

What Is an Allusion?

What is an allusion?¹ The answer seems obvious at first. An allusion is an indirect reference. While this definition may be a convenient starting point, it is, as we shall see, not a satisfactory final answer. But why ask the question at all? Most educated people have a fairly clear idea of what an allusion is and have done well with it. This may be the case, but I would suggest that literary theory is the worse for not having come to a clearer understanding of this term. There is, to be sure, no shortage of studies detailing the use of allusion. Witness, for example, the vast quantity of work devoted to T. S. Eliot's use of allusion in *The Waste Land* and Alexander Pope's use of allusion in *The Rape of the Lock*. Still, what nearly all such studies neglect is the basic question: What is an allusion? And the result is confusion. Whereas there is no shortage of theoretical work on such subjects as irony and metaphor, there is a scarcity of theoretical work on allusion, a small number of articles, and no books.²

One might suggest that the reason for the scarcity is that it is just not a very important or interesting topic, but surely this is not the case. Allusion is bound up with a vital and perennial topic in literary theory, the place of authorial intention in interpretation, and in literature itself allusion has become an increasingly pivotal device. How different would twentieth-century poetry be without ubiquitous allusion? As we shall see, allusion is a difficult and elusive topic. Still, difficulty alone cannot explain the lack of attention to allusion, and, thankfully, it is not the purpose of this paper to explain this lack of attention. Rather, here we shall provide an answer to the question: What is an allusion? To begin, we shall articulate a definition of the term. We shall then consider, in detail, the role of intention in

allusion. Finally we shall consider "accidental associations," the reader's response independent of authorial intent.

I. A DEFINITION OF ALLUSION

The definition of allusion is at the root of our inquiry. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines allusion as "a covert, implied, or indirect reference." It is clear that allusion is a type of reference, but, as we shall see, in just what way it must be covert, implied, or indirect is a matter of some dispute. We sometimes use the word "allusion" with little care in distinguishing it from "reference"; indeed, we sometimes treat the two words as if they were coextensive.³ Reference has, of course, been the subject of much theoretical consideration, yet, as we shall see, we cannot rest with simply taking a definition of reference and using it as a definition of allusion.⁴

As Carmela Perri has pointed out, allusions can actually be overt.⁵ They can be out in the open, rather than hidden to some degree. If a person or character in the midst of deciding whether or not to approach a young woman for a date resolves, "I am not Prufrock," clearly we have an allusion.⁶ This is an indirect and possibly covert reference. The same character or person in the same situation might instead say, "I am not like Prufrock in T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.'" This, certainly, is an overt reference. Yet, it is still an allusion, perhaps a poor allusion, aesthetically speaking. Still, allusions are often covert; they may even be concealed. It is well known, for example, that Pope meant to conceal many of his allusions; had he not, a large part of his intended audience

would have been offended beyond his purposes. The point is that allusions need not be covert.

Why are “I am not Prufrock” and even “I am not like Prufrock from T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’” allusions? Because they are references that, for their correct understanding, depend crucially on something more than mere substitution of a referent. Certain associations are to be made. One sense, then, in which an allusion is necessarily indirect is that it depends on something more than mere substitution of a referent. How specialized the knowledge in the substitution must be is something that cannot be strictly specified; it can range from terribly esoteric to nearly universal.

So, allusion is reference that is indirect in requiring more than the mere substitution of a referent. But just what is required beyond the substitution? I may recognize, or even be told more directly, that the author or speaker is referring to a character in an Eliot poem, but surely that does not complete the act of understanding the allusion. In his article, “The Limits of Allusion,” Michael Leddy argues that “allusion-words typically describe a reference that invokes one or more associations of appropriate cultural material and brings them to bear upon a present context.”⁷ Allusion does indeed call for us to make certain unstated associations. Leddy is correct, but he is too soft in his statement. Additional associations are more than just typical; they are necessary for correct and complete understanding.⁸ One must make certain associations to assemble correctly the pieces of the allusion puzzle. In the case of “I am not Prufrock,” for example, we are not just to substitute for this “I am not like a character in a T. S. Eliot poem.” Rather we are to make associations with the kind of character Prufrock is. The speaker’s implication is that “I am not an indecisive man who will live with regrets and ‘might-have-beens.’” We might also make the association (among others) that the speaker is cleverly playing upon the line, “I am not Prince Hamlet,” in the original poem. The point of the allusion goes beyond simple reference. We are not just to substitute one thing for another. We are supposed to make unstated associations, and in this sense the reference is indirect. I may understand that the author or speaker is referring to a character in a T. S. Eliot poem who is named J. Alfred Prufrock, but unless I make further indirect connections I have

failed to fully understand the allusion. Unless I realize that Prufrock would not likely approach the young woman but would impotently wonder, “Do I dare? And, Do I dare?” I have missed the point of the allusion. The speaker or author by saying, “I am not Prufrock,” sets himself up as a man of action, as someone who will take a chance.

