PASSING THROUGH THE IMPASSE: THE FIGURE OF APORTIA IN THE WORKS OF COLERIDGE, TENNYSON, AND STEVENS

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As respective representatives of Romanticism, Victorianism and Modernism, poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Alfred Tennyson, and Wallace Stevens differ significantly in regards to aesthetics, literary history, and biography, yet their work shares one common attribute—the figure of aporia. Because this term—which can be succinctly identified as doubt or puzzlement—is not widely recognized, a historical review of its various usages and meanings throughout history precedes discussion of the three poets. A particular emphasis is placed on Jacques Derrida's classification of three aporetic types, which are suggested to correspond with specific functions of aporia and further define modes of debilitation, consolation, and production which characterize the poets' aporetic approaches. Chapters on each poet include discussions of divergences in biography and literary history to further contextualize aesthetic intent and artistic circumstance. Although such an assertion remains speculative, a cumulative analysis of the three varying approaches to aporia ultimately suggests the possibility that the figure undergoes a specific progression through literary history.
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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

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**Introduction**

A particular problem of literary studies arises when we consider the lack of available methods of discourse needed to discuss how, where, and why poetic language breaks down. To put it another way, how do writers treat and describe moments of ineffability, poetic doubt, and creative failure? Furthermore, how do literary critics identify and examine those descriptions which emerge when poetic constructions malfunction? Tropes of malfunction appear in the poetry of numerous movements, histories, and authors; however, three major poets whose works consistently showcase such tropes are Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Wallace Stevens. Given the disparate nature of these poets' historical circumstances, the poetic malfunctions which occur in their works necessarily emerge in unique modes and manifestations, a fact which might be partly explained by contrasting the poets' diverse biographical situations. Coleridge's intense personal struggles with addiction, marital discord and romantic disappointment, and poverty exert significant influence on his work. Tennyson, while he fared far better than Coleridge financially, faced equally insurmountable difficulties: notable among them, his depression after the loss of his close friend Arthur Hallam, a loss which resulted in his major elegy *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1849). Unlike Coleridge and Tennyson, Stevens chose to separate his art from his public persona, at least until later in life. An insurance executive by day, Stevens's literary activity surfaced
alongside his business obligations, a fact which made the poet more likely to adopt an experimental aesthetic. Stevens’s work dramatically departs from Romantic and Victorian aesthetics precisely because his poetry so closely embodies American Modernism. Certainly these differences are significant, but what is most remarkable is not difference, but convergence: the parallels the critic can draw between the similar tropes occurring at the boundaries of poetic language and thought. One possible theoretical approach which might allow a more comprehensive examination of these boundaries, as well as an investigation of the specific functions and situations of poetic malfunction, depends upon exploring the concept of aporia in order to employ the term as critical scheme of literary analysis.

Due to the confusing nature not only of this term, but of its critical, philosophical and rhetorical histories, a brief overview is both pertinent and necessary. Etymologically, “aporia” can be broken down into two ancient Greek morphemes: the prefix “a” meaning “without” and “poros” meaning “passage.” Historically, the ancient Greek verb “aporein” took on a more figurative meaning, and is consistently translated into English as “to doubt.” The Oxford English Dictionary includes two forms of the word: the adjective, “aporetic” which it defines as “to be at a loss,” “impassable,” and “inclined to doubt, or to raise objections”; and the noun form “aporia,” which it defines as the “state of the aporetic” and “a perplexity or difficulty.” The dictionary also refers to early textual uses of the term. George Puttenham’s The Arte of English Poesie (1589) defines aporia as “the Doubtful, [so] called . . . because oftentimes we will seem to caste perils, and make
doubts of things when by a plaine manner of speech we might affirm or deny [them].” In another reference from 1657, J. Smith’s Mystical Rhetoric, the term is defined as “a figure whereby the speaker sheweth that he doubteth, either where to begin for the multitude of matters, or what to do or say in some strange or ambiguous thing.”

More specialized resources also provide some background. In Greek Grammar (1956), Herbert Weir Smyth defines the term as “an artifice by which a speaker feigns doubts as to where he shall begin or end or what he shall do or say” (674). William Harmon’s A Handbook to Literature identifies aporia as “a difficulty, impasse, or point of doubt and indecision” while also noting that critics have employed the term to “indicate a point of undecidability, which locates the site at which the text most obviously undermines its own rhetorical structure, dismantles, or deconstructs itself” (39). Both sources reference the “unjust steward’s meditation” in Luke 16:3, a reference which appears in other sources as well and which appears to be the quintessential example of aporia: “What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed.” (qtd. in Harmon). The steward’s aporia is represented by his indecision, feigned in this case, which results from a particular dilemma.

The scriptural allusion certainly provides some contextualization, but it is not representative of the concept’s historical origins. In fact, one of the earliest representations of aporia can be found in Plato’s Socratic dialogue Meno. In the midst of a discussion over the nature of virtue, Socrates requests one of Meno’s
“attendants” or slaves and asks him a series of geometry challenges which ultimately lead to the boy’s admission of his own ignorance. As is typical of the method of *elenchus*, the dialectical mode preferred by Socrates, the series of questions is intended to be intellectually productive, a fact to which the following passage, which begins with the slave-boy’s confession of ignorance, bears significant testimony:

**Boy**
Well, on my word, Socrates, I for one do not know.

**Socrates**
There now, Meno, do you observe what progress he has already made in his recollection? At first he did not know what is the line that forms the figure of eight feet, and he does not know even now: but at any rate he thought he knew then, and confidently answered as though he knew, and was aware of no difficulty; whereas now he feels the difficulty he is in, and besides not knowing does not think he knows.

**Meno**
That is true.

**Socrates**
And is he not better off in respect of the matter which he did not know?

**Meno**
I think that too is so.

**Socrates**
Now, by causing him to doubt and giving him the torpedo’s shock, have we done him any harm?

**Meno**
I think not.

**Socrates**
And we have certainly given him some assistance, it would seem, towards finding out the truth of the matter: for now he will push on in the search gladly, as lacking knowledge; whereas then he would have been only too
ready to suppose he was right in saying, before any number of people any number of times, that the double space must have a line of double the length for its side.

Meno
It seems so.

Socrates
Now do you imagine he would have attempted to inquire or learn what he thought he knew, when he did not know it, until he had been reduced to the perplexity of realizing that he did not know, and had felt a craving to know?

Meno
I think not, Socrates.

Socrates
Then the torpedo's shock was of advantage to him?

Meno
I think so. (Meno 84a-c)

Throughout the passage, “aporein,” and its various inflected forms, occur in three distinct semantic manifestations, translated respectively as “difficulty,” “to doubt,” and “perplexity.” The act of being “perplexed,” as experienced by the slave boy, is discussed as well as the state of “perplexity.” The Greek root allows for both verb and noun inflections. But the various figurative and inflectional uses of the morpheme, while they are indicative of the syntactic and semantic fluidity of the term, are secondary to the passage’s rhetorical significance. The epistemic advantages of aporia, as set out by Plato’s Socrates, are founded upon an awareness of ignorance which is superior to the slave-boy’s mistaken confidence in his own
flawed intelligence. To state it more simply, he is better off realizing his ignorance than persisting, unknowingly, in ignorance. Furthermore, the new knowledge is the cause of no detrimental effect but rather, provides the boy with a natural intellectual curiosity, a philosophical impetus to remedy his deficit. Finally, Socrates makes certain to reiterate that none of this would be possible without the “perplexity” or aporia of the awareness of ignorance.

Plato’s examination of the concept of aporia, and the various allusions and definitions of the term which appear in handbooks and dictionaries, demonstrate a tangible critical tradition on which to base investigations of poetic doubt and difficulty. This tradition is further realized in the philosophical investigation of the concept in Nicholas Rescher’s *Apoletics: Rational Deliberation in the Face of Inconsistency* (2009). As is evident in the title, Rescher is especially concerned with the methods in which an aporia, or “apory,” is intellectually processed and resolved. In the Preface, Rescher identifies the work as an attempt to “synthesize and systematize an aporetic procedure for dealing with information overload (of ‘cognitive dissonance,’ as it is sometimes called)” (ix). The text is also useful in that it provides a more precise (although specialized) definition of the concept: “any cognitive situation in which the threat of inconsistency confronts us” (1). Rescher further introduces his specific study of aporetic by qualifying the term as “a group of individually plausible but collectively incompatible theses,” a designation he illustrates with the following syllogism or “cluster of contentions”:
1. What the sight of our eyes tells us is to be believed.
2. Sight tells us the stick is bent.
3. What the touch of our hand tells us is to be believed.
4. Touch tells us the stick is straight. (2)

The aporia, or “apory” of this syllogism lies in the fact that, while each of these assertions are individually conceivable, together, they are inconsistent or impossible. Published in 2009, Rescher’s study is ultimately indicative of the continuing presence of scholarly examinations of the concept of aporia. It is part of a tradition which looks back to Plato’s work. However, in more recent literary criticism, this tradition has generally been overlooked. In fact, scholars have developed new critical systems to deal with aporetic literature which make little or no reference to the preexisting tradition of aporia. The most conspicuous instance of such oversight is Dwight Eddins’s “Darkness Audible: The Poem of Poetic Failure,” which examines “poetic failure” as it emerges in the metapoetic works of four major known poets: Coleridge, Yeats, G.M. Hopkins, and Dylan Thomas. Eddins’s examination of Coleridge’s poetic failure depends specifically on his recognition of the poet’s compositional processes as failed processes, in which the poet cannot connect or synthesize the various and disparate subjects of his contemplation: “The dynamic of imaginative synthesis is perverted into a dynamic of anti-synthesis that not only deconstructs vision but enforces randomness and incoherence among its potential components” (408). “Poetic failure,” as a figure of inability or ineffability arising from doubt or paradox, is inherently analogous to similar tropes of aporia. Indeed, it
might even be pertinent to incorporate the conceptualization of poetic failure as a
distinct element in a broader critical classification of aporetic manifestations. To
further define the critical system in which this might take place, it is necessary to
introduce a scholar whose work on aporia is perhaps the most well known: French
deconstructionist Jacques Derrida.

In *Aporias: Dying—Awaiting (One Another at) the "Limits of Truth,"* Derrida
employs the concept of aporia to discuss the paradoxical questions of mortality: “Is
my death possible? Can we understand this question? Can I, myself, pose it? Am I
allowed to talk about my death?” (21). The theorist systematically interrogates these
ontological questions, which arise from the essential impasse between the
word/concept “death” and its “unassignable” meaning or “thingness” (22), by
utilizing a theoretical classification of the concept of aporia itself. Within this
classification system, Derrida identifies three possibilities of the aporetic modality:

A plural logic of the aporia thus takes shape. . . . In one case, the
nonpassage resembles an impermeability; it would stem from the
opaque existence of an uncrossable border: a door that does not open
or that only opens according to an unlocatable condition, according to
the inaccessible secret of some shibboleth. . . . In another case, the
nonpassage, the impasse or aporia, stems from the fact that there is no
limit. There is not yet or there is no longer a border to cross, no
opposition between two sides: the limit is too porous, permeable, and
indeterminate. . . . Finally, the third type of aporia, the impossible, the antinomy, or the contradiction, is a nonpassage because its elementary milieu does not allow for something that could be called passage, step, walk, gait, displacement, or replacement, a kinesis in general. There is no more path. . . . The impasse itself would be impossible. (20-21)

These three possibilities of aporia—"impermeability," "limitless permeability," and the "impossible"—demonstrate the concept's complex evolution from rhetorical stratagem in Plato's *Dialogues* to philosophical/deconstructionist *modus operandi*. Ultimately, such evolution is indicative of the critical opportunity provided by Plato and Derrida, the foundation upon which the concept of aporia can be applied to literature. Furthermore, a critical system built upon this multifaceted foundation should possess the capability to engage and incorporate classifications such as poetic failure, thereby consolidating theoretical approaches to create a more unified theoretical framework. The various divergent systems of Platonic rhetoric and Derridean philosophy further demonstrate the essential need for theoretical synthesis of the complex and inexplicable nature of the study of aporetics. Ultimately, an extended investigation of aporia is needed to reconcile and synthesize the differences demonstrated by both Derrida's and Plato's treatment of the concept, as well as the misappropriation and oversight made apparent by Eddins's use of the term "poetic failure."
However, such a task should also be combined with an elucidation of the mode’s immediate product. The aims of this work are dual, then, as I hope to both 1) create a coherent definition of literary aporia which synthesizes various manifestations and classifications of the concept; and 2) determine the consequences of the aporetic mode in specific literary texts as well as its ultimate significance within English and American poetic histories and traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The following investigations of aporetic function and situation rely on literary analysis and observation of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Alfred Tennyson, and Wallace Stevens. Chapter One includes a comprehensive realization of Coleridge’s inability to reconcile philosophical and aesthetic modes of thought in *Biographia Literaria* (1817); and to demonstrate the effect of this inability and incoherence on Coleridge’s poetry, specifically three meta-poems which can be defined as containing elements of aporia: “Dejection: An Ode” (1802), “Kubla Khan” (1816), and “The Eolian Harp” (1796). Chapter Two, which moves directly into the Victorian period, consists of an investigation of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. The chapter examines instances of doubt in Tennyson’s major elegy which can be argued to be representative of a larger mode of aporia that occur within four distinct elements of the text: 1) its multiple expressions of ineffability, 2) its fragmentary composition 3) its elegiac genre, and 4) its speaker’s anxiety over the poem’s reception. Such a mode becomes a central force in the poem because it enables rather than disables the elegy’s dialectical and rhetorical elements to produce new systems of belief and knowledge. The third and
final chapter shifts to the American Modernist period to examine a broad sampling of Stevens's poetry by focusing on a system of aporia which is comprised of various modes of apophasis, ineffability, and agnosticism. Analysis and discussion of a number of Stevens's poems demonstrate the productive and positive nature of imagination and aporia in Stevens's poetics. The chapter ultimately narrows in scope to investigate Stevens's major work "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1947).

