Significantly, the act of closure here represents movement and temporality rather than a narrative imprisonment. Following her negative epiphany, Allie links 'compromises, closures' with the need to progress, the need to engage the world as it 'rushes in'.

What Allie, Saleem and Bariamma establish is that social engagement is an impossibility without an active centralisation of meaning. To be within a closed meaning does not axiomatically petrify reality's fluid shapes, though that is a danger. Rather, narrative and meaning have to have a certain centripetal force to provide the interface between language and decisive social action.
If we move to Rushdie's last novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, we can see the more visible links between Rushdie's acceptance of narrative closure and ethical responsibility. We saw in the case of Kurt Vonnegut how the mortal finality of death presents itself as an ethical confrontation. Similarly, *The Moor's Last Sigh* is a novel that uses death to demonstrate that meaning and narrative do have a very definite terminus in physical mortality, yet this end increases responsibility to the way that we use narratives. Like Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, the narrator of *The Moor's Last Sigh* knots narrative and existence together in very concrete bonds. The pages of the Moor's narrative litter the route by which he has escaped from his imprisonment in Vasco Miranda's fortress. The implication is that the end of the novel will be the moment when his murderous pursuers, who are following his literary trail, discover his whereabouts and end his life. Thus the novel is essentially a mortal script: the narrative's progression eats into the very life of the narrator. As the narrative extends its hold over the Moor's existence, he speculates increasingly on the fragility of the self and its relation to meaning. At the beginning of Chapter Four when Moraes ponders the strain of his asthmatic attempts to sleep, he equates his Being with the breath that only just sustains his life:

I am what breathes. I am what began long ago with an exhaled cry, what will conclude when a glass held to my lips remains clear. It is not thinking makes us so, but air. *Suspiro ergo sum.* I sigh, therefore I am. The Latin as usual tells us the truth: *suspirare = sub,* below, + *spirare,* verb, to breathe. 

*Suspiro:* I under breathe.

In the beginning and unto the end was and is the lung [ . . . ] and beyond the airless, silent void.36

The Moor's revision of Descartes realigns Being with respiration, with the fragility of the lung which is always under-breathing, hovering over its own collapse and the glass that will remain clear. The emphasis on mortality, however, is not the signal for a subjection to despair. Rushdie's preoccupation, similar to that contained in Derrida's
The Gift of Death, is in distinguishing our uniqueness, our individuality, because of our irreplaceable relationship with mortality. And like Derrida again, Rushdie extends the consciousness of mortality into moral responsibility. Thus the Moor realises that the ‘presence’ of death offers a demand on his, and our, responsibility:

A sigh isn’t just a sigh. We inhale the world and breathe out meaning. While we can. While we can. (Rushdie, Moor’s, p.54)

The Moor’s ethical statement moves from the individual lung to the collective breath. Death, one of Rushdie’s ‘transcendent’ moments, moves from personal implication to collective ethics by establishing responsibility for the meanings that we create and ‘breathe out’ into the world. Thus, throughout the novel, the Moor creates mottoes which unite the solitary responsibility towards life with the expectations of imminent demise: ‘I must live until I die’ (Rushdie, Moor’s, p.169), ‘So you made it today. Will you still be here tomorrow?’ (Rushdie, Moor’s, p.340). Under the conscious mortality of the narrator, the text becomes framed in the demise of the source and the existence of the text. This awareness is extended to reader responsibility by the recognition that our reading is enacted by the meanings that we produce under the recognition of death. Under the perspective of death, The Moor’s Last Sigh attests to the need for closure in a finite existence, the requirement for us to possess meaning while we have the breath to execute our responsibility. Significantly, it is in The Moor’s Last Sigh that we see moments where the pluralistic and open philosophy of postmodernity seems to attract direct criticism, or at least the suggestion that it contains its own world of crimes. Most prominently, the Moor considers the multi-dimensional and protean Uma Sarasvati to be a questioning of his secular pluralism:

It did not fail to occur to me – indeed, for a time it occupied most of my waking thoughts – that what had happened was, in a way, a defeat for the pluralistic philosophy on which we had all been raised. For in the matter of Uma Sarasvati it had been the pluralist Uma, with her multiple selves, her highly inventive commitment to the infinite malleability of the real, her
The manipulative opportunism of Uma raises the possibility that postmodern plurality is not an intrinsically more benign way of interacting with the world, but still stands or falls upon the closures it makes within its local areas of performance. By the time of the writing of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie appears to be less optimistic about the postmodern sensibility and more engaged with the issue of necessary closure that has always been important in his work. He by no means recommends overbearing narratives as political solutions, but the dialogic process in his writing has always implied that the clash of narratives is as much, if not more, a case of repackaging foundations as accepting the absence of foundations.