Having examined in what way allusion is indirect, let us see what else is distinctive about it. M. H. Abrams defines allusion as “a brief reference, explicit or indirect, to a person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage.”⁹ While Abrams correctly notes that an allusion can be explicit, in the sense of being overt, he makes a claim, which is not so obviously correct: allusion is brief. Following Abrams’s lead, Michael Leddy claims that one of the “limits of allusion,” as he calls them, is that it be “a local small-scale device.”¹⁰ To be sure, allusions are typically brief, but must they necessarily be? Leddy’s motivation in claiming that they must be is to rule out the possibility of forms and styles alluding.¹¹ As he says, “a form is better described as a form, and not as an allusion. . . . Style is not an allusion.”¹² While Leddy is correct in asserting that a similarity in form or style is not necessarily an allusion, he is incorrect in categorically denying the possibility that form or style can allude.

Leddy believes that allusion can necessarily be isolated and pointed to on a micro level. “Allusion is located in words—we can point to allusion in a way we cannot with irony.”¹³ It does seem impossible to *point* to irony, but it is not clear that it is any more possible to *point* to allusion. In the line, “seek the seven seals,” it is easy to point to the alliteration; it is there for anyone who understands the concept to see and hear. Context and authorial intent clue us in to irony, and, I suggest, to allusion as well. Why could it not be that an entire epic poem alludes to the *Odyssey*? In a sense, does not *Paradise Lost* do just that? While certainly this is not typical, it is also not impossible. More commonly, an entire stanza in one poem may allude to an entire stanza in another poem.¹⁴ Clearly, it is possible to imitate the style or form of a work without necessarily alluding to that work: Not every Petrarchan sonnet need be an allusion to Petrarch.¹⁵ Still it is possible for a work to allude to another work by imitating its style or form; it

would be possible, for example, to compose a sonnet that as a whole alludes to Shakespeare's Sonnet 55.

It is common to speak of literary allusions, but are all allusions literary? Clearly not. Inasmuch as allusions often depend on some information not readily available to every member of our cultural and linguistic community they may well be literary. After all, not everyone is well versed in Homer, Virgil, and Shakespeare. Still, of course, allusions need not be so highbrow. A baseball fan can remark, "There will never be another Mr. October." In this case the baseball fan is alluding to Reggie Jackson, and he is doing more than just referring to Jackson. The fan crafts an allusion that calls for us to make the association (perhaps among others) that no one will ever perform quite as well in postseason play, which takes place in October.

To conclude this section, then, let us summarize our findings by defining allusion as a reference that is indirect in the sense that it calls for associations that go beyond mere substitution of a referent. Allusions often draw on information not readily available to every member of a cultural and linguistic community, are typically but not necessarily brief, and may or may not be literary in nature.

II. THE ROLES OF TEXT AND AUTHOR

Let us continue defining allusion by examining the roles of the text and author. What roles do text and author play in determining what associations we are to make? Generally speaking, there are three possibilities: the intentionalist view, the internalist view, and the hybrid view. The intentionalist view is that we have an allusion when an author¹⁶ includes a reference in his or her text¹⁷ that he or she intends to be an allusion to another text.¹⁸ The internalist view is that one text alludes to another when the internal properties of one text resemble and call to mind the internal properties of an earlier text.¹⁹ The hybrid view is that we have an allusion when some combination of authorial intent and shared internal properties is present. Let us take each of these in turn.

What objections can we raise to the intentionalist view? It appears to be too strong. Any text that an author intends as an indirect reference in the sense defined above would by fiat be

an allusion. By mere force of will and intention we would have an allusion, and this might well render the concept of allusion vacuous and meaningless. In accord with the intentionalist view, it seems, one cannot fail to allude when one intends to. As Göran Hermerén objects to this view, "A work of art can apparently allude to anything, and we cannot say an artist intended to allude to something but failed to do so. Thus the crucial difference between success and failure becomes difficult to explain on this analysis."²⁰ While authorial intent may or may not be important, it is difficult to deny the need for some shared internal, i.e., textual, properties. As Stephanie Ross puts it, "I cannot at random choose two objects and declare that one of them alludes to the other. The one must contain some feature which can plausibly be said to refer to the other—and, moreover, to do so obliquely."²¹

What objections can we raise to the internalist view? The internalist view demands that we judge the presence of an allusion simply on the basis of the shared internal properties of two texts without regard to authorial intent. The chief problem with this view is that it gives what appears to be a necessary condition for allusion, shared internal properties, but it does not give a sufficient condition. Two texts may have internal properties in common on the basis of something other than allusion. One text may have influenced another, the two may be the products of the same *Zeitgeist*, or it may be a simple coincidence. We should also note that allusion moves in only one direction. If A alludes to B, then B does not allude to A. The Bible does not allude to Shakespeare, although Shakespeare may allude to the Bible.²² As Ross sums up the matter, "When one art work alludes to another . . . it is not a case of some predicate or concept referring to the two of them. Rather, one of the works refers to the other. Thus allusion involves reference *between* two works of art."²³