The various aesthetic and philosophical disparities between these three poets undoubtedly create three distinct poetic approaches to aporetic function and situation. To account for these disparities, each chapter necessarily emerges within its own unique form, as analysis, text, and theory require. Furthermore, the poets' biographical and historical circumstances also influence textual manifestations of aporia. In Coleridge and Tennyson, tropes of failure, doubt, and paradox often emerge as a response to some personal trauma which can be linked to biographical details in the writer's life. Stevens, in contrast, as a Modernist practitioner, often depersonalizes and deliberately interrogates the limits and boundaries of the poetic imagination. Accordingly, each chapter includes a biographical section to contextualize the individual poet's aporetic intentions, or lack thereof. The respective poetic texts in this study differ in significant ways, yet a comprehensive examination of the total effect of the aporetic within the texts is not without a collective analytical product. In particular, the comparison of the various modes and approaches to the aporetic situation revealed by the three chapters demonstrates an inherent progression from debilitating (in the poetic works of Coleridge), to consolatory (in Tennyson's In
Memoriam), and finally, to productive (in Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction). Furthermore, the three stages of this progression can be categorized by Derrida's aporetic types. Coleridge's debilitation corresponds to the third type, the "impossibility" of "passage" or movement, which prohibits the imagination from extending beyond the imaginer, as is succinctly demonstrated in the following lines from "Dejection: An Ode," a poem of imaginative failure and despair:

It were a vain endeavor,
Though I should gaze forever
On that green light that lingers in the west:
I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within. (III, ll. 4-8)

The consolatory stage found in Tennyson's In Memoriam functions from Derrida's first type, the "impermeability" of an "uncrossable border," specifically the uncrossable border between the speaker and his departed friend, Arthur Hallam, the subject of Tennyson's elegy. Unlike Coleridge, Tennyson's speaker does not lament the failure of the imagination. He dwells in the realm of possibility rather than impossibility. And yet, an awareness, a connection with, Hallam is largely inaccessible; a spiritual reunion is only achievable through an "inaccessible secret of some shibboleth," in Tennyson's case, the shibboleth of Christian faith:
We have but faith: we cannot know;  
For knowledge is of things we see  
And yet we trust it comes from thee,  
A beam in darkness: let it grow. (Prologue, ll. 21-24)

Finally, Stevens's productive stage directly corresponds with Derrida's second aporetic type: the limitless, "too porous [and] permeable," "indeterminate." In "The Plain Sense of Things" (1952), Stevens writes "Yet the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined." (ll. 13-14). The inherent impasse of these lines is not, as in Tennyson, restricted by faith, or, as in Coleridge, by the impassable distance between subject and object. Rather, Stevens's ideation is blocked only by the profundity of limitlessness. It is a gesture toward the infinite capabilities of the imagination which not only characterizes American modernism, but the culmination of aporetic opportunity as well.

As is evident, this study depends heavily on Derrida's classification of the types of aporia. The following examinations, are not, however, wholly bound to a deconstructionist or Derridean approach. It's important to note that Derrida's assertions concerning aporetic types, indeed the entire work in which those assertions appear, are motivated by philosophy rather than literary criticism or literary history. Derrida's conceptualizations are a starting point for this study, and a method to demonstrate the progression of aporetic function in literary history. Ultimately, the identification of such progression allows the literary critic a glimpse, not only into the evolution of poetry from the Romantic to Modernist periods, but into the history
of intellect itself, of philosophy, rhetoric and metaphysics, into the methods humans employ to cope with the unknown, the puzzling, and the doubtful.
Chapter One

*The Mad Lutanist:*

Coleridge’s Aesthetic Incoherence and Debilitating Aporia

While he gained some notoriety in his old age, the majority of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s life was extremely difficult. We need not look beyond the poet’s most well-documented troubles, his reluctant and unhappy marriage to Sarah Fricker, his unrequited love for Wordsworth’s sister-in-law Sara Hutchinson, and his opium addiction and poverty, to find an abundance of material to support such a claim. Certainly, critics have long employed biographical material to interpretations of Coleridge’s work; however, a new line of interpretation might be opened by employing biographical information to contextualize functions of aporia which appear not only in the writer’s poetry, but his prose as well. Accordingly, the following study begins with a brief discussion of Coleridge’s major prose work, *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Examinations of this work reveal two important properties of Coleridge’s writing. First, the contradicting declarations of philosophy, art, imagination and composition (and Coleridge’s inability to reconcile such contradictions) within *Biographia* are representative of the essential incoherence of the poet’s aesthetic principles. Secondly, analysis of this incoherence allows for the discovery of instances of aporia in *Biographia* while also providing a possible source or origin for the aporetic situations which arise in three of Coleridge’s “conversation
poems.” A careful analysis of these poems, “The Eolian Harp” (1796), “Dejection: An Ode” (1802), and “Kubla Khan” (1816), reveal their specific aporetic functions and the correspondence of these functions to Derrida’s third aporetic type, “the impossible, the antinomy, or the contradiction” (Aporias 21). Further analysis of these poems will also reveal and define the debilitating nature of Coleridgean aporia, a critical ambition of this study which necessitates the inclusion of biographical detail into discussions of all three poems. Finally, analysis of Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode” will also include discussions of Dwight Eddins’s “poetic failure” genre and of the possibility that this critical system might be incorporated into the larger classification of the debilitating aporetic mode.

Evidence of the aesthetic incoherence of Biographia Literaria emerges in two arenas of evaluative anxiety. First, Coleridge’s attempts to assess his own literary abilities reveal a system of contradiction in which the author fails to reconcile opposing assertions of self-worth and self-deprecation. Anxieties stemming from such a failure are inherently connected to and further exacerbated by the poet’s apprehensions concerning the validity and significance of his work, or lack thereof, apprehensions which are identified by critic David Vallins in a study of competing modalities of idealism and empiricism. The second evaluative anxiety, the apprehension of critical reception, becomes apparent in investigations of a modality of apology which surfaces in the work. Coleridge’s insistent need to defend his work against contemporary critical accusations, as well as the work of friend Robert Southey, reveal the poet’s intense anxieties concerning the critical reception of his
poetry and prose. Anxieties of ability, literary product, and critical reception influence the work's apparent aesthetic incoherence, but *Biographia* is also a philosophical treatise. A study by Roy Ayon, which deals with contradicting influences of Schelling and Hegel within the work, further reveals the work's specific philosophical inconsistencies. The cumulative product of each of these manifestations of incoherence reveals the fundamental aporia of Coleridge's prose, a state of "nonpassage" in which the author cannot move forward, reconcile, or overcome contradicting philosophical and aesthetic stances.

Before any discussion of these specific instances of incoherence, it is first pertinent to consider the general claim: why does this study insist on the mystifying deconstructionist label *incoherent*, and how have other scholars interpreted *Biographia*? Jerome McGann provides a partial answer to these questions as he examines the state of scholarly research surrounding the controversial work and attempts to expound a "consensus" among such research. The result of McGann's synthetic efforts demonstrates a critical consensus which is predominantly characterized by an agreement of the incoherence of *Biographia*. No critic has yet resolved the tension between Coleridge's "critique of the empirical tradition and of materialism, and his correlative defense of Idealist positions" (742). The poet's political outlook is both "independent and conservative" (742). None of the poet's representations of his own convictions, be they political, aesthetic or philosophical, can be viewed "objectively" without reference and deference to the poet's own subjectivity. (Coleridge's various pronouncements cannot be understood outside the
context of other pronouncements.) Finally, the “literary criticism” of *Biographia* is the ultimate accomplishment of the work (742). Three out of the four items of “consensus,” (excluding the final, immediately previous pronouncement) are effectively connected only in their agreement of Coleridge’s many contradictions. Furthermore, the consensus of incoherence which is ultimately discovered by McGann remains unresolved as McGann chooses to limit his critical focus to the element of literary criticism in *Biographia* for the remainder of the study. McGann’s ultimate findings, then, apply only to this element. This is not to say McGann’s conclusions are irrelevant. Although he fails to resolve the various contradictions of the text, his poststructuralist interpretation of Coleridge’s aesthetic process is illuminating: “Coleridge’s theory of poetry sees it as a continuous play of signifiers and signifieds, and its object is to provide, in the traces left by this play, glimpses of the ordering process which is the ground for the play” (750). However, such an aesthetic interpretation is only useful as a means to provide a cohesive vision of *Biographia*, a vision which is inherently limited, in McGann’s own assessment, to issues of literary criticism. An appropriate response to McGann’s interpretation requires not only an examination of the work’s incoherent vision in modes both aesthetic and philosophical, but also an application of those incoherencies to at least a portion of Coleridge’s poetry. Herein lies further critical impetus to examine *Biographia* as an essentially incoherent text: such examinations not only reveal the aporetic mode within the work, they also uncover possible sources of origin for the aporia found within his poetry.
A starting point for examinations of incoherence in *Biographia* may be found in a brief passage from the second chapter. This single statement not only serves as a representative paradigm for the inconsistencies of *Biographia*, it also demonstrates certain anxieties of literary ability which emerge within the work:

Besides, though it may be paradoxical to assert, that a man can know one thing and believe the opposite, yet assuredly, a vain person may have so habitually indulged the wish, and persevered in the attempt to appear, what he is not, as to become himself one of his own proselytes. (Halmi 395)

In the discussion following this declaration, Coleridge attempts to repudiate the notion of “irritability” as an indicator of poetic genius (395). On a local level, the contentions of this passage seek to affirm the failure of the writer to acknowledge or accurately perceive his own poetic ability. On a broader interpretative level, however, the statement is indicative of a writer who is incredibly and inherently conflicted. Coleridge’s admission to this conflict is represented almost immediately in his confession, “though it may be paradoxical to assert.” The passage is further characterized by an implicit difference between competing epistemological modalities of knowledge and belief, clausal duality, and an exhaustive syntax leading to an essential inchoateness. Coleridge’s claim concerning a human’s ability to “know one thing and believe the opposite” not only implicates those he considered to be
poetasters, it implicates himself as well. Coleridge’s explicit knowledge and acknowledgment of “one thing” and “the opposite” betrays his own experience with an epistemological system of duplicity in which the poet both doubts and affirms his creative agency. Furthermore, this self-implication is manifested in the shifting progression of nouns and pronouns which begin as general and inclusive but evolve to become more specific. Such evolution reveals a process of descending stages, in which the sentence progresses from a telescopic representation of everyman to a personal and microscopic self-reference: “a man,” “a vain person,” “he,” “himself.” Note also the shift from the nominative case to the accusative. The clausal duality of the passage parallels this duplicity from the initial “Besides,” an adverb which both refers back to a previous statement and initiates a system of duality in which Coleridge walks a tightrope between contradictory accusations of subject and object, the grammatical manifestations of the symbolic other and the symbolic self. This system is most immediately identifiable in the poet’s diction of function: the initial adverb “besides,” the following subordinating conjunction “though,” and the coordinating conjunction and adverb “yet assuredly,” which betrays not only the poet’s aporia, but his unsuccessful attempt to assuage that aporia. This attitude of reassurance is also revealed in the exhaustive syntax of the sentence which contains no less than six relative clauses and two subordinating clauses. The consequence of such clause accumulation is a declaration which is at once incoherent and desperate, as Coleridge makes multiple (failed) attempts to narrow the semantic (and aesthetic) gap.
The analysis of this passage alone provides significant evidence for the aesthetic incoherence and resulting aporia of *Biographia*; however, current critical research of these issues provide further analysis and support. Especially pertinent here is David Vallins’s identification of the poet’s apprehensions concerning artistic motivation and the value of his literary product, apprehensions which are inherently linked to the anxieties concerning his poetic ability discussed previously.

Acknowledging the philosophical attention Coleridge paid to “non-rational” modes of thought, Vallins identifies the poet’s anxiety concerning these modes and the opposing and grounded rational process of the mind. Furthermore, Vallins asserts that Coleridge struggled to create a reasonable and meaningful order of his feelings which might be “insightful” or “delusive” (158). This struggle ultimately results in Coleridge’s adoption of “idealist” over “empiricist” modes of thought. However, the poet is unable to resolve the anxiety produced by the contemplation of his literary endeavors, which cause an apprehension “about the motivation of his work, both in a moral sense and in terms of its implications for the validity of his ideas” (179).