Through the application of the theme of death in his novels, Rushdie not only maintains the links with physical existence and metaphysical awareness that we have noticed throughout this chapter, but also directs our attentions to the responsibility we bear in generating meaning. Saladin Chamcha's devilish transformation in *The Satanic Verses*, resulting from the descriptive power of racist Britons, potently urges us to look at the nature of our metaphors and narratives. Meaning in Rushdie's novels does celebrate play and hybridity, but equally recognises that the things that we say and think frequently determine how society grounds its sense of reality. This is not to say that Rushdie's definition of self is of an unlimited creative power; this would be the subtext of the postmodern subject that I find most questionable. Rushdie moves outside postmodernism by insisting on the presence of different realities in definite social, political and spiritual conditions. Our narratives are in incessant dialogue with these conditions and we must simultaneously accept the roots of our own dialogic voice and the responsibilities of our contribution.
It is unfortunate that Rushdie’s constant interaction with theological ideas, religious history and mythical archetypes has been so often conflated with the postmodern project of assaulting metanarratives. By fixating on Rushdie as an iconoclast, much of the genuine political power of his spiritual content is overlooked. Rushdie’s deepening relationship with Islam is etched within the theme and fabric and his novels, especially in his attempt to weld the religious and the material into a distinct whole. Moreover, it has always seemed important to Rushdie to dismiss the simplicities spoken concerning religion in general. He has always pointed out that the West, in its obsessive demonisation of Islamic fundamentalism, has overlooked the sheer varieties of tolerant, pluralistic and philosophical Islam that exist throughout the world. Few critics have seen Rushdie’s use of Islamic motifs as a celebration of the Muslim community itself in all its shapes and contours. A notable exception is Feroza Jussawala, who claims that Rushdie embraces Islam in both his form and philosophy, though an Islam of the more fluid and self-questioning post-Mughal traditions. Jussawala goes on to argue that Islam’s plural and radical traditions question whether we are right to position Rushdie’s characters purely within the status of postcolonial, hybridised subject; this is a western appropriation of Indian historical experience. On the basis that ‘migration and hybridisation are not just conditions of recent postcoloniality’, Jussawala concludes that Rushdie’s evident parallels with the dastan, a ‘long-winded stream of consciousness tale’ from Urdu and Persian traditions, combined with a deep sense of problematic faith, makes The Satanic Verses a novel fundamentally located within Islam (Jussawala, ‘Dastan’, p.60). Rushdie’s abiding attachment to the spiritual life of India and the Middle East is in many ways a challenge to secular deficiencies and the overlooking of cultural reality. Jussawala contends that ‘Postmodern indeterminacy can [. . .] result in dangerous
misinterpretation when authority is wrested from both the author and his/her cultural location' (Jussawala, *Dastan*, p.71). Rushdie has been a victim of this sort of appropriation. Though he has expressed sympathies for postmodern ideas, he is ultimately distinct from the projects of that camp, though the social force of his work can be put in parallel with other authors labelled as postmodern. Rushdie’s novels are more akin to E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* and Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* rather than the works of Pynchon or Auster, not least because they refuse to transfer social variety and change into aporetic encounter. Rushdie’s novels retain a strong sense of presence and reality, and his use of religious themes elucidates what he understands as human spirituality’s enactment within a material world.

In many of the novels considered in this thesis, the overwhelming tendency has been to transform alterity, indeterminacy and difference into transcendental principles that exercise total control over the interpretative possibilities of the text. Implicit in this process has been a tendency to place negativity into models of religious language and religious iconography — an inevitable result once alterity becomes the centre of the author’s fictional theme and aesthetic content. The consequence of all this is a dishonesty at the heart of the postmodern project. The problem is that while postmodernism claims itself as a pluralised philosophy that disrupts metaphysical ideas, it is actually a quite limited philosophy that thrives on some of the most metaphysical ideas of all history. By effectively creating a negative theology that is unable to have confidence in affirmative ideas, postmodernism creates for itself a sublimity that is at best idealistic and at worst socially bankrupt.