Both Hermerén and Ross defend hybrid views. Seeing the choice between intentionalism and internalism as a false dilemma, they choose to combine parts of each in determining the conditions of allusion. Let us consider Hermerén first. Hermerén's hybrid view, "the combination view," requires that a combination of three conditions be met in order for there to be allusion. These conditions, as he states them, are:

1.) The artist intended to make beholders think of the earlier work by giving his work certain features. 2.) As a matter of fact beholders contemplating his work make associations with that earlier work. 3.) These beholders recognize that this is what the artist (among other things) intended to achieve.²⁴

Let us consider these three conditions. Condition 1 is fair enough. The two texts²⁵ must not simply share something in common, but rather the commonality must be intended in a specific way by the author. Condition 2, however, is not a necessary condition for the presence of allusion. It could well be that all the actual beholders of a work fail to detect the presence of an allusion, and yet we would want to say that the allusion is present nonetheless. I might allude to Eliot's poem in claiming, "I am not Prufrock," and find that no one among my audience has detected my allusion. Perhaps they simply think I have badly mispronounced "peacock." (We may suppose they think I am alluding to the animal or to the character in the game Clue.) It is indeed possible for an allusion to be so obscure that in fact no one but the author is aware of it, although in principle others could detect it. Condition 2 should be restated, then, as: "Beholders of the work could in principle make associations with that earlier work." Condition 3, like Condition 2, is desirable but not necessary. First of all, if beholders of the work fail to note the connections between the works, which as we have just seen is possible, Condition 3 does not hold. And, in addition, beholders of the work may make associations with the earlier work and yet not realize that this is what the author intended. In such a case we would not necessarily want to say that there was no allusion present. Rather, we might want to blame the audience for not being perceptive enough. So, Condition 3 should be restated as, "Beholders of the work could in principle recognize that this is what the artist (among other things) intended to achieve." So, Hermerén's conditions for allusion, if they are to be accepted, must be modified significantly. In the end they would simply state that the author intended his or her audience to think of an earlier text by giving the text certain features, and that it is in principle possible for the audience to make those associations and realize that they were intended.

Ross also defends a version of the hybrid

view, claiming that "one artwork, A, alludes to another artwork, B, only if the artist of A: (1) intended to refer to B, and (2) incorporated into A an indirect reference to B."²⁶ This view is more reasonable than is Hermerén's, but it still falls short. The first condition is inadequate because the author must do more than simply intend to refer to the other text; he or she must intend to allude to the other text. That is, he or she must intend to refer to another piece of information in a way that calls for further associations, not mere substitution of a referent. The second condition is vague. What does it mean to say that the author must "incorporate" an indirect reference from one text to another? Never mind the fact that this must be a special kind of indirect reference; in what way does the author "incorporate" it? Without the author's intent to allude, we have no allusion; i.e., authorial intent is at least a necessary condition for allusion. "To incorporate" then can only mean using words or structures that communicate the author's intention to allude. But what does this mean? We have already noted that an audience can completely miss an allusion and that allusions can be obscure. By "incorporating," then, we can only mean using words that in principle can be recognized as alluding.

The only acceptable version of the hybrid view, then, is that for an allusion to be present, the author must intend to allude and must use words or structures that can in principle be recognized as alluding. Because nearly anything can *in principle* be recognized as alluding, the hybrid view begins to collapse into the intentionalist view. But given the problems we noted with the intentionalist view, can it possibly be correct?

III. INTENTIONS AND ALLUSIONS

Let us re-examine the intentionalist view: We have an allusion when an author includes a reference in his or her text that he or she intends to be an allusion to another text. What about the objections we noted? Is the intentionalist view too strong? Does it allow any text to allude to any other simply by authorial fiat? Does it erase the distinction between success and failure in allusion, thus making allusion a vacuous notion?

Let us begin by considering the issue of authorial fiat. Can an author be unaware of an all-

lusion that he or she is making? Yes, clearly authors are not always conscious of their motivations for alluding or even that they are alluding. In such a case, then, do we have a situation in which allusion is present and yet the author did not intend the allusion? No. What we actually have is a situation in which the author intended an allusion but was nonetheless unaware that he or she was alluding. That is, we have an allusion, unconsciously intended.²⁷ For example, an author may allude to *Paradise Lost* with his or her use of the word “pandemonium,” but not be consciously aware that he or she has done so until someone draws it to his or her attention. This raises the epistemological question: How can we tell the difference between an allusion unconsciously intended and something that appears to be, but is not, an allusion unconsciously intended? This is indeed a good question, but it is not one we need to answer at the moment. It is ultimately a hermeneutical, not a metaphysical, concern. Despite the hermeneutical and epistemological difficulty (although certainly not impossibility) of detecting unconscious intentions, there is good reason for recognizing their existence. So much of what we do in everyday life and in writing is guided by the unconscious in a purposeful way that it would be odd to restrict talk of intentions to the level of conscious awareness. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. gives the example of an author who uses parallel sentence structure to emphasize similarity in thought, yet is unaware that he has done this. Upon having this pointed out to him, the author can legitimately claim to have intended it.²⁸ The author made the sentence structure as it was with an intended purpose, although the purpose was not at the level of conscious awareness. In the same way, an author could, for example, allude to Milton by speaking of pandemonium, be unaware of this allusion, and yet, if it is drawn to his or her attention, legitimately claim to have intended it.