Vallins’s identification of competing “idealist” and “empiricist” modes in *Biographia* is especially applicable to Coleridge’s assertion “that a man can know one thing and believe the opposite;” however, Coleridge fails to demonstrate, as Vallins claims, a preference for “idealist” modes of belief within the surrounding passage. Vallins’s ultimate interpretation of *Biographia* as an exhibition of unresolved compositional-creative anxiety can be further supported in an examination of the following passage which immediately precedes Coleridge’s assertions of belief and knowledge:
In whatever country literature is widely diffused, there will be many who mistake an intense desire to possess the reputation of poetic genius, for the actual powers, and original tendencies which constitute it. But men, whose dearest wishes are fixed on subjects wholly out of their power, become in all cases more or less impatient and prone to anger. (395)

Vallins’s recognition of anxieties of artistic motivation and validity are especially apparent in these two sentences. Coleridge’s desire to produce specific demarcations of poetic ability or “genius,” his desire to clearly delineate and separate poet from poetaster is indicative of a further support for the anxiety of ability in which the poet implicitly betrays apprehensions surrounding his own creative agency. Furthermore, Coleridge’s experience and knowledge of the “impatience” and “anger” resulting from inability or impotence betrays his own lack of artistic confidence. Along with aesthetic anxieties of ability, artistic motivation, and the validity of his literary product, Coleridge also suffers from a second evaluative anxiety which surfaces in a modality of apology (defense) within Biographia—specifically, Coleridge’s insistent need to defend his work against critical accusations. Interestingly, Coleridge also defends the work of poet Robert Southey. The apologetic mode reveals further evidence of Coleridge’s conflicted evaluative sense of ability and product as it uncovers his specific and intense apprehension of critical reception. In Chapter Three, Coleridge considers the various motivations for the
abuse of various contemporary critics, and focusing on the most likely ("noscitur a socio"), initiates a comprehensive defense of Robert Southey. Coleridge’s need to defend and explain the motives of his critics is indicative of an anxiety of critical reception, an anxiety which is further compounded in the evasive transference of an apology for his own work to an apology of Southey’s. Coleridge acknowledges such a transference, stating, “This, however, transfers, rather than removes, the difficulty” but nevertheless plunges into an exhaustive examination of Southey’s mistreatment (404).

The anxieties of ability, motivation, literary product and critical reception discussed above demonstrate the text’s aesthetic incoherence; however, Biographia is not solely concerned with aesthetics, since it is a philosophical manifesto as well, a manifesto characterized by numerous contradictions and incoherencies. McGann’s acknowledgment of the failure of critical research to interpret a mode or method which resolves these inconsistencies has undoubtedly prompted studies which define the work’s epistemological and philosophical systems as fundamentally irresolvable. Critic Roy Ayon’s investigation of the poet’s “complex and ambivalent attitude towards foundationalist intuitionism” (280) is especially pertinent. After a discussion of the various disparities and convergences of Schelling and Hegel, Ayon asserts that Coleridge’s letters and marginalia reveal his philosophical stance to be located between the two thinkers. Furthermore, this conflicted stance demonstrates a specific paradox of the “self-undermining text” of Biographia, a paradox in which Coleridge expresses “skepticism” concerning intuition while actively employing and
"advancing" the theory (280). Ayon's identification of the "self-undermining" dual processes of uncertainty and promotion of philosophical systems parallel the aesthetic tensions of the text discussed previously in which the poet both doubts and affirms his literary ability. Furthermore, Ayon's acknowledgement of the text's essential philosophical paradox allows the critic to identify the essential aesthetic paradox as well. Coleridge's employment of literary ability to confess to literary inability, his apprehensions concerning the value of his literary product within a literary product, and his anxieties of critical reception which anticipate that reception, all are equally paradoxical. Furthermore, such paradoxes are ultimately representative of the general aporia which surfaces in Coleridge's prose as he repeatedly and consistently traps himself between contradicting assertions of anxiety and ability. These assertions allow no movement, progression or escape precisely because no reconciliation is possible between their essentially opposing circumstances.

Nicholas Rescher's definition of an "apory", as a "group of individually plausible but collectively incompatible theses" (1), provides further elucidation. For example, by itself, Coleridge's affirmation of creative agency is "plausible." However, the addition of the poet's doubt of his abilities to this "thesis" creates a syllogism which is collectively inconsistent. No conclusion can be made to resolve the separate theses because they contradict each other. The inherent aporia which arises from such duality in Biographia may also be viewed as a possible source of origin for certain aporetic functions which emerge in "The Eolian Harp," "Dejection:
An Ode,” and “Kubla Khan.” All three poems commit similar logical errors of duality as their speakers (metapoetically) acknowledge the failure of the poems’ linguistic systems while employing such systems to acknowledge that failure. Furthermore, this process results in a mode of abandonment in all three poems. In “The Eolian Harp,” for instance, contradicting modes of imagination and religion result in the abandonment of a specific poetic system within the poem. In “Dejection: An Ode,” the speaker’s inability to relieve personal moments of doubt and despair leads him to abandon concern for himself and focus on concern for another, the “Lady” whom he apostrophizes throughout the poem, and whom many critics have identified as Sara Hutchinson. In “Kubla Khan,” the speaker abandons the entire poetic system. This similarity of mode certainly connects discussions of the poems’ aporetic functions. But “The Eolian Harp” and “Dejection: An Ode,” are more explicitly linked by their shared concern with Coleridge’s difficult romantic experiences, a fact which determines the order of subsequent discussion and also necessitates a brief biographical discussion.

In a notebook entry written when he was living with the Wordsworths (William and sister Dorothy) and Sara Hutchinson, (1808-1809), Coleridge writes:

Unhappy I!—I have loved many more than ever I loved myself, & one beyond myself, & beyond all things, & all persons—but never, never have I met with any Being who did not love many better than they loved me—Several women that would have married me because no
one whom they better loved, was in their power; but never anyone, who would have married me, because they loved me better than any one. . . . In the Anger of Agony I could almost bid [Hutchinson] look at herself, & into herself, & then ask whether she beloved constantly has a right to compare others with me, & love them better because they are more vigorous, or more this thing or the other—Love more!—O blasphemy! (Halmi 597-598)

On a surface level, the notebook entry is indicative of a sentimental and introspective nature, one in which self-indulgence is particularly prominent. Coleridge, of course, has foreseen this accusation, and argues that his feelings reveal, instead, the "constancy of nature," a characteristic inherent in the "least selfish" individuals (597). Yet the immediate contradiction of this short passage rests in the absence of any mention of Coleridge's wife, Sarah Fricker, whom he married in 1795. Coleridge laments the sad fact that no woman would choose him above others to marry. Yet the poet's choice of Fricker was, ironically, motivated by practical purposes: Coleridge's desire to establish a utopian community, Pantisocracy, with Robert Southey, who, because he was married to her sister, encouraged Coleridge to wed Sarah Fricker.

If "The Eolian Harp" (1795) is any indication, this union began happily even if it eventually resulted in the despondent attitudes expressed above. The poem, which was first published as "Effusion XXXV," and which is addressed to Sarah Fricker, was written immediately before the two were married and is set at Clevedon,
Somersetshire. It begins with descriptions of the peace the speaker feels as he takes joy in his company, Sarah Fricker, and the atmosphere of the evening. The sights, smells and sounds of dusk are noticed and appreciated, and the speaker’s senses are especially tuned to manifestations of nature: the “white-flower’d Jasmin,” “the broad-leav’d Myrtle,” “the clouds, that late were rich with light,” “the star of eve” (ll. 4, 6, 7). Before long, the speaker notices “that simplest Lute,” the Eolian harp, to which he pays considerable attention, assessing the nature of its music, and praising its strange and melodic beauty.

The images associated with the lute’s music are particularly outlandish, at odds with a Christian aesthetic: “Such a soft floating witchery of sound / As twilight Elfins make ... like birds of Paradise / ... hov’ring on untam’d wing” (ll. 20-21, 24-25). Subsequently, these associations lead the speaker to a comparison of the wind which plays the lute to the barrage of idea and thought which floats through the imagination:

And many idle phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain
As wild and various, as the random gales
That swell or flutter on this subject lute! (ll. 32-35)

This analogy, in turn, causes the speaker to hypothesize about the human capability to imagine independently:
And what if all animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely fram’d,
That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps,
Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze. (Il. 36-39)

Comparing human thought processes to the passive, pantheistic musical enactment of the Eolian harp, the speaker asserts the lack of self-will and control, the lack of autonomy, in human individuals. Instead, “animated nature” is controlled by the “intellectual Breeze,” which is “At once the soul of each, and God of all” (Il. 36, 39-40). Considering this ideation from his partner Sarah’s perspective, however, the speaker quickly abandons such a hypothesis as inherently blasphemous:

But thy more serious eye as mild reproof
Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts
Dim and unhallow’d doest thou not reject,
and biddest me walk humbly with my God. (Il. 41-44)

The following final lines of the poem are devoted to the speaker’s affirmation of his Christian faith.

The aporetic function of this poem occurs at a distinct moment: specifically, as the speaker acknowledges the failure of both imaginative and rational processes to arrive at any truth concerning human autonomy. Such a moment is characterized
instead, by the speaker’s complete abandonment of the hypothesis which his observations of nature and the lute have led him to. Instead of following the imaginative line which might be created from his assertions on the “one intellectual breeze ... the soul of each, and God of all,” the speaker deems such reasoning as inherently impossible and irreconcilable with Christian theology. The implicit duality constructed by the speaker which manifests in contradicting modalities of human imagination on one pole and moral considerations on the other, like Coleridge’s opposing aesthetic assertions in *Biographia*, further characterize the poem’s aporia. Such a duality can only be reconciled by the abandonment of one of the contradicting theses. The speaker, of course, chooses to abandon imaginative agency.

Such a process, it might be argued, parallels Derrida’s identification of the third aporetic type which is a “nonpassage because its elementary milieu does not allow for something that could be called passage, step, walk, gait, displacement, or replacement, a kinesis in general. There is no more path. . . . The impasse itself would be impossible.” (21). The speaker’s question is not “how” to reach the conclusion of his many blasphemous assertions because there is no conclusion, no way through to an epistemological destination which does not exist. The aporia, the puzzle which the speaker sets up for himself, is one which has no possible answer because it is beyond the grasp of human mental faculty and can only be answered by a superhuman entity, in Coleridge’s case, the Christian God. Religion then, becomes a manifestation of the unknown; it allows the speaker some reconciliation by
permitting him to abandon his imaginative dilemma, a process which is illustrated in four lines from the earlier version of the poem, "Effusion XXXV":

For never guiltless may I speak of Him,
Th' INCOMPREHENSIBLE! Save when with awe
I praise him, and with Faith that inly feels;
Who with his saving mercies healed me. . . (ll. 50-53)

Like "The Eolian Harp," "Dejection: An Ode" is also addressed to a female, a "Lady" which many critics have argued might be Wordsworth’s sister-in-law, Sara Hutchinson. Unlike "Dejection," the poem’s system of aporia is much more complex. To attend to this complexity, it’s first necessary to realize the poem’s various aporetic modes. In particular, the poem’s aporetic quality depends upon five acts performed by its speaker: 1) the admission that poetic language fails to provide emotional or spiritual catharsis, 2) the paradoxical acknowledgment of the failure of language within a system of language, 3) the generation of an awareness of the unbridgeable difference between perceived and perceiver, signified and signifier, 4) the apprehension that observations of external realities cannot alter, alleviate or modify internal states, and 5) the assertion that observations of external realities allow no obtainable truth concerning those realities, such observations are only capable of mirroring the processes of observation. Furthermore, the nature of such acts causes them to appear within instances of metapoesis, in which the speaker
transcends the immediate narrative of the text to comment on compositional process or aesthetic circumstance.

The poem begins with the speaker’s perception of the weather conditions and his hope for a storm that “might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live” (l. 20). Coleridge’s use of the subjunctive signifier “might” in the line and its parallel in the line immediately previous initiate the poem’s hypothetical and aporetic mode. In the second stanza, the speaker identifies the particular melancholy he experiences as:

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled drowsy, unimpassion’d grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear— (ll. 21-24)

It is an extraordinary grief especially because it is explicitly irresolvable. The speaker’s acknowledgement that the “word” cannot offer “outlet” or “relief” creates the inherent metapoetic paradox of the ode which is written to alleviate emotional trauma yet admits to the impossibility of such an alleviation, a paradox which is immediately and intrinsically related to the “self-undermining” processes demonstrated by Coleridge’s own assertion “that a man can know one thing and believe the opposite” (BL 395). In the remainder of the stanza, the speaker briefly introduces the “Lady” whom he apostrophizes throughout the ode but turns quickly to descriptions of the act and processes of an instance of observation— the object
being the “western sky” and the moon and stars which fill it: “And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!” (I. 30); “I see them all so excellently fair, / I see, not feel how beautiful they are” (II. 37-38). The distinction between visual observation and emotional perception made in the final line is indicative of Coleridge’s attempts to identify the essential separateness of the external sphere and the impossibility of an authentic perception of this sphere by the seer, who may observe beauty but fails to understand it. In the third stanza, the speaker again confesses to feelings morose and melancholic while expounding on internal and external difference: “I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within” (II. 45-46). For the speaker of “Dejection,” observations of outward forms cannot alleviate internal states of emotional anxiety. In stanza four, the speaker again apostrophizes the “Lady” and asserts that the only obtainable epistemological systems are those which come from within, “O Lady! we receive but what we give, / and in our life alone does nature live” (II. 47-48). Nothing may be obtained from observations of the external object but the processes of this observation. This is further expounded as the speaker realizes that even the realization of observational procedure is not certain—but dependent upon the perceiver’s emotional state:

Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—

We in ourselves rejoice!