What Salman Rushdie gives us is an alternative to combining religion and indeterminacy into transcendentalism. Rushdie merges fragmentation and faith to produce not an absolute theology of absence, but a material theology of dialogue.
Rushdie shows how the metaphysical is part of the total material condition of being human and of being part of a society. As such, Rushdie steers clear of pure conceptions of absence to establish instead a complex material world that is fixed in a dialogue between the material and the spiritual (or psychological) and not the present and the absent. In the latter dialogue, which postmodernism tends to promote, absence is always the winning binary, or at least the guiding figure. In the Rushdean dialogue, the aim is not philosophical detachment, but a total involvement in the realities of a multi-faith, multi-ideological world. Rushdie’s religious tendency is ultimately ‘affirmative’ because for him metaphysics are not something to be deconstructed (which leads back to a transcendent brand of metaphysics), but something to be accepted as the essential fabric of existence both material and spiritual.

NOTES

6 Throughout this chapter’s involvement with Bakhtin, I acknowledge that the authorship of several works is problematic, namely those ones signed by Medvedev and Voloshinov. Consequently I shall follow Pam Morris’s strategy of textual attribution of the disputed works to both the signed author and Bakhtin (e.g. Voloshinov/Bakhtin). For Morris’s overview of the debate surrounding Bakhtin’s work, see Pam Morris (ed.), The Bakhtin Reader - Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov (London, Edward Arnold, 1994) pp.1-5.
9 Wilson Keith, who reads Midnight’s Children as a novel engaged with reader-response theory, interprets Padma as a model of the ‘imperious reader’ who compels Saleem’s narrative into form.
Though Wilson argues that Saleem recognises the 'impossibility of closure' Padma could be said to draw out the essential recognition that communication is fundamentally reliant upon agreements of closure between two or more parties. See 'Midnight's Children and Reader Responsibility', Critical Quarterly, 26, 3 (1984) 23-37 (pp.26-30).


12 For a brief consideration of other characters in Midnight's Children who attempt to possess the whole of reality, see Wilson, 'Reader Responsibility', p.25.


15 Bakhtin extends the dialogue from just being confined to inter-personal vocalisation to being a presence within individual psychological structure (because inner-language is as ideologically stratified as outer speech, and thus thoughts are always in dialogue with themselves). See Bakhtin, 'Dialogue in the Novel', pp.349-50.


18 See Eagleton, Literary Theory, p.102: 'Bakhtin respected what might be called the "relative autonomy" of language, the fact that it could not be reduced to a mere reflex of social interests; but he insisted that there was no language that was not caught up in definite social relationships, and that these social relationships were in turn part of broader political, ideological and economic systems. Words were "multi-accentual" rather than frozen in meaning: they were always the words of one particular human subject for another, and this practical context would shape and shift their meaning.'


20 By 'sociological' I do not mean that Rushdie focuses himself entirely upon the economic and political environment. Here I use sociological to refer to the broadest spectrum of cultural elements through which people define themselves, including mythology, religion, popular culture etc.

21 See M.M. Bakhtin, Speech Genres, p.96.


24 Rushdie announces this decision in 'Why I Have Embraced Islam', contained in Imaginary Homelands, pp.430-32. While stating his 'deepest respect' for the principles of 'secular humanism', his central message is 'to affirm the two central tenets of Islam—the oneness of God and the genuineness of the prophecy of the Prophet Muhammed—and thus to enter into the body of Islam after a lifetime spent outside it' (p.430).


26 'In the end [ . . .] the novel cannot be seen through the distorting images of the protests or what the media made of them since they overestimate the Islamic themes of a novel that is, after all, primarily about a very secular England.' Brennan, Third World, p.147.


Anthony Close also argues that this episode in the novel manifests Rushdie's general tendency towards promoting the mystical against the exclusively material: Rushdie 'shows how the "religion of submission" contains potentialities for inspiring love, communal solidarity, and a sense of wonder, and also, for overcoming materialist scepticism.' Anthony Close, 'The Empirical Author: Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, *Philosophy and Literature*, 14, 2 (October 1990) 248-267 (pp.263-4).