Even if we admit the existence of unconscious allusions, there seems to be another way in which allusion can be present without authorial intent. It seems that sometimes a reader will recognize an allusion that the author did not intend, consciously or unconsciously. Suppose a poet composes a dark and cerebral piece he entitles “Sea Sick,” and suppose a hypothetical reader takes this title to be an allusion to Sartre’s existential novel *La nausée*. The poet claims, how-

ever, that there is no allusion to *La nausée*; he did not intend one. As evidence he offers the fact that he never read Sartre’s novel and never even heard of it at the time he composed “Sea Sick.” In fact, *La nausée* had not yet been translated into English or any other language, and our poet cannot read French. There may still be a possibility that the poet in some way came into contact with *La nausée*, has since forgotten that contact, and nonetheless unconsciously intended it. It is most reasonable, however, to believe that this is not the case, until and unless convincing evidence to the contrary emerges.

Do we, then, have a case of allusion that was not intended, consciously or unconsciously? No. What we have is an accidental association on the part of the reader. This association may or may not aesthetically enhance our reader’s experience, and it may actually be what we would expect a reasonable or even ideal reader to think, but regardless, this connection between “Sea Sick” and *La nausée* should not be classified as an allusion. Allusion, unlike reference in general, requires authorial intent; it is a necessary condition. Allusion, then, differs from reference in general, as it does even more clearly from alliteration, with regard to authorial intent. The line “seek the seven seals” contains alliteration whether I intended it (consciously or unconsciously) or not, but the presence of allusion in the connection the reader makes between “Sea Sick” and *La nausée* is not independent of authorial intent. That there is a connection is, however, independent of authorial intent. The reader may establish such a connection, but that connection is best called, as I suggested, an accidental association. We shall explore accidental associations in detail in the next section.

We have established that authorial intention is a necessary condition for allusion, but is it a sufficient condition? The hybrid views of Hermerén and Ross recognize the need for authorial intent but seek to place limits on its power. At work here is the fear that an intentionalist view would make the notion of allusion vacuous, eliminating the distinction between success and failure in allusion. Still, Hermerén’s hybrid view is too strong in requiring the audience to recognize the allusion and the author’s intent, and Ross’s view is ambiguous in requiring that the author “incorporate” an indirect reference.

Certainly, though, there must be some limit on the power of authorial intention to allude. As is well known, Wittgenstein argued against the possibility of a private language,²⁹ one that it would be logically impossible for anyone else to understand. Let us admit, then, that private allusions, in this sense, are impossible. Still, this actually does not rule out very much, in that much that is practically, or as a matter of fact, impossible to understand, is not logically impossible to understand. We can clearly have private allusions in the sense that only the author, as a matter of fact, recognizes the allusion. The allusion may be very well concealed, the author may not have shown anyone else his or her text, the audience may not be well informed, etc.

What restrictions, then, should be placed on authorial intention? The hybrid views suggest that the internal properties of the texts must play a role as well. But how? There are no necessary or sufficient conditions to be met in terms of internal properties. Quotation is not necessary or sufficient, and neither is stylistic similarity, echo, or any other textual property. In fact, the internal properties can bear all the signs of allusion without allusion being present, as, for example, when a child says, "that was the most unkindest thing I ever heard." Here we have a case of poor grammar, not an allusion to Shakespeare. Similarly, we can have an allusion with no link in textual properties, as when I allude to the mayor of my town by speaking of "the walrus." Perhaps it strikes me at that very moment that the mayor reminds me of a walrus, and I allude to him in that way, intending the proper type of indirect reference, which is in principle possible to detect. What is most important is what Ross notes, that the author "incorporates" an indirect reference. Given, however, that internal properties cannot be specified, this notion of incorporating is equivalent to intending. In other words, what is required for allusion to be present is that the author intends a certain kind of indirect reference known as allusion and that it is in principle possible that it could be detected. This *in principle possible* caveat might seem to put strict restrictions on things, but, as I suggested, there is little if anything that it is logically impossible to understand.