And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,

All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colours a suffusion from that light. (ll. 71-75)

In stanza six, the speaker reminisces on his happy past which enabled him a poetic ability and laments his current emotional state which “suspends what nature gave me at my birth, / My shaping spirit of Imagination” (ll. 85-86). Such contemplations motivate the speaker to shift his gaze from inward to outward in the seventh stanza, as he attempts to provide a description of the wind “which long has rav’d unnotic’d” (l. 97). This shift demonstrates the paradox of the poem yet again as Coleridge maintains the futility of external observation as he practices such observation. Furthermore, because of such a paradoxical and dual mode, it must be assumed that Coleridge’s textual representations of “wind” represent nothing in the external sphere. Instead, these representations betray their compositional processes. His personification of wind, therefore, must also be viewed as a personification of his own identity. Coleridge himself is the “Mad Lutanist,” the “Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds,” the “Mighty Poet, [even] to frenzy bold!” (ll. 104, 108, 109).

In the final stanza, the speaker again returns to concerns for his “lady,” and wishes her joy and sleep, two accommodations which he does not allow himself. Ultimately, the speaker’s sadness is irresolvable and unalleviated. Whether or not the woman is Sara Hutchinson, Coleridge’s unrequited love, is subject to debate. However, what is significant is the tension created by her resolved state and the speaker’s unalleviated sadness, a tension which remains unmitigated and, it might be assumed, unbearable. Critic Dwight Eddins comes to a similar conclusion as he
asserts that Coleridge’s final apostrophe to the “Lady” represents a hypothetical allusion which provides no relief for what he calls the “poetic failure” of the poem. However, Eddins’s analysis departs from my own in another significant way. Eddins recognizes a conflux of failure in the “metapoem that is at once a lament for vision’s loss and a prayer for its return” (409). The latter aspect emerges as the poem’s central redemptive (aesthetic) quality. This redemption is symbolized in the poem as the approaching storm, which characterizes the possibility of the re-attainment of voice and vision. A similar interpretation is made by Thomas M. Greene. Employing one of Coleridge’s many notebook fragments as an access point to the body of the poet’s work, Greene identifies the dominant symbol of “privation” within this fragment and asserts that “the suggestion that all imaginative writing derives from a certain experience of privation needs to be considered seriously” (908). Greene further contends that Coleridge’s creative confrontation of privation is redemptive, even in a poem of negative capability such as “Dejection: An Ode,” which Greene identifies as Coleridge’s discovery of the “metaphoric generativity of the storm” (927). What both of these critics fail to consider is that the metaphor of the storm is fully realized. The transference of tenor and vehicle occurs and is finalized within the speaker’s personification of himself (discussed previously) as the “Mad Lutanist,” the “Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds,” the “Mighty Poet, [even] to frenzy bold!” (ll. 104, 108, 109). Coleridge equates the tenor of the metaphor, the storm, “Thou Wind, that rav’st” to the vehicle of the “Mad Lutanist,” “who in this month of show’rs, / of dark brown gardens, and of peeping flow’rs, / Mak’st Devils’ yule, with worse than
wint’ry song” (ll. 99, 104-106). To identify the possibility of aesthetic redemption within the storm metaphor is to neglect the narrative of the poem. This transference, (this possible redemption), has already occurred in the poem and has already failed. In Coleridge’s words, “This, however, transfers, rather than removes, the difficulty” (BL 404). The identification of failed transference also connects the aporetic mode of the poem to Derrida’s third aporetic type. The storm is the “elementary milieu [which] does not allow for something that could be called passage, step, walk, gait, displacement, or replacement, a kinesis in general” (21). “There is no more path” within the narrative system of the poem, precisely because the speaker himself embodies the essential separation between self and other, poet and external object, a separation which has already been proven to be impassable. The speaker’s position as both subject (tenor) and object (vehicle) prohibits any possibility of metaphoric transcendence beyond the self, a situation which is further illustrated by the speaker’s shift to thoughts of sleep and his “Dear Lady” in the final stanza. Like the impossibility of metaphoric transcendence, for the speaker, sleep is also impossible: “‘Tis midnight, but small thoughts have I of sleep” (l. 126). This realization, in turn, leads the speaker to abandon concern for himself, and instead focus on the more possible wishes of rest, healing, and happiness for the “Lady:” “Visit her, gentle Sleep! With wings of healing, . . . Joy lift her spirit, Joy attune her voice” (ll. 128, 134).

Eddins’s identification of “Dejection: An Ode” as a “poem of poetic failure” complicates my own assertion of the poem’s “aporetic” qualities. What is the major
difference, we may ask, between these two critical approaches, and their respective nomenclature? Eddins’s study “Darkness Audible: The Poem of Poetic Failure” provides a partial answer. The study examines “the poem of poetic failure” as it emerges in the metapoetic works of four major known poets: Coleridge, Yeats, G.M. Hopkins, and Dylan Thomas. However, Eddins’s emphasis on metapoetics, as exhaustive and informative as it is, leaves little room for a thorough discussion of the concrete and specific terms of poetic failure. Such an omission is ultimately indicative of a larger problem: the lack of a thorough and systematic critical system in which to examine instances of poetic doubt, creative failure, ineffability, and the many other manifestations which emerge when poetic systems malfunction or breakdown. Examining the concept of aporia, in all its dimensions, however, provides a solution. “Poetic failure,” as it is expounded by Eddins, is inherently analogous to the specific functions of aporia which emerge in Coleridge’s work. Discussion of a final poem by Coleridge, “Kubla Khan,” further identifies these functions and makes a final critical aim of this study possible: specifically, the identification of the debilitating mode of Coleridgean aporia, a mode which parallels Eddins’s negative nomenclature.

Like “The Eolian Harp” and “Dejection: An Ode,” a discussion of “Kubla Khan” also benefits from a brief biographical introduction. The poem’s preface, in which the speaker explicitly acknowledges the work as a consequence of “a profound sleep” caused by the “effects” of “an anodyne,” specifically necessitates details
concerning Coleridge’s opium use and addiction. Such addiction was undoubtedly the most severely devastating difficulty suffered by the poet. A notebook entry from 1804, written aboard a ship bound for Malta, describes the excruciating constipation pain, a common side effect of opiate abuse and withdrawal:

the Obscure, or the disgusting—the dull, quasi-finger pressure on the liver, the endless Flatulence, the frightful constipation when the dead Filth impales the lower Gut—to weep & sweat & moan & scream for the parturience of an excrement with such pangs & such convulsions as a woman with an Infant heir of Immortality / for Sleep a pandemonium of all the shames & miseries of the past Life from early childhood all huddled together, & bronzed with stormy Light of Terror & Self-torture / O this is hard, hard, hard!—O dear God, give me strength of Soul to make one trial— (Halmi 601)

While critics have certainly made use of such biographical material to interpret this complex poem, it does little to provide a critical answer to the ongoing argument concerning the poem’s fragmented or whole (finished) state which is complicated by the work’s dual composition: (it contains both preface and actual poetic text). Such duality, which again mirrors the incoherent duality which manifests in Coleridge’s prose, is representative of a fundamental system of opposition in which to locate the text’s main aporetic functions: anxieties of literary value within a literary product
(the poem and its preface), prohibition of external observation which leads to the paradoxical failure (and abandonment) of a poetic system within a poetic text, and an awareness of the unbridgeable difference between perceived and perceiver, signified and signifier.

In the Preface to the poem, Coleridge initiates anxieties of literary value by immediately confessing the work’s lack of “poetic merits.” This acknowledgement is compounded by the speaker’s admission of the unorthodox methods of inspiration in the preface:

In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair. . . . The author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines. . . . (180-181)

Coleridge’s distinction between the sleep of internal and “external senses” is particularly significant to our study as he claims to have written the fragment without external capabilities. Such an assertion allows for the identification of a progression from the speaker’s lament of the futility of external observation in “Dejection” to the outright prohibition of such processes in “Kubla Khan.” Furthermore, the conditions of the poem’s only possible source as “internal” activities of a “profound sleep” are
indicative of its unfinished and abandoned state. Interrupted in the recording processes, the speaker:

found to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purpose of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream in to which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter. (181)

The impossible premise of the poem, then, relies specifically on its method of composition. “Kubla Khan” is an abandoned work precisely because it cannot be accessed by the speaker. Its “elementary milieu,” the tranquilizing of “external senses” and “profound sleep” which is accessed through an experience with the effects of opium cannot be repeated in an exact enough manner to complete the compositional process. The poem’s “impasse itself [is] impossible” (Derrida) because its author cannot return to his source of composition.

But the compositional methods of “Kubla Khan” also highlight another aporetic function within the poem: the speaker’s intense awareness of subject / object difference which culminates in an emotional attitude of fear. Support for this claim is provided by David Hogsette whose interpretation of the poem reveals an aporetic situation in which the “ideal (pro)creative and redemptive imagination lies beyond
Hogsette's analysis relies on the incorporation of the poem's preface into the "performance context" of the poem itself. Hogsette asserts that the aporia of "Kubla Khan" reflects Coleridge's assessment of his own lack of poetic agency. To make such an assertion, he emphasizes the passive compositional process (in part due to the inspirational effect of the opium ingested by the poet) in which the "author figure clearly rejects the faculties of the active primary and secondary imaginations in favor of an unconscious, passive process that is antithetical to Coleridge's ideal poetic process." Hogsette cites the following passage as evidence of the fear produced by such a process:

And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honeydew had fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise. (ll. 48-54)

Hogsette's interpretation of this passage is certainly valid. The inhabitants' anxiety concerning this figure is indicative of Coleridge's own anxiety of ability. Such anxiety is further manifested in the speaker's "vision" of "a damsel with a dulcimer" which is detached from the preceding narrative. This vision is inherently opposed to
the poem's beginnings in which the speaker describes Kubla Khan's edict to construct the Eden-like "pleasure-dome" and its gardens, the appearance of the "sacred river," and "the ancestral voices prophesying war" (ll. 2, 8, 30). This opposition is most evident in the shift which occurs at the beginning of descriptions of this vision, in which the first person "I" first appears in the poem:

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssian maid
And on her dulcimer she play'd,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight would 'twoud win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air. . . . (ll. 37-46)

Along with the first person "I," this passage also reveals a shift of mood in the poem—from indicative to subjunctive. The subjunctive is most notably apparent in the hypothetical "could" and "would" which initiates a mode of doubt or impossibility. Moreover, this mode of impossibility also reveals further anxieties of creative ability as the speaker confesses his inability to "revive within [him]" the
damsel’s “symphony and song” (ll. 42, 43). Finally, the passage is also representative of the failure of a compositional mode which attempts to operate from only internal modalities, without the “external senses.” It is, after all, a “vision” which the speaker cannot “revive” and all of the visions of “Kubla Khan” are ultimately ephemeral. Coleridge’s “passive compositional processes,” as identified by Hogsette, fail as poetic experiments because Coleridge can never access the entirety of his visions. The implications of such failed experiments are dire. Not only does Coleridge fail to transcend the internal through observations of the external in “Dejection,” he fails to produce a complete and functional poem of strictly internal processes in “Kubla Khan” as well.

Such allegations of failure provide further evidence of the debilitating aporetic mode which emerges in Coleridge’s prose and poetry. Such debilitating can certainly be linked to the poet’s traumatic personal life, his romantic difficulties and drug addiction as well as the essential incoherence of Biographia which influences aporetic tropes within his poetry. However, the debilitating mode may also be connected to the issues of intentionality and literary history. Perhaps the manifestations of aporia in the works of Coleridge are bound within modalities of failure because the poet could not realize any other rhetorical or poetic possibility. The Romantic emphasis of the limitless capabilities of the imagination produced a literary and cultural atmosphere in which poetic transcendence was not only deemed possible, but also, inherently essential. When he could not employ imaginative efforts to realize such transcendence, Coleridge knew no other opportunity but
failure. Such an attitude might be further explained by considering the poet’s lack of intentionality. The multiple instances of aporia discussed in this chapter have one thing in common: they were all arrived at inadvertently. Coleridge never intended to examine the limits of the poetic imagination, or the paradoxical state which arises from contradicting philosophy or aesthetic assertion, he arrived at these boundaries by the strange fate of his historical circumstance and traumatic personal life. In the following chapters on Tennyson and Stevens, literary history will demonstrate the ability of the aporetic mode to evolve according to changing circumstances of literary history and author intentionality. Eventually, the mode becomes less indicative of failure and debilitation and more productive. Ultimately, such evolution provides a final argument against the use of negative nomenclature such as “poetic failure.” This nomenclature may be appropriate within a localized examination of Coleridge, but it is restrictive in an examination of the history of aporia. Coleridge is part of that history, his inadvertent interrogations of aporetic function represent the early literary manifestations of the trope, manifestations which demonstrate the literary artist’s struggle with poetry’s limits, its impasses and nonpassages, its aporias.
Chapter Two

*There Lives More Faith in Honest Doubt:*

Consolatory Aporia in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*

In October of 1833, Alfred Tennyson received a letter which was to influence a major portion of his creative work for the next seventeen years. The letter, written by his friend Arthur Hallam’s uncle, contained the dark news of Arthur’s death. A small part of the letter, which announces the tragic event and its circumstances, reads as follows:

Your friend, Sir, and my much loved nephew, Arthur Hallam, is no more—it has pleased God, to remove him from this first scene of Existence, to that better World, for which he was Created. He died at Vienna on his return from Buda, by apoplexy—and I believe his Remains come by sea from Trieste. (qtd. in Ricks 114)

Arthur was not a mere friend of Tennyson; he was a fellow student at Cambridge, an early admirer of Tennyson’s poetry and, at the time of his death, engaged to Tennyson’s sister Emily. Christopher Ricks succinctly summarizes the importance of their relationship when he asserts that “the essential fact is simply that Alfred
Tennyson and his sister loved and needed Arthur Hallam and were loved and needed by him” (115).