See Bruce King, 'Satanic Verses and Sacred Cows', *Sewanee Review*, 98, 1 (1990) 144-52. King understands the 'story of Ayesha [...] depending on how you regard it, is an example of faith or of the way new movements demand unquestioning fanatical belief from their followers' (p.146). I would counter King by suggesting that we as readers are not forced to make the decision as to which camp Ayesha and her followers belong, rather we are confronted with the interpretative power of our own attempt to distinguish their nature.

My understanding of magic realism as a dialogic form places it outside the 'celebratory' postmodernism argued for by such critics as Kenneth Ireland. Whereas Ireland understands magic realism as a more euphoric extension of 1960s and 1970s postmodern literature I would argue that magic realism's origins outside of Western culture locate it more within a faithfulness to cultural diversity than ontological liberty. See Kenneth R. Ireland, 'Doing Very Dangerous Things: *Die Blechtrommel* and Midnight's Children', *Comparative Literature*, 42, 4, (1990) 335-61 (p.336).

'If you come from India or Pakistan, how can you reject religion? Religion is in the air everyone breathes. If you're trying to write about that world, you can't make a simple rejection of religion. You have to deal with it because its the centre of culture' (quoted in Appignanesi and Maitland, *Rushdie File*, p.30). See Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London, Vintage, 1995) p.251: 'So called Islamic "fundamentalism" does not spring, in Pakistan, from the people. It is imposed on them from above. Autocratic regimes find it useful to espouse the rhetoric of faith, because people respect that language, are reluctant to oppose it. This is how religions shore up dictators; by encircling them with words of power, words which people are reluctant to see discredited, disenfranchised, mocked.'

Rushdie has commented that in his attempts to represent worlds in which religion is a significant part he desires a form 'which allows the miraculous and the mundane to co-exist at the same level—as the same order of event.' See Rushdie's essay 'In God We Trust', *Homelands*, p.376.

See Anthony Close, 'Empirical Author', p.264: *The Satanic Verses* is not impudent sacrilege. It represents, in mythic and objective form, the agonized doubts of collapsing faith. This faith is not just Islam, nor even just religion. Like all Rushdie's fables, Gibreel's dream has a universal significance, summed up by Milan Kundera's words in the postscript to *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: "The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude... The totalitarian world, whether founded on Marx, Islam, or anything else, is a world of answers rather than questions. There the novel has no place..." The Kundera quotation is from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (London, Penguin, 1981) p.237.


Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate how postmodernism is profoundly metaphysical in the nature of its language and the perspective of its philosophy. Of course, the fact that postmodern theory has been up and running for nearly thirty years means that I have had to leave many theoretical and fictional stones unturned. It may be argued that I have focused exclusively on a certain sublime postmodernism that is rather unrepresentative of the full scale of postmodern thought, particularly its Jamesonian elements that concentrate on postmodernity as a social effect rather than a conceptual project. With postmodernity I have few problems. The world has seen awesome technological, political and social changes since the last war and I regard postmodernity as no more than a label for these concrete effects. Postmodernism, however, is a step beyond social description into a pure metanarrative of alterity. In this metanarrative, the dominant models are metaphysical and theological, though these are masked by an anti-foundational discourse. Again, I accept that postmodern theory is aware of the inescapability of the metanarrative. Yet implicit in its arguments is the suggestion that the narratives we use to define our reality are not the whole picture and that there remains an aporetic deposit that judges all that we say and do when it is consciously determined.

The alternative to postmodern discourse is a subtle shift in perspective, though a rather traditional one. By accepting metanarratives as competing presences free from
the judgements of a reified alterity, we can keep narrative linked to material reality in a way that postmodernism cannot. For postmodernism is at heart a transcendental theology. In fact, postmodernism’s sceptical relation to the law and the metanarrative means that its has not the focus on praxis that most major religions contain. In the end, postmodernism has found trouble accepting itself as an historical phase, even though it should have no problems determining itself so. As the potency of its thought starts to wane, we wait to see how reality will perceive itself in the near future.
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