The troubling thing about not having definite restrictions on allusion, outside of authorial intent, is that it seems to make the distinction be-

tween success and failure in allusion impossible, thus making the notion itself vacuous. But this is not the case. Success and failure in allusion can be judged in at least two different ways. We may judge an allusion as successful if it is understood by its intended audience, or at least by some part of that audience. An allusion, then, that is not understood by anyone but the author would be judged as an unsuccessful allusion (unless that is what he or she intended). An unsuccessful allusion is still an allusion, just the way a failed attempt is still an attempt. There is, however, something unsatisfactory about judging the success of an allusion on the basis of audience understanding. After all, an allusion could, in some sense, be a very good one although no one but the author even recognized it. I suspect, for example, that there are some very clever and pleasing allusions in *The Rape of the Lock* that Pope took to his grave. What I am pointing to here is the possibility of judging an allusion as a success or a failure on the basis of its aesthetic value. An author may make an allusion that no one picks up on, not because it is well concealed, but because it is poorly constructed. Yet, if it is at least in principle possible for the allusion to be understood, then it is still an allusion. The point is, simply, that in accord with an intentionalist view, success and failure are still viable terms, and allusion is not a vacuous notion. In fact, the possibility of judging allusions on an aesthetic basis is all the more important given an intentionalist account.³⁰

There seems to be another way, though, in which an allusion can go beyond its author's intention. We can construct allusions purposely to elicit and include the reader's response.³¹ The word "allusion" comes to us from the Latin *alludere*: "to jest, mock, play with," and there is indeed something ludic, gamelike, in the nature of allusion. We are asked to fill in the missing piece of a puzzle, to draw on some knowledge to complete the written or spoken word in our own minds.³² Perhaps allusions are by their very nature incomplete and the process of completing them is a productive one.³³ Susan Stewart has argued that allusions are in this way like enthymemes.³⁴ Can an allusion, then, require something beyond the author's intention? Could it be that, as Wolfgang Iser suggests, "The literary text does not state its intention and so the most important of its elements is missing. . . . in-

tention is to be fulfilled by the guided projections of the reader's imagination"?³⁵ Perhaps, but let us consider further what may be meant by this.

To what extent is the reader to be imaginative and creative in filling the gap left by the allusion? Ziva Ben-Porat suggests that "certain features of literary allusions are constants. . . . The presence of elements in both texts which can be linked together in unfixed, unpredictable, intertextual patterns, and the process of actualization which reflects in all its stages the effort to reconstruct a fuller text."³⁶ It seems that according to Ben-Porat, anything goes. The presence of similar textual elements gives us *carte blanche* to mix and match, finding all sorts of connections between the texts that the author did not intend to suggest. If this is the case, however, allusion loses its force. If we accept Ben-Porat's view, we should adopt the internalist criterion for identifying the presence of allusion. The problems with such an approach are legion, however. Any two texts with even the most remote similarities could be said to allude to one another. With some intertextual approaches, perhaps even the criterion that a later text cannot allude to an earlier text would be lost. Clearly, this is not acceptable.

In what way, then, are we to fill the gap created by the allusion? An internalist approach will not do. Still, we cannot deny that the reader must play a vital role in his or her own understanding of an allusion. That understanding, however, if it is to be genuine, must be in accord with the author's intent. If it is not, the reader is not understanding the allusion but creating something else.³⁷ As John Campbell suggests, "Allusions invite us to select from our mental library, knowledge which is not in the text itself and without which the writer's intention will not be fully communicated."³⁸ In other words, for an allusion to be successful, in the sense of being understood, the reader must call to mind something not explicitly in the text. This accords well with the definition of allusion we have formulated, which states (in part) that the reference must call for associations beyond mere substitution of a referent. Can the reader, however, call to mind anything at all in his or her "library of knowledge" to complete the allusion, thus allowing the author's intention to be fully communicated? No. Rather, the reader must call to

mind what the author intended for him or her to call to mind. When a character says, "I am not Prufrock," the allusion is not completed if the reader believes that Prufrock is a servant of the Grinch in a Dr. Seuss book. If this is how he or she fills in the blank, he or she has missed the point and misunderstood the allusion. As Carmela Perri suggests, "in allusion, the referent must be recognized and the relevant aspects of its connotation determined and applied."³⁹

In the example above, the reader misses the referent, thinking it is a character in a Dr. Seuss book, not a character in a T. S. Eliot poem. What about the associations, though? Is it possible to identify the referent and still misunderstand the allusion? Yes, when the associations do not match those that the author intended. Consider the position of Perri, who investigates allusion in terms of speech act theory, in particular focusing on the perlocutionary act—the intended effect on the audience. She argues that a successful allusion has the following effects on its audience: recognizing, remembering, realizing, and connecting.⁴⁰ "Creating" is not among those effects, and with good reason. In a successful allusion an author manages to get the audience to fill the gap in just the way he or she intended. The author may intend the reader to be creative in filling the gap, but this is not strictly necessary.⁴¹

Are author's intentions always strictly defined? No. For example, an author can allude to Jesus as "the crucified one" with only the broad intention that the reader bring to mind Jesus, a good man who was wrongly put to death. The author's intention may be broad enough to encompass more specific associations, and in fact this may be precisely what he intended—that the reader call to mind her personal picture of Jesus. Whether the authorial intent is broad and inclusive or narrow and exclusive will depend on the individual case. The intention may be difficult to detect, but, again, this is an epistemological and hermeneutical problem, not a metaphysical one. It exists nonetheless.