There can be no doubt that Hallam’s death deeply influenced Tennyson’s work; yet Arthur was not the first loss suffered by the poet, as he lost his father as well in March 1831. The death of Dr. Tennyson—whose alcoholism and mental illness had caused enormous distress to the family throughout Tennyson’s childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood—represents yet another tragedy which would characterize this dark period in the poet’s life. Because Tennyson refrains from publishing during this time (1832-1842), critics commonly refer to this period as the “decade of silence.” Tennyson was not, however, completely silent, but instead spent much of his time revising earlier work that contemporary critics had assailed.

Alongside these revisions, Tennyson also became involved with work on early fragments which were to become part of his elegy In Memoriam A.H.H. (1849), anonymously dedicated to his departed friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. The popularity of the poem and the poet’s subsequent popular success is indicative of the intrinsic value of In Memoriam both as an artistic expression and an investigation of conflicting modalities of science and religion which define the Victorian period. Scientific discoveries in the nineteenth century, including early theories of evolution, were troublesome to many Victorians because such advancements were in direct conflict with religious and biblical epistemology. Evolutionary theory, brought about in part by advances in geologic sciences, represented a direct challenge to the biblical narrative of creation. In In Memoriam, Tennyson attempts to mediate between
conflicting modes of science and religion, of reason and faith. Furthermore, many of
the poet’s contemporaries believed he had found a resolution between the two which
validated religious faith by means of a partial acceptance of competing systems and
philosophies of scientific discovery and technological progress.

Such an affirmation of faith in the face of science is problematic to many
modern critics who consider the speaker’s doubt as inherently more momentous than
his resolved faith. Such an interpretation is in contrast with the poem’s original
reception and celebration, yet it is indicative of the poem’s complexity and resilience.
The major critical problem of *In Memoriam* parallels the major conflicting modes of
the poem and Tennyson’s attempt to resolve such a conflict. How do critics resolve
its conflicting epistemologies of religious faith and scientific doubt? Such a question
was confronted early in the poem’s critical history. One of the most famous instances
of such a confrontation is Tennyson’s son Hallam Tennyson’s defense of the poem in
his memoir of his father. This defense is centered on the identification and assertion
of his father’s religious beliefs, beliefs which Hallam claimed to be the ultimate
significance of the elegy. Such an argument may be more indicative of Hallam’s
recognition of the unconventional terms of the poem and his need to protect his
father’s image than his determination to uncover his father’s true intentions. More
recently, T.S. Eliot has argued for the poem’s dependence on the figure of doubt: “Its
faith is a poor thing but its doubt is a very intense experience” (138).

Eliot’s emphasis on the agency of doubt provides the scholar with impetus to
further investigate this trope. Eliot’s interpretation should be read as an invitation. To
solely examine the ultimate affirmation of faith in this elegy is to neglect much of Tennyson’s meditation. To respond to this neglect, this study will investigate the possibility of interpreting the poem’s instances of doubt as representative of a larger mode of aporia which occurs in the work. Functions of aporia in *In Memoriam* arise within four distinct elements of the text: I) its multiple manifestations of ineffability, II) its elegiac genre and the functions of that genre, III) its fragmented composition and IV) its speaker’s anxiety over the poem’s reception. Furthermore, this mode will be more specifically defined in the first two sections through the application of Derrida’s first aporetic type in which:

> the nonpassage resembles an impermeability; it would stem from an opaque existence of an uncrossable border: a door that does not open or that only opens according to some unlocatable condition, according to the inaccessible secret of some shibboleth. (*Aporias* 20)

The final sections of this study attempt to demonstrate how the aporetic mode becomes a central consolatory force in the poem as it enables rather than disables the elegy’s dialectical and rhetorical stamina to produce new systems of belief and knowledge.

Much like Coleridge, Tennyson was often troubled by intense anxieties concerning his own literary abilities. In 1834, Tennyson was asked by Arthur’s
father, Henry Hallam, to contribute a memoir to a posthumous collection of Hallam’s prose and poetry. The poet responded in the following self-effacing language:

I attempted to draw up a memoir of his life and character, but I failed to do him justice. I failed even to please myself. I could scarcely have pleased you. I hope to be able at a future period to concentrate whatever powers I may possess on the construction of some tribute to those high speculative endowments and comprehensive sympathies which I ever loved to contemplate; but at present, though somewhat ashamed of my own weakness, I find the object is yet too near me to permit of any very accurate delineation. You, with your clear insight into human nature, may perhaps not wonder that in the dearest service I could have been employed in, I should be found most deficient.

(qtd. in Ricks 146)

Unlike Coleridge, however, these confessions of literary “deficiency” demonstrate an ineffability rather than a strict linguistic failure. The possibility of memorializing Arthur is not completely unattainable, only unattainable at the present moment, “the object is yet too near me to permit of any accurate delineation.”

Similar instances of ineffability arise in the poem itself as well, as the speaker constantly doubts his own poetic abilities and the capabilities of language. In Section
XXXVI, Tennyson’s speaker is berated and belittled by Urania, the classical muse of astronomy, who accuses him of incompetence:

Urania speaks with darken’d brow:
‘Thou pratest here where thou art least;
This faith has many a purer priest
And many an abler voice than thou. (ll. 1-4)

Tennyson’s allusion to Urania is indicative not only of the poet’s interest in astronomy, but of the cultural significance of contemporary discoveries within the field. Such discoveries, and their accompanying theories, became problematic to the Victorian Christian as they challenged traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs concerning planetary creation and stability. In In Memoriam, Tennyson’s engagement with contemporary astronomy becomes a source of poetic doubt which is manifested in the speaker’s comparison of astronomical distance to the distance between life and death and the more general aporia which occurs as the poet attempts to reconcile the scientific obstructions to spirituality.

A study by Anna Henchman provides more specific insight into the field of astronomy in Tennyson’s time. In particular, Henchman emphasizes that contemporary theories of stellar astronomy and stellar decay, and the resulting implications of such secular theories, were as multiple as they were controversial in the Victorian age. Theories which negated the stability of the universe as well as
theories which proposed the ultimate “dissolution of the solar system” (33) consistently inform the text of In Memoriam, often as analogs to describe the distance the speaker feels between himself and his lost friend, Hallam. Tennyson’s inclusion of Urania, then, serves a dual function. First, as Henchman has revealed, Urania becomes a personification of the “astronomical distance” between speaker and object. Furthermore, as a figurehead of science, the muse is symbolic of the logical or scientific barriers which surround matters of spirituality. Urania’s speech represents more than the speaker’s doubt of his own abilities. Specifically, she doubts his competence to discuss matters of religion, directing him, instead, to focus on more earthly issues: “‘Go down beside thy native rill... And hear they laurel whisper sweet / About the ledges of the hill’” (XXXVI, ll. 5-8). If Urania can be interpreted as giving voice to Tennyson’s assessment of his own competence, ultimately, her directive supports the assertion that the poem is centered on doubt rather than faith, a doubt which emphasizes the speaker’s own admissions of ineffability in the inexplicable convergence of science and religion.

In the previous instance, the manifestation of ineffability is directly related to the speaker’s troubled spirituality. In other passages, Tennyson’s speaker’s comments rise above this debate to identify the broader failure of language to produce meaning. In Section LXXV, the speaker laments the fact that he cannot adequately express the esteem he holds for his lost friend. Instead, he focuses on the impossibility to use language to assert or describe a feeling or object:
What practice howso’er expert
In fitting aptest words to things,
Or voice the richest-toned that sings,
Hath power to give thee as thou wert? (ll. 5-8)

Even the best words, the speaker asserts, cannot reproduce Hallam as he was when he was alive. While it informs a broader mode of aporia, this specific lament also touches on the difficulties the speaker encounters as he attempts to honor his dead friend.

Such difficulties arise from Tennyson’s idealist recognition of the impossibility to transcend the self, a recognition which emerges from meditations on the boundary between life and death. This impossibility is most apparent in CVIII, a section immediately following the speaker’s meditation on the anniversary of Hallam’s birth. In CVIII, the speaker’s despair is qualified by his promise to refrain from isolating himself from the rest of humanity in his grief (ll. 1-4). He questions the usefulness of his desire to eulogize Hallam, and in an especially poignant stanza, comments on the impossibility to transcend the self and grasp the desired object:

What find I in the highest place,
But mine own phantom chanting hymns?
And on the depths of death there swims
The reflex of a human face. (ll. 9-12)
In the search for Hallam, or for the appropriate representation of his feelings surrounding the loss of Hallam, Tennyson’s speaker finds nothing but his own writing, the “phantom chanting hymns” which reveal nothing but his own reflection, “the reflex of a human face.” The inherent paradox of this passage, that description of anything outside the self is impossible because the individual is unable to describe anything but itself, is representative of the essential impasse which characterizes specific functions of aporia. The idealist realization that reality depends upon individual observation cannot be reconciled with the speaker’s desire to attain knowledge of an object. The lines are extremely similar to two lines from Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode”: “I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within” (ll. 45-46). However, Tennyson’s allusion to the “depths of death” creates a significant departure from Coleridge’s lines. Whereas the separation of subject/object in “Dejection” is absolute; the impasse of Tennyson’s quatrain is dependent upon the boundary between mortality and death. Early in the elegy, Tennyson’s speaker personifies this boundary as a Death-like figure, “the Shadow fear’d of man”:

Who broke our fair companionship,
And spread his mantle dark and cold,
And wrapt thee formless in the fold,
And dull’d the murmur on thy lip,
And bore thee where I could not see
Nor follow, tho’ I walk in haste,
And think, that somewhere in the waste
The Shadow sits and waits for me. (XXII, ll. 12-20)

The boundary is further described in the final stanza of section LVI which follows
Tennyson’s famous depiction of evolutionary Nature, as “red in tooth and claw”
(l.15). The speaker’s realization of the cruelty of natural law leads him to yearn for
Hallam’s voice:

O life as futile, then, as frail!
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
What hope of answer, or redress?
Behind the veil, behind the veil. (ll. 25-28)

However, access to that voice is separated by a “veil.” Because of the multiple
religious and ceremonial connotations of the word, Tennyson’s use of veil creates
certain hermeneutical challenges. In Christian liturgical traditions, the veil is used to
honor and protect the Eucharist. Tennyson most certainly would have been familiar
with the tabernacle veil and chalice veil. Given the elegiac mode of In Memoriam,
however, the veil in Section LVI is most likely intended to conjure associations of
mourning. The speaker’s desire to access Hallam’s “voice” is blocked by the boundary of the “veil” of death. This boundary is not “impossible” as in Derrida’s third aporetic type, but rather—“impermeable.” The impasse emerges from the “opaque existence of an uncrossable border” (Aporias 20), the border of death, which Tennyson’s speaker, because he is among the living rather than the dead, can contemplate but not pass through. The speaker may realize that “redress” exists, but he cannot gain admittance “behind the veil.” Furthermore, because Tennysonian aporia allows for such contemplation, as opposed to the debilitating mode which emerges in Coleridge’s works, the speaker’s realization of the distance or gap between subject and object is not representative of a terminal phase of In Memoriam’s aporetic processes. That this realization is, in fact, consolatory, can be demonstrated within further investigations of the text’s essential elements.

In any analysis of In Memoriam, it is important to acknowledge the more immediate concerns of the poem as an affectionate elegy written on the occasion of the author’s loss of a dear friend. But the elegy, of course, is part of a longer poetic tradition, a tradition which Tennyson both honors and departs from. In an examination of early rituals associated with the vegetation gods, Peter M. Sacks identifies the traditional elegy as containing certain conventions, among them: the “ceremonial structure,” which “place[s] the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living” (19); the element of catharsis or “basic passage through grief or darkness to consolation and renewal” (20); “elegiac questioning,” which set[s] free the energy locked in grief or rage and to organize[s] its movement in the
form of a question that is not merely an expression of ignorance but a voicing of a protest” (22); and the trope of repetition which “creates a sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death” (23). *In Memoriam* contains all four of these conventions. Structurally, the poem is organized around three descriptions of Christmas and ends with the epithalamium for Tennyson’s sister’s wedding. Its cathartic function depends upon Tennyson’s proposal of the concept of “moral evolution” which is introduced in the Prologue and further expounded in the Epilogue. The poem’s “elegiac questioning” is fulfilled by the speaker’s constant questioning of faith, which becomes problematic as it is juxtaposed with modern science. Finally, Tennyson’s use of repetition may be most apparent in the strict adherence to meter (abba).