Our definition of "allusion" is, then, a reference that is indirect in the sense that it calls for associations that go beyond mere substitution of a referent. An author must intend this indirect reference, and it must be in principle possible that the intended audience could detect it. Allusions often draw on information not readily available to every member of a cultural and lin-

guistic community, are typically but not necessarily brief, and may or may not be literary in nature. The indirect nature of the reference is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. In the same way, authorial intention and the possibility of detection in principle are necessary but not sufficient. Taken together as a whole, the indirect nature of the reference, the authorial intent, and the possibility of detection in principle amount to a sufficient condition for allusion.

IV. ACCIDENTAL ASSOCIATIONS

Let us now consider the intertextual connections readers make independent of authorial intent. We have argued that such connections are not allusions, but rather accidental associations. Such associations are "accidental" in accord with the etymology of "accident"; they simply "happen" to be. This choice of terminology is not intended to bear positive or negative connotations.

Let us begin by distinguishing accidental associations from creative reader associations that actually fill the allusional gap in accord with authorial intent. As Perri suggests, "In allusion, although the aspects of connotation are unexpressed in the allusion, these are tacitly specified."⁴² Perri is correct in arguing that what an allusion should call to mind for the reader is tacitly specified by the author's intent, and, we should note, this implies that the determinacy of this tacit specification varies from text to text. In one case an author may have very definite intentions for what the reader should call to mind upon hearing, "I am not Prufrock," for example, that Prufrock is indecisive and the author is playing upon Eliot's line, "I am not Prince Hamlet." In another case a different author may intend the very same line to call to mind whatever the reader associates with Eliot's character. In other words, the tacit implications of the allusion may be quite specific or they may be broad and actually call for a creative act on the part of the reader.

Wolfgang Iser has given a phenomenology of what occurs when we read fiction that is of some value to us in coming to terms with the kind of authorial intent that calls for a creative reader response in actualizing an allusion. Iser speaks broadly about literature in general rather than allusions in particular, but for the moment let us see how what he says applies to the topic at hand.

"Indeterminate elements of literature represent a vital link between text and reader. They are the switch that activates the reader into using his own ideas to fulfill the intention of the text."⁴³ Inasmuch as allusions are sometimes indeterminate, what Iser says applies to them. In order for the author to communicate successfully his intention the reader must sometimes use his or her own imagination. For example, Eliot gives us some definite descriptions of Prufrock's appearance, "his arms and legs are thin," his "head grown slightly bald," his "necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin," but it is fair to say that Eliot intends for us to imagine the rest. There are certain limits, though, which if surpassed, will violate Eliot's intention and lead to misunderstanding—if we imagine Prufrock as devilishly handsome, for example.

Unfortunately, Iser overstates his case, claiming that literature in general is always indeterminate. Consider the following:

Because the literary text makes no objectively real demand on its readers, it opens up a freedom that everyone can interpret in his own way.⁴⁴

No reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities.⁴⁵

With all literary texts . . . the reading process is selective, and the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations.⁴⁶

A literary object never reaches the end of its multifaceted determinacy. It can never be given a final definition.⁴⁷

We should note that Iser restricts his account to the process of reading literature, whereas, as we have noted, allusions can and do occur outside of literature. To be sure, what Iser says is true of much literature, particularly in that, as he notes, since the eighteenth century, indeterminacy in literature has been on the increase.⁴⁸ Still, not all literature is indeterminate, and certainly not every gap in every literary text is to be filled with the product of the reader's imagination independent of authorial intent. As we have argued, gaps such as those created by allusions may well be intended to be filled with something

quite specific, without which misinterpretation and misunderstanding occur.

Allusions, then, to be understood and interpreted correctly must accord with authorial intent. What about connections between texts that readers make independent of authorial intent? Such connections are what we called accidental associations. We do not want to limit the reading process to recognizing authorial intent, but we do want to distinguish between readings that accord with authorial intent and those that do not.⁴⁹ As Hermerén says with regard to his own definition of allusion, “The definitions outlined here do not exclude that literary critics take an interest in what a text suggests to more or less well-educated readers, regardless of what the author intended.”⁵⁰ We, as readers, can generate much aesthetic value on the basis of our own readings. The text may suggest many things that the author did not actually intend, but that an ideal, or merely reasonable, reader is correct to notice. There is no harm in taking notice of these things as long as we do not incorrectly attribute them to the author or his or her text. They are, properly speaking, our reading, which in fact may be a misreading.

Let us consider an example. Line 83 of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” contains the phrase, “I am no prophet.” This seems to be a definite allusion to John the Baptist, who is alluded to in the preceding lines with the phrase “seen my head . . . brought in upon a platter.” Kathleen Sherfick, however, argues that “I am no prophet” alludes to both John the Baptist and Amos.⁵¹ The association with Amos is an interesting one. Amos, like Prufrock, is a rather ordinary and unspectacular man. Yet Amos, unlike Prufrock, does indeed “dare.” So, with this reading, the line is all the more aesthetically pleasing and in that way richer. Prufrock is not a prophet in the sense of being some great or special man, and he is also not a prophet in the sense that he is unable to act. The question we face is: Did Eliot intend to allude to Amos as well John the Baptist? That is, is the connection with Amos an allusion or is it an accidental association? While it is possible that Eliot intended to allude to Amos, the evidence Sherfick offers is not convincing. It seems far more likely that the connection to Amos was an accidental association on her part. To be clear, accidental associations are in no way a bad thing, and this is not a pejorative term.

Indeed, the connection to Amos makes for a richer and more aesthetically pleasing reading. By no means are all allusions good and all accidental associations bad when we consider these things from an aesthetic standpoint. What is bad, however, is to confuse the two.

Allusion is only one element of intertextuality, and as long as we do not misrepresent accidental associations as allusions there can be much value in them. Accidental associations are important and interesting grounds for consideration and discussion. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson tell the story of an Iranian student at Berkeley who developed a particular fondness for the phrase “the solution of my problems.”⁵² The Iranian student had misunderstood the phrase to mean a liquid solution in which one’s problems were mixed and dissolved. He was quite disturbed when he discovered that this is not what people intended for him to imagine when they used the phrase. Nonetheless, his misunderstanding of the phrase was a good one, perhaps more aesthetically pleasing than the one intended. It would be fine for him to hold on to it as long as he did not continue to assume that this is what other people had in mind or intended for him to have in mind. Similar occurrences of fruitful mistakes and misunderstandings are common in literature. Consider the well-known example of A. E. Housman’s poem “1887”: “Get you the sons your father’s got / And God will save the Queen.” Many readers assumed that this was an ironic stab at the queen, as would have been characteristic of Housman, but the poet vehemently denied that this was his intention.⁵³ It may well be preferable from an aesthetic standpoint to misunderstand the line as being an ironic stab, and no harm occurs in doing so as long as one does not attribute that meaning to the author and his intention. In another well-known case of accident, a number of editions of Yeats’s “Among Schoolchildren” contain a mistake in printing, giving the phrase, “soldier Aristotle,” whereas the text should have read, “solider Aristotle.” Few would argue, however, that the intended word and meaning would have improved the poem aesthetically.⁵⁴

Although the examples above do not deal with allusions, much the same can be said of them. A reader can make an accidental association that actually produces a more aesthetically pleasing reading than would correct understanding of the

allusion. For example, a highly unsophisticated author may actually use the phrase "to be or not to be" without alluding (although perhaps referring) to *Hamlet*. This author may not be aware that this phrase has its origins in Shakespeare, but rather thinks it is just a common saying. Still, the reader may with good reason make an accidental association to *Hamlet* and in doing so enhance his or her own aesthetic experience. In listening to Simon and Garfunkel's "Homeward Bound," I am always struck by the line, "Everyday's an endless stream of cigarettes and magazines." I cannot help but connect it to Prufrock who has "measured out [his] life with coffee spoons" and "spit out the butt-ends of [his] days and ways." Did Simon and Garfunkel intend for their listeners to call Prufrock to mind? It is possible, but perhaps unlikely. Most likely, what we have here is an accidental association, one that enriches my aesthetic experience of the song.

Detecting allusions sometimes demands the precision of a science, while making fruitful accidental associations sometimes demands the creativity of an art. What Harold Bloom says of criticism we can say of accidental association: "It is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem."⁵⁵ But still we must not get carried away, and we must be careful not to attribute to authors allusions they did not intend. We must strike the mean between the deficiency of obsequious reliance upon the author and the excess of unchecked textual play, for as Stanley Rosen has said, "If reading is writing, then writing is scribbling."⁵⁶

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1. I wish to thank King's College for supporting this research with a generous summer grant. I also wish to thank Gregory Bassham, Megan Lloyd, Jorge J. E. Gracia, and an anonymous reviewer from *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* for insightful comments and criticisms on earlier drafts of this article. An earlier version of this work was presented at an Eastern Division Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics and benefited from questions and discussion there.

In this paper we shall consider only verbal allusions, although we shall draw on the work of theorists who have considered allusion more broadly, i.e., in the visual arts and

music as well as in verbal form. Whether or not we can properly apply the concept of allusion outside the verbal realm is an issue we shall have to address elsewhere, although I suspect that given my definition we can.

2. No books in English, that is. There is one notable book in Italian, Gian Biagio Conte, *Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario: Catullo, Virgilio, Ovidio, Lucano* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974). For a review essay focusing on this book, see Anthony Johnson, "Allusion in Poetry," *PTL* 1 (1976): 579–587. There is also at least one notable article on the topic in Polish, Konrad Górski, "Aluzja literacka," *Z historia i teorii literatury*, II, Seria 2 (Warsaw: PWN, 1964), pp. 7–32.

3. Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 65–66.

4. Without involving ourselves in the theory of reference, we shall simply accept the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of "refer" as "to trace (back), assign, attribute, impute (something) to a person or thing as the ultimate cause, origin, (author), or source," and "reference" as "The act or state of referring through which one term or concept is related or connected to another or to objects in the world."