While the poem certainly adheres to many standard conventions of the elegy, it departs from the genre in many significant ways. John D. Rosenberg identifies two such departures as the poem’s great length and transgressive quality. Of its length, Rosenberg claims:

*In Memoriam* is a slow, winding procession that, like mourning, circles back upon itself even as it progresses. It is six times longer than “Adonais,” fifteen times longer than “Lycidas.” [Tennyson] strains the generic seams of the elegy to the bursting point, yet he remains eminently Victorian in mourning at such elaborate length. (41)
Rosenberg's claim that Tennyson's particular form of mourning represents a "Victorian" approach is complicated by his identification of the poem's transgressive quality which is inherently opposed to Victorian decorum. The transgressive, Rosenberg asserts, is most evident early on in the poem in passages which exhibit "a crossing of borders that normally separate the living from the dead, the natural from the supernatural one sex or species from another" (36). Rosenberg cites Section II as evidence of this border-crossing:

And gazing on thee, sullen tree,  
Sick for thy stubborn hardihood,  
I seem to fail from out my blood  
And grow incorporate into thee. (ll. 13-16)

Certainly, these particularities of genre are illuminating. Yet the poem’s membership in the poetic tradition of the elegy also contributes significantly to its aporetic mode. A contemporary poem, W.S. Merwin's "Elegy," succinctly summarizes the futility and ineffability which mark this genre in a single question: "Who would I show it to?" Ultimately, the elegy is a poetic text written for the dead, which the dead can never read. The elegiac aporia of In Memoriam emerges from such paradox as the speaker acknowledges the impassable gap between subject and object while simultaneously and persistently attempting to address or name that object. More
simply, Tennyson’s speaker undertakes a poetic errand he has already recognized as impossible. Critical work by David W. Shaw—who provides further evidence of the paradoxical quality of the elegiac genre—and Erik Gray—who recognizes the apostrophic difficulties in the poem—further support an identification of the poem’s dual, contradicting processes. Furthermore, the uncovering of such processes ultimately reveals a specific connection between *In Memoriam*’s elegiac aporia and Derrida’s first aporetic type.

In his poststructuralist analysis of elegiac paradox, Shaw identifies two modes of elegiac “tremor”: first, the “tremulous ripple effect of a verbal ambiguity or two-way meaning;” and second, the “transgress[ion] [of] a code” or convention (219). This second mode is paid exhaustive attention in the examination of “six more specific ways in which Tennyson’s elegies transgress other earlier conventions” with the ultimate aim of uncovering the essential paradox of the genre first identified by Tzetvan Todorov (220). Such a paradox is evident in the fact that these transgressions both uncover and undermine the genre’s conventions. Shaw’s realization of the dual and paradoxical processes of “uncover[ing]” and “undermin[ing]” within *In Memoriam* is further informed by Erik Gray’s recognition of the speaker’s “difficult” search for “someone or something to address” in the beginning stanzas of the poem (xx). Gray identifies five separate attempts of the speaker to name his object: “Old Yew” (II, l. 1), “O Sorrow” (III, l. 1), “O heart” (IV, l. 5), “Dark house” (VII, l. 1) and “Fair ship” (IX, l. 1). Gray’s recognition of these apostrophic difficulties is sufficient but not completely comprehensive. In fact, such
difficulty is further compounded by the fact that many of these attempts of the speaker contain multiple representations of the addressed object. The hauntingly beautiful lines of the third stanza show such representations beginning with "O Sorrow" and followed by further epithets: "cruel fellowship," "O Priestess in the vaults of Death" and "O sweet and bitter in a breath," (III, ll. 1,2,3). "Dark house" is followed by "Doors, where my heart was used to beat" (VII, ll. 1,3). In stanza nine, "Fair Ship" becomes "My friend, the brother of my love" and finally the impossible "My Arthur, whom I shall not see" (IX. ll. 1,16,17). The fluctuation of address demonstrates the speaker's impulse to search for his object in abstract terms initially, and, as he continues, in progressively more concrete and specific language. Additionally, the various terms employed to describe the object each become unique epithets for Hallam as the speaker attempts to locate not only his friend, but the loss of this friend.

More significantly—the multiplicity of object, and the multiplicity of epithet within each object, in the beginning stanzas of the poem—ultimately create an incoherent analog. The tenor or ground of such an analog is understood to be the implicit "you" the speaker is attempting to address. Because it is not altered, it can be considered stable. The vehicle or figure of the analog, however, is constantly in flux. Gray identifies five vehicles and within those five, three contain multiple variations. Such morphology of vehicle—the continuous adjustment of the metaphor's source by the speaker—admits the poetic impossibility of a suitable metaphor for Hallam while
simultaneously demonstrating, yet again, the un-passable gap between subject and object, which inevitably exists in the system of an elegy.

This dual process further affirms Shaw's assertion of the poem's elegiac function, but also reveals the link between the function of aporia in *In Memoriam* and Derrida's third aporetic type: the impasse of "a door that does not open or that only opens according to some unlocatable condition, according to the inaccessible secret of some shibboleth" (*Aporias* 20). Derrida's assertion that this aporetic type depends upon "some unlocatable condition" directly corresponds to the inability of Tennyson's speaker to locate the appropriate vehicle to represent Hallam. Yet the speaker's persistence, his attempt to utilize five vehicles and multiple variations within three of those vehicles, reveals a specific condition of possibility. The speaker of the elegy does not, as Coleridge's speakers often do, submit to the failure of transcendence, but rather continues to attempt to find, to locate, the condition in which he might succeed. Derrida's use of the word "shibboleth" presents some interpretative difficulty. However, one possible analysis might include an explication of the term as representative of the two epistemological modes which the poem fluctuates between: the shibboleths of Christian faith and scientific doubt. Both modes, Tennyson's speaker seems to assume, contain the potential to reveal some "inaccessible secret." Contemporary scientific discoveries in fields of geology, evolutionary science and astronomy revealed massive and groundbreaking data in Tennyson's day. Similarly, Christianity, with its mystery, ritual, and imaginative allure must also be assumed to have been an attractive in ways both "inaccessible"
and "secret." Tennyson's traversal between these two extremities may also be seen as an attempt to locate the "unlocatable," and to untangle the incoherent analog which inevitably emerges in the elegiac genre.

The persistent attempts of the speaker to resolve the incoherent analog are representative of a significant aspect of the poem's aporetic mode. Specifically, Tennysonian aporetic function departs from the debilitation which occurs in Coleridge's work because the speaker consistently seeks out new methods when faced with failure and incoherence. Tennyson's apostrophic usage of "Fair Ship," which is carried over into a latter section of the elegy, has led one critic to examine the poem's navigation imagery and assert the poem's positive agency. Allan C. Christensen asserts that Tennyson's admissions of failure and linguistic inadequacy are identified as "strategic" because they ultimately result in "sources of inspiration" which save the poem from the speaker's abandonment. Comparing In Memoriam with G.M. Hopkins's "The Wreck of the Deutschland," Christen recognizes that climactic passages in both poems lead to strategic modifications from negative commentary on narrative progresses to modes of "more positive confidence" (394). Ultimately, Christensen argues for an evolutionary narrative of both "The Wreck" and In Memoriam, a narrative which "investigat[es] the possibilities of language" and in the process, "leads both poets to a new linguistic mastery" (402). Similarly, Shaw's discussion of themes of contradicting modes of "forgetting and remembering" (221) and "brokenness and continuity" (224) illustrate "the process of a genre's breakdown and renewal" (228). The identification of such a process also
allows for the identification of its positive effect on Tennyson’s creative capabilities, an effect which allows the poet to recognize the break from old elegiac convention and forces him to seek new, evolved methods of elegy (229).

The inevitable incoherence of the elegy should cause any poet a fair amount of anxiety over his work’s intents and outcomes, and Tennyson would not have been an exception. It’s important to remember, here, that *In Memoriam* was written in fragments over a long period of time. Tennyson himself describes the process in the following terms:

> The sections were written at many different places, and as the phases of our intercourse came to my memory and suggested them. I did not write them with any view of weaving them into a whole, or for publication, until I found that I had written so many.

(qtd. in Gray’s “Introduction”)

In a study of “loss” in *In Memoriam*, Irene Hsiao further explores Tennyson’s admissions of the poem’s unfinished and fragmented quality by recognizing two early title considerations for the poem: “Fragments of an Elegy” and “The Way of the Soul.” The first, Hsia argues “implies something unfinished, shattered, the shards of something unpieceable, yet it is also within sight of a cognizable whole: the elegy” (173). “The Way of the Soul,” on the other hand, “is too complete, suggesting a
narrative, a journey arriving at its proper destination” (173). Hsai goes on to argue that the poem’s fragmented, sectional form and the circular rhyme and meter of its stanzas advance a mode of infinite loss and mourning with no actual “consolation of formal finitude” (194). However, her recognition of the tension between the two title considerations is also indicative of Tennyson’s uncertainty of the specific value of the poem.

This uncertainty, coupled with Tennyson’s admissions of the poem’s fragmentation, its continuous starting and stopping, must be assumed to have paralleled the poet’s continuous questioning of the value of compositions in the elegiac genre. Such questioning, of course, is what gives the final assemblage its rhetorical and dialectical depth as it forces the speaker to continually attempt to justify his creative failure. Eliot describes the fragmentary composition of *In Memoriam* in the following terms: “It is unique: it is a long poem made by putting together lyrics, which have only the unity and continuity of a diary, the concentrated diary of a man confessing himself. It is a diary of which we have to read every word” (136). Eliot’s identification of the confessional mode of the poem is useful in that 1) it lends some coherence to the poem’s fragmented form and 2) it justifies the speaker’s admissions of doubt. Tennyson’s speaker’s confessions allow him to express the poem’s failure and attempt to resolve or explain such failure. Such attempts, are not, in themselves, admissions of the inability of the speaker to console himself. Instead, the speaker finds consolation in the act of honoring his deceased
friend. Such an act, as well as the consolation it brings, is especially evident in the final two stanzas of Section VIII:

So seems it in my deep regret,
O my forsaken heart, with thee
And this poor flower of poesy
Which little cared for fades not yet.

But since it pleased a vanish’d eye,
I go to plant it on his tomb,
That if it can it there may bloom,
Or dying, there at least may die. (ll. 17-24)

The passage describes the speaker's use of poetry, which he compares to a flower laid on the grave, to honor Hallam. The two stanzas are characterized, first, by the speaker's admissions of creative failure. The "flower of poesy" is "poor" and "little cared for." And yet, the same flower also retains some strength and potential: it "fades not yet," and once "pleased a vanish’d eye" (Hallam was an early admirer of Tennyson's poetry). Ultimately, however, it is the act itself which is valuable as the speaker admits that whether the flower "die" or "bloom," "at least" the offer itself was made.
While this passage emphasizes the consolation the poet receives through the value of poetic offering in spite of creative failure, other sections achieve consolation by focusing on the value inherent in the actual writing process. In Section V, which immediately follows his search for an object, the speaker admits to the failure of the poem to access Hallam and confesses “I sometimes hold it half a sin / To put in words the grief I feel” (ll. 1-2). Immediately following, however, the speaker’s recognition of his failure is justified by his assertion that the poetic act is a useful process for the control of grief. The writing process becomes a consolation to the writer:

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,

A use in measured language lies;

The sad mechanic exercise,

Like dull narcotics, numbing pain. (V, ll. 5-8)

The speaker’s admission of this self-motivated aspect of the writing process, while it demonstrates concrete evidence of the consolatory mode, also acts as a source for further anxieties about the imagined reception of the poem. In section XX, which so beautifully alludes to the tradition of the pastoral elegy, the speaker considers three criticisms which might be brought against the poet: the poet’s extreme sentimentality, which “…would make weakness weak / and melt the waxen hearts of men” (XXI, ll. 7-8); the poet’s superficial determination to receive praise, “‘He loves
to make a parade of pain / That with his piping he may gain / The praise that comes to constancy’” (XXI, ll. 10-12); and the poet’s neglect of more public issues and problems for private, selfish interests:

A third is wroth: Is this an hour
For private sorrow’s barren song,
When more and more the people throng
The chairs and thrones of civil power? (XXI, ll. 13-16)

This final criticism leads its speaker, the third “traveler” who criticizes the speaker of the poem, to further consider the poem’s neglect of scientific issues, as he continues his question of timing:

A time to sicken and to swoon,
When Science reaches forth her arms
To feel from world to world, and charms
Her secret from the latest moon? (XXI, ll. 17-20)

Obviously, these criticisms represent manifestations of the speaker’s constant doubt and the poem’s aporetic mode. However, they also provide a paradigm for the consolatory agency of such a mode. Tennyson’s emphasis on the final criticism, to which he devotes two stanzas as compared to the two and three lines of the previous
two criticisms, is indicative not only of his interest in science but of the quantity of
guilt and failure he experiences as he neglects this subject. Such an experience
becomes productive in the poem because it represents an exigency or impetus to
refute the critique, ultimately allowing for the speaker’s concentration on scientific
subjects such as evolutionary theory. Tennyson’s anxieties over his talent and critical
reception, in other words, enable renewed and vigorous examinations of scientific
topics which may be viewed as attempts of the poet to invalidate his imagined poetic
deficiencies. Furthermore, Tennyson’s scientific examinations are not without a
concrete product. By the end of the elegy, Tennyson provides a possible resolution to
the conflict of science and religion by predicting that humanity will undergo a moral
evolution, a philosophy which comes to fruition in the Epilogue as Tennyson
imagines his sister’s child’s conception and embryonic development:

A soul shall draw from out the vast
And strike his being into bounds,

And, moved thro’ life of lower phase,
Result in man, be born and think,
And act and love, a closer link
Betwixt us and the crowning race. . . . (ll. 123-128)
Undoubtedly this application of evolutionary theory to the religious dilemma of the Victorian era represents one of the greatest achievements of the poem. However, it may not be the only application of evolutionary theory Tennyson endorses. The constant dialectic between doubt and faith can also be interpreted to mirror evolutionary theory. The speaker’s many doubts and failures throughout the poem, his expressions of anxiety and ineffability, are part of a larger aesthetic-compositional mode which seeks to identify and terminate futile artistic rhetoric to clear a path for more qualified rhetoric. Furthermore, Tennyson’s tendency to re-examine and re-write enables the poem’s central consolation. Tennyson achieves this consolation precisely because he persists in valuing the dialectic process rather than succumb to his many spiritual doubts and poetic anxieties. Recognizing that the melancholia of the speaker does not mandate an elegiac failure, Peter M. Sacks comes to a similar conclusion concerning the consolatory value of the poem:

'Throughout, In Memoriam reveals the melancholic’s self-love and self-doubt, his guilt and self-contempt … his distrust of mediation, especially that of his own language, and his reluctance to accept any remedy for grief. And yet, In Memoriam does eventually represent a successful work of mourning, one whose intriguing aspect is not Tennyson’s skepticism— “the quality of his doubt”—but rather the unique if tortuous way in which he achieves consolation by revising rather than rejecting the constrains of his own melancholia. (169)
This revision, as Sacks calls it, is perhaps most evident in Section CVI, a sequence of anaphoric stanzas which celebrates the extinction of old, ineffectual modes and the arrival of a new, more ethical humanity:

Ring out the old, ring in the new
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

..................................................

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be. (ll. 5-8, 29-32)

Such a mode may have been first identified by J.L. Kendall in “A Neglected Theme in Tennyson’s In Memoriam.” Acknowledging the failure of critics to recognize an essential element of In Memoriam’s narrative “progression” from doubt or “despair” to its ultimate affirmation of faith, Kendall asserts that the elegy consists of an essential failure, and an accompanying attitude toward that failure, which together represent the “indispensable conditions of [the poem’s] ultimate success” (414). Kendall traces the processes of defeat and success through the four sections of the poem and reasserts that the final affirmative attitudes of the speaker are caused by
his “unequivocal acceptance of defeat,” an acceptance which allows for the speaker’s evolution toward a tranquil and productive faith (420).

Kendall’s usage of the vague terms “failure” and “success” are indicative of the study’s general lack of a critical framework in which such terms might be more precisely identified. The “failure” of In Memoriam and the speaker’s attitude toward that failure may be more specifically interpreted as Tennyson’s confrontation with Derrida’s first aporetic type, the “impasse ... of a door that does not open or that only opens according to an unlocatable condition” (20). The sense of possibility evoked by this type of aporia, its unlocatable condition” which might allow passage, permits the speaker of the poem to continue to search for that condition in spite of blockages and failures. While Kendall’s nomenclature differs from the classifying terms of this study, his recognition of the evolutionary processes which lead to the poem’s ultimate achievement parallel my own assertion of an evolutionary aesthetic-compositional mode. A more succinct paradigm of this mode can be identified as a dual process of causation in which Tennyson recognizes the futility of the elegiac form which leads him to further anxieties of audience. These anxieties, in turn, enable the emphasis of evolutionary theory, which allows the poet to produce the ultimate epistemological system of moral evolution. Such processes not only celebrate manifestations of aporia and doubt; they require these manifestations. It is doubt which enables Tennyson his ultimate resolution, and it is Tennyson’s recognition of the positive agency of doubt which is the other great achievement of In Memoriam, an elegy in which “There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe
me, than in half the creeds” (XCVI, ll. 11-12).

In the previous study of aporetic function in Coleridge’s prose and poetry, I have argued that Coleridge arrives at instances of debilitating aporia inadvertently, without any specific intention. What I have attempted to demonstrate in this study of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* is that the aporia which arises in this elegy functions, not as a debilitating mode, but as a productive mode of consolation. While instances of doubt and despair may result in creative blockage or debilitating despair, these effects are largely temporary within the poem. That is, such blockages do not result in the termination or complete abandonment of the work’s poetic and rhetorical systems. The impasses do, however, allow Tennyson to realize when and why a particular epistemological strategy fails and to correct this failure through the attempt of alternate strategies. Such a position certainly raises questions concerning intentionality and literary history. Could Tennyson have been aware of the productive potential made available by aporetic systems? Furthermore, what circumstance of literary history or biography allows for the evolution of the aporetic function from debilitating, in Coleridge’s work, to productive and consolatory in Tennyson’s? Of course it is possible that Tennyson may have been exposed to the term aporia, but ultimately, such exposure is irrelevant. The poem itself, its continuous fluctuations between faith and doubt, spirituality and scientific inquiry, demonstrates the poet’s exposure and employment of the dialectical mode, a mode which may be viewed as analogous to broader productive functions of aporia. To assert that the poet actively “employs” the dialectic necessarily includes further
implicit assertions of Tennyson's intentionality. I will not argue that strategies to employ the dialectic or aporetic mode were, in any way, premeditated or preconceived by Tennyson. However, it may be more likely that Tennyson, having worked on *In Memoriam* for 17 years, arrived at the knowledge of these strategies as he confronted his personal doubts and failures as well as the spiritual doubts of the Victorian age. Furthermore, the overall nature of the Victorian era in which scientific progress challenged more traditional foundations of religion may also be viewed as an origin for the dialectical mode of Tennyson's elegy. Finally, the poem's genre may have also influenced Tennyson's intentions, for the traditional purpose of the elegy is not debilitating, but productive work which seeks to allow for and facilitate the grieving process. In the final chapter of this study, which examines functions of aporia in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, the mode of aporia will evolve even further in regards to productivity and modernist intentionality. Tennyson's place in this evolutionary history represents the essential shift of the poetic usage of aporia—from debilitating or destructive to consolatory and productive, a shift which will demonstrates, overall, the ability of poets not only to access the boundaries of language, but to employ those boundaries in fruitful ways.
Chapter Three

Notes Toward a Koan:

The Aporetic Situation in the Works of Wallace Stevens

One of the most unique aspects of the life of Wallace Stevens— and a circumstance which sets him apart from Coleridge and Tennyson— is the fact that he worked as a lawyer both before and during his career as poet. Born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania, Stevens attended Harvard College from 1897-1900, and, a few years later, graduated from New York Law School. After working for a variety of law firms in the first decade after his graduation, Stevens moved to Hartford, Connecticut to join the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, where he was eventually named Vice-President in 1834. Stevens continued to work in this position even as he began publishing poetry frequently in the years following (Brazeau xi-xiii). The effect of Stevens’s professional career on his poetry is not immediately discernable but becomes more apparent by considering the poet’s frequent business trips, many of which took him to Key West, Florida. Stevens was fascinated with the tropical climate, which differed so much from his home in the Northeast, and this fascination surfaced in his creative work in such poems as “The Idea of Order at Key West” (1936). In this and other works, Stevens’s portrayal of the warmth, energy, and life of the Florida Keys is in direct contrast with the bleakness of a Connecticut winter and the drudgery of office work. Furthermore, such a contrast also reveals
Stevens’s particular approach to poetry, written between office hours as a kind of imaginative escapism. It is this attitude which perhaps most characterizes the lawyer’s creative endeavors. His poetic activity was an escape from his professional career, a chance for him to find recreation within his own imaginative abilities. More than anything, the playful curiosity with which Stevens crafted his poems led the poet to an innovative and experimental aesthetic that allowed him to investigate the potential and strength of the imagination.

As a connoisseur of art, Stevens maintained a variety of interests. His penchant for the exotic was not limited to a fascination with the tropical, but extended, as well, to a fascination with Eastern art and culture. Nowhere is this fascination more evident than in the multiple references to Asian poetry, painting, and literature that can be found among his personal notes and correspondences. Even as early as 1909, long before the publication of his first breakthrough collection *Harmonium* (1923), Stevens wrote with subtle fondness and enthusiasm on Chinese culture in a letter to his future wife, Elsie Moll: “I do not know if you feel as I do about a place so remote and unknown as China—the irreality of it. So much so, that the little realities of it seem wonderful and without belief” (*Letters* 137). Further in the same letter, Stevens transcribes and praises a poem written by Wang Anshi, a Chinese poet of the Song Dynasty. “Curious thing,” Stevens remarks after describing the simple beauty of the poem, “how little we know about Asia and all that. It makes me wild to learn it all in a night” (138). This small example—of which there are many—of Stevens’s appreciation of Eastern art, demonstrates not only his desire to
gain a cultural education beyond Western traditions, it also reveals an early and persistent poetic influence.

In recent years, the scholarly work concerning Stevens’s influences has been extensive. J.S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton note the influence of St. Anselm, an eleventh-century theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury, on Wallace Stevens’s poetic treatment of the “ideal and real.” In another study, Mark S. Burrows traces Stevens’s employment of apophatic modes which value creativity and imagination to similar modes first employed by “mystical writers of the late antique and medieval periods” (176). Despite these and other enriching contributions, however, few critics have fully realized or recognized the Eastern (specifically Chinese) tendencies of Stevens’s poetics, or the factors that may have brought about such tendencies.

The critical impetus of this study, then, is partially based on the attempt to assuage such critical oversight. When viewed in the context of Eastern literature, Stevens’s “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1947) incorporates a poetic system which is startlingly similar to the Chinese literary genre of the kōan. To demonstrate such similarity, it is first necessary to realize the rhetorical-poetic circumstances in which the kōan-like modality emerges: specifically, the situation of aporia. Much like Rescher’s definition of an “apory” as “a group of individually plausible but collectively incompatible theses” (2), the kōan operates from the circumstance of a “double-bind” – a dual set of contentions which cannot, together, be rationally compatible. The first section of this study is comprised of examinations of aporetic function in three of Stevens’s poems: “The Course of a Particular” (1950), “The
Plain Sense of Things” (1952), and “A Clear Day and No Memories” (1954). Two additional poems will further contextualize the discussion and introduce “Notes”:

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1917), which demonstrates early eastern influence and technique, and “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (1922), which reveals Stevens’s early disillusionment with Western religion and includes his first mention of the concept of “supreme fiction.” Subsequent analysis of Stevens’s major poem “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” provides further elucidation of the similarities between the kōan and functions of aporia. These discussions also attempt to further define specific modes of aporia by applying Derrida’s second aporetic type in which:

The nonpassage, the impasse or aporia, stems from the fact that there is no limit. There is not yet or there is no longer a border to cross, no opposition between two sides: the limit is too porous, permeable, and indeterminate. (21)

The final segment of this study attempts to demonstrate how functions of aporia enable a productive mode in Stevens’s “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Discussion of such productivity is then juxtaposed with the central aporetic modes of debilitation and consolation in Coleridge’s and Tennyson’s work.

Examinations of the figure of aporia within Stevens’s poetic work are not uncommon in contemporary critical circles; however, the assertion that instances of
aporia might permit an identifiable product does represent an original critical stance. Bart Eeckhout, for instance, employs examinations of aporia to reveal Stevens's treatment of linguistic and literary limitations. Eeckhout's assertions concerning the concept of aporia rely on the argument that Stevens casts such limitations in a negative light by focusing on the inherent aporia "between reality and language" (265). Such aporias, Eekhout claims, reveal the poet's ultimate embracement of principles of "totality," as well as "the supremacy of logic and absolute thought" (266). Ultimately, Eekhout's examination of aporetic function in Stevens's work is somewhat incomplete because he fails to consider not only the productive possibilities of Stevens's aporias but also the various modalities in which these aporias might arise. Perhaps the most distinct of these is Stevens's use of apophasis in "The Course of a Particular" (1950).

Somewhat reminiscent of the barren landscapes in Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Stevens's "The Course of a Particular" depicts a desolate scene of "icy shades and shapen snow" (I. 3) in "the nothingness of winter" (I. 2). The bleakness of tone and setting immediately becomes a trope essential to the processes of observation and to the object of that observation, named in the first line: "Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind" (I. 1). This "cry" is repeated throughout the poem's five stanzas of tercets as it becomes informed by the negative, apophatic atmosphere of the poem. Such an atmosphere represents not merely absence or barrenness but the attempt to quantify infinite absence, absence which is capable of further and further reduction, further lessening: "The nothingness of"
winter” in the second line, “becomes a little less.” The cry of the leaves, too, is subject to such apophasis as the speaker attempts again and again to decipher its meaning. The speaker can only describe what the cry of the leaves is not: “It is not a cry of divine attention, / Nor the smoke-drift of puffed out heroes, nor human cry” (II. 10-11). The various apophatic attempts to name the meaning of the sound ultimately lead the speaker to a realization of inherent ineffability: “It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves” (l. 12).