5. Carmela Perri, "On Alluding," *Poetics* 7 (1978): 290.

6. I choose this example from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" both because it is helpful and because it has been used in several other theoretical discussions of allusion, including those of Perri.

7. Michael Leddy, "The Limits of Allusion," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992): 112. For a related view given in terms of Grice's theory of conversational implicature, see James H. Coombs, "Allusion Defined and Explained," *Poetics* 13 (1984): 481. Perri makes a similar point in saying that beyond substitution of the referent, certain connotation is to be recognized; see "On Alluding," p. 292.

8. At the very least an allusion requires what Ted Cohen calls the cultivation of intimacy. In the case of allusion, the intimacy is the realization through the association that the reader shares something in common with the author. Cf. Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 28–29.

9. M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), p. 8. Cf. Leddy, "The Limits of Allusion," p. 110.

10. Leddy, "The Limits of Allusion," p. 111.

11. He is also motivated by the desire to rule out the possibility of allusion in the visual arts and music. In this paper we are limiting ourselves to the discussion of verbal allusion, and so this does not directly confront us. This is, however, an interesting issue, and we should note that Leddy is in the minority in arguing that we cannot have allusion in the visual arts or music.

12. Leddy, "The Limits of Allusion," p. 114.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

14. Cf. Coombs, "Allusion Defined and Explained," p. 476, on Wordsworth's *The Prelude* alluding to Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

15. Leddy, "The Limits of Allusion," p. 114.

16. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the word "author" rather than speaker, utterer, artist, etc.

17. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the word "text" here and in subsequent definitions and discussions.

18. See Göran Hermerén, "Allusions and Intentions," in Gary Iseminger, ed., *Intention and Interpretation* (Temple

University Press, 1992), p. 209, and Stephanie Ross, "Art and Allusion," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40 (1981): 60.

19. See Hermerén, "Allusions and Intentions," p. 210, and Ross, "Art and Allusion," p. 62.

20. Hermerén, "Allusions and Intentions," p. 209.

21. Ross, "Art and Allusion," p. 62.

22. Only a divine author, outside of time, would seem capable of alluding to a later text.

23. Ross, "Art and Allusion," p. 63.

24. Hermerén, "Allusions and Intentions," p. 211.

25. I will continue to speak of texts and authors to keep my own terminology consistent.

26. Ross, "Art and Allusion," p. 63.

27. For some discussion of unconscious intention and interpretation, see my *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 41–42 and 47–48. There has been no lengthy or substantive discussion of unconscious allusion, although Hermerén speaks as if it is, of course, possible in *Influence in Art and Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 76. Ross also supports the possibility of unconscious allusion in "Art and Allusion," p. 64. Perri is against "unconscious echoes" acting as allusion markers; see "On Alluding," p. 300. It is not completely clear, though, whether she means that there cannot be unconscious echoes on the part of the audience or author. With her general sympathy for Freud, it would be surprising if she were to rule out the role of the authorial unconscious.

28. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 20–21. For more defense of unconscious intentions, see pp. 51–57 and 221–223. The persistent tendency to highlight the epistemological difficulties in discovering authorial intention is disappointing. For a nice correction of this tendency, cf. Peg Zeglin Brand and Myles Brand, "Surface Interpretation: A Reply to Leddy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (1999): 463–465.

29. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 243 ff.

30. We cannot consider the subject here, although we have done so in an as yet unpublished paper entitled "The Aesthetics of Allusion," presented at the 1999 Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

31. Note Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Re-*

sponse to Literary Anthropology (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 3–30.

32. Jokes frequently work in a similar way. Cf. Cohen, *Jokes*, p. 27.

33. Susan Stewart, "The Pickpocket: A Study in Tradition and Allusion," *MLN* 95 (1980): 1133 and 1145.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 1135 ff.

35. Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 29.

36. Ziva Ben-Porat, "The Poetics of Literary Allusion," *PTL* 1 (1976): 127.

37. Cf. Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, p. 54.

38. John Campbell, "Allusions and Illusions," *French Studies Bulletin* 53 (1994): 19.

39. Perri, "On Alluding," p. 292.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

41. Cf. Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, pp. 111–123.

42. Perri, "On Alluding," p. 292.

43. Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 28.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

45. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Prose Communication From Bunyan to Beckett* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 280.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 9.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

49. For an interpreter to do otherwise is potentially unethical. Cf. Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, pp. 50–54.

50. Hermerén, "Allusions and Intentions," p. 216.

51. Kathleen A. Sherfick, "Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, 83, I," *The Explicator* 46 (1987): 43.

52. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 143.

53. Cf. Ross, "Art and Allusion," p. 61. In accord with our own account we must recognize that the poet may have intended it in that way unconsciously despite his denial, or that he may be publicly denying his true intent although he himself knows what it is.

54. See F. Cioffi, "Intention and Interpretation in Criticism," in Cyril Barrett, ed., *Collected Papers on Aesthetics* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), pp. 172–173.

55. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 96.

56. Stanley Rosen, "Horizontverschmelzung," in Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1997), p. 212.