Such ineffability relies on an essentially incoherent analog, the product of failed rhetorical and poetic processes. Stevens’s title “The Course of a Particular,” consequently, becomes indicative of the failed rhetorical process of the observation of a particular object or experience. The speaker observes the sound of the winter foliage but immediately realizes his own failure to interpret its meaning: “It is a busy cry, concerning someone else” (l. 5). He attempts to describe the object in negative, apophatic terms but fails again, noting that the leaves fail to “transcend themselves” (l. 12). Finally, the speaker acknowledges the inherent meaninglessness of his object of observation and with this acknowledgment abandons the attempted analog. The leaves signify nothing outside their own existence:

In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all. (ll. 13-15)
The aporetic function of this poem exists within this incomplete analog, one which is stilted or neglected. The tenor or ground of the poem's major metaphor, the "cry of the leaves," is left without a vehicle or figure. In formulaic terms, the metaphor is incomplete; $X=Y$ but $Y$ is undefined. In fact, $Y$ is deemed impossible by the speaker. Such ineffability in the midst of seasonal destitution is ultimately symbolic not of earthly desolation but of linguistic deficiency.

Such a reading is undoubtedly supported by the recent scholarship of Helen Vendler. Vendler identifies a set of rhetorical tropes in the work of Wallace Stevens which provides a method of examining the poet's creative evolution and unique style. These rhetorical tropes, identified as "ifs and ors" and "buts," are indicative of the fluctuation of "speculation" and the "obstruction of speculation" in Stevens' poetry. The progression of Stevens' creative work throughout his oeuvre, as Vendler argues, reflects an initial dependence on these tropes, followed by a period of doubt in which he questions their rhetorical worth, and a final period in which he abandons such tropes all together (101). Such a model can undoubtedly be applied to the rhetorical processes of "The Course of a Particular," but Vendler's study also releases the poem from its own negative and barren energy. Further in the essay, Vendler asserts that this sequence demonstrates the poet's interest in multiple methods of searching for truth, methods which ultimately demonstrate that even at his most barren and thematically desolate, Stevens' rhetorical dialectics are an argument for the depth and richness of his work rather than its desolation (117).
In “The Plain Sense of Things” (1952), Stevens persists upon the ideational line of “The Course of a Particular.” In certain undeniable ways, “The Plain Sense” begins where “The Course” ends. Again, the speaker finds himself in the barren season of winter “after the leaves have fallen” (I. 1); and again he meditates on the limits of observation. “We return,” the speaker asserts, “To a plain sense of things...as if / We had come to an end of the imagination” (II. 1, 2-3). It is the same finale arrived at in “The Course,” repeated here as an initial meditation. Such thematic repetition not only demonstrates Stevens’ obsession with the limits of the imagination, but also his desire to repeat his own arrival at those limits. In spite of rhetorical and poetic restriction the speaker takes joy in describing epistemological boundaries: the greenhouse in need of paint, the dilapidated chimney which “slants to one side,” the “great pond and its waste of the lilies” (II. 9,10, 18).

But “The Plain Sense” is not only an imaginative exercise of joy. Stevens’s reiteration of the aporetic trope of imaginative failure is productive as well. The first product, a system of clear ineffability, is expressed in an instance of metapoiesis in which the speaker comments on compositional process and aesthetic circumstance:

It is difficult even to choose the adjective
For the blank cold, this sadness without cause.
The great structure has become a minor house.
No turban walks across the lessened floors. (II. 5-8)
It is this system of ineffability which rhetorically enables the second, and more significant, achievement of the poem: a kind of poetic epiphany in which the speaker becomes conscious of the startling knowledge that even linguistic and semantic deficiencies arise out of the imagination:

Yet the absence of the imagination had
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,

Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
Required, as a necessity requires. (ll. 13-15, 19-20)

Stevens explores the same epiphany within systems which are devoid of metapoetic consciousness. In “A Clear Day and No Memories” (1954), Stevens’s speaker casts off environmental description to focus, instead, on the trope of absence and semantic void. The poem is not “set” beyond its quotidian title and obscure negation of atmospheric conditions. “No soldier in the scenery,” the speaker asserts, “Today the mind is not part of the weather. / Today the air is clear of everything.” (ll. 1, 7-8). The poem’s division into two stanzas separates its dual rhetorical processes. In the first stanza, Stevens’ speaker describes the absence of the particular. Acknowledging the absence of thought, he nonetheless carries the thought forward by describing the specific details which are negated. The noun phrase “No thoughts
of people now dead” (l. 2) both refutes the ideation of mental description and
(paradoxically) facilitates the inevitable continuation of thought in the following
lines:

As they were fifty years ago:

Young and living in a live air,

Young and walking in the sunshine,

Bending in blue dresses to touch something— (ll. 3-6)

The subtle punctuation of this passage is telling, as is Stevens’ precise use of
anaphora. The colon following line three, which is itself a continuation of the
preceding negation, indicates both the termination of that negation and its generative
effect: the persistence of ideation in spite of negation. The anaphora “Young” in lines
four and five simulates the flow of production caused by this persistence. The two
lines represent an anaphoric stream which demonstrates the surge of creative power
which continues despite organizational or rhetorical restraint. Stevens is especially
interested in the gap between genesis and restraint and in the second and final stanza,
the speaker returns to the restrictive modalities of absence and negation realized in
the clear, blank space of air which “has no knowledge except of nothingness” (l. 9):
And it flows over us without meanings,
As if none of us had ever been here before
And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,
This invisible activity, this sense. (ll. 10-13)

Stevens’ evocation of absence reveals the modality’s ultimate productivity. Negation
is productive despite the poet’s rhetorical and rational attempts to limit that
productivity. What one might call the “agency of absence,” as well as Stevens’ play
with the modes of restraint and generation, further reveals two important aspects of
his work: first, its dependence upon tropes of aporia, namely ineffability and
apophasis, and second, the agency or productive nature of those tropes.

The various functions and modes of these three poems, the apophasis and
incoherent analog in “The Course,” the linguistic deficiency in “The Plain Sense,”
and the agency of absence in “A Clear Day,” when viewed together, are
representative of a broader system of productive aporia at work in Stevens’ poetics.
To apply this system to Stevens’ “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” it is first
necessary to briefly contextualize the discussion with two early poems: “Thirteen
Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1917), which demonstrates Stevens’s early use of
Eastern poetic devices, and “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (1922), which
reveals the poet’s initial explorations of the concept of “supreme fiction.”

“Thirteen Ways” is enlightened by title and form as much as it is by the
poem’s central content. The title immediately contextualizes the work within
concepts of relativism and perspective. The thirteen numbered cantos spring forward under the directive of this title. Of course, each episode is more than a perspective aimed at the indicated object of the blackbird. The speaker aims that perspective back at himself as well, as early as the second canto: "I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds" (l. 4-6). Consequently, the poem's focus transcends its immediate object to converse with the difficulty and multiplicity that surrounds the poet's task of linking signifier to signified. Stevens's division of the processes of observation and speculation into thirteen fragments not only mirrors the fragmented modern consciousness but also reproduces the basic aporetic mode creative language labors under: the impasse or gap between subject and object. In many instances, this reproduction can be accomplished in a single canto. The cantos themselves, their brevity and open, fluid endings resemble the eastern tradition of haiku. The poem also experiments with "metaphorical silence," a literary trope identified by Yanfang Tang in her comparative study of disparate epistemological modes in Eastern and Western literatures. Attributing the tactic's origins to Chinese philosophy, Tang commends the trope in the following terms:

Paradoxical as it may seem, the tactic of silence possesses advantage unsurpassed by other tactics. It renders to the text gaps and holes that provoke the reader's imagination and encourage him to search for its hidden meanings. It liberates the words from their rigid reference so
that they are transformed from physical marks into artistic symbols.

(20)

In Canto V, Stevens seems to recognize the possibility of metaphorical silence, if not employ the trope outright: “I do not know which to prefer, / The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendos, / The blackbird whistling / Or just after.” (ll. 1-4).

Perhaps even more pertinent to a discussion of “Notes” is a brief overview of Stevens’s poem “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman.” While the subject of conventional religion is not a major theme in Stevens’s work, the poet’s treatment of Christianity in a select few of his poems demonstrates early disillusionment and skepticism concerning western orthodoxy. “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (1922) is perhaps the most lucidly demonstrative of such conflicted and quietly radical views. As is evident in the title, the poem takes the form of a monologue and is addressed, somewhat disparagingly, to a female Christian figure. The speaker’s derision of this figure is expressed in his formulations of the “high-toned,” conventional pedantry which comprise her religious outlook. Despite the abstract diction, the speaker’s essential attitude can still be deduced, as can the objective of his address: to expose such pedantry and farce for the empty rhetoric, ritual, and meaningless babble in which it is manifested:

Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
Proud of such novelties of the sublime,
Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk (ll. 15-18)

The abstract language of this passage is contrasted in the poem with another system of diction, a repertoire of architectural and constructive apparatus with which the poet frames the other central motive of the poem. Upon “naves,” “palms,” and “peristyles” the speaker builds the major argument of this poem— that poetry and religion both emerge from the same source, the imagination:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it.
And from the nace build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy cytherns hankering for hymns. (ll. 1-5)

Most importantly, it is with “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” in 1922, that Stevens first introduces his chief poetic thesis: the “supreme fiction” alluded to in the first line of this abstract and daring poem.

Stevens briefly describes the concept of “supreme fiction” in a biographical note which accompanied a reprint of his collection The Auroras of Autumn (1950): “The author’s work suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment” (Letters 820). Of
course, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," is best understood through summary and
explication of the poem itself which is comprised of three sections, or notes, with
each section containing ten cantos. The first section, "It Must Be Abstract," also
includes an invocation. Who or what Stevens invokes is not entirely clear, although it
seems as if he is addressing a personified version of the imagination. "And for what,
except for you, do I feel love," the speaker begins. What is especially significant here
is not only this "love," the praise of the imaginary, but also the celebration of the
reward of the imaginative process: "The vivid transparence that you bring is peace"
(I. 8). The body of the first section is addressed to another object: the "ephebe" or
young man and begins, in Canto I, with the following directive:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it. (I, ll. 1-6)

The speaker's instructions revolve around the concept of the "first idea," a phrase he
uses consistently in later passages. Such a concept is essentially an acknowledgement
of the idealist philosophy that experience is a product of mental processes; reality is
nothing but an invention. The ephebe’s first task, then, is to realize the artifice of the world and attempt to cast off false knowledge to return to an existence devoid of reflection, to consider experience before language. In the following stanzas, the speaker warns against the creationism of conventional Western religion: “Never suppose an inventing mind as source / of this idea not for that mind compose / a voluminous master folded in his fire” (I, ll. 7-9). Because the only true creator is the imagination itself, the idealist realization and the import of the first idea negates the existence of an external creator: “The death of one god is the death of all... Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was / A name for something that could never be named.” (I, ll. 13, 16-17).

Stevens’s juxtaposition of idealist philosophy with his negation of Christianity is meant, first and foremost, to prepare the way for the essential objective of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” the search for a fictive (poetic) surrogate for the idea of God. While Stevens’s motives for such an objective can be somewhat deduced from “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” discussed above, a clearer explanation is offered by Milton J. Bates. Recognizing Stevens’s relationship with and interest in the ideas of George Santayana, Bates summarizes the main thesis of Santayana’s Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (1900) as follows:

According to Santayana, poetry and religion are both human fabrications, designed to express and at least partly to satisfy our longing for the ideal... Santayana contends that the highest poetry is
identical with religion. By allowing us a glimpse of the ideal, it likewise gives direction and meaning to our lives. Because many of the tenets of traditional religion—eternal damnation, for example—have become distasteful and no longer satisfy the imagination … poetry must step forward to provide us with a new mythology. (49)

“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” is, like Santayana’s ideas, a response to this need for a new mythology. However, Stevens wasn’t exactly sure how to achieve the desired result. Specifically, he wasn’t entirely sure whether or not the imagination itself could replace traditional religion, or whether a manifestation of the imagination was needed. This attitude is especially apparent in a letter written by the poet in 1940:

If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else. Logically, I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination. A good deal of my poetry recently has concerned an identity for that thing. (370)

And this is where the initial meditations on the “first idea” in Section One of “Notes” lead the speaker as well: to the recognition that the supreme fiction requires a
manifestation, “a thing created by the imagination,” which would be easier to believe in than the imagination itself. In this way, Stevens arrives at the primary product of the first Note, a personification of the essential imagination which might replace traditional religion, a figure not unlike Nietzsche’s Übermensch, MacCullough, the “major man”:

The first idea is an imagined thing.
The pensive giant prone in violet space
May be the MacCullough, an expedient,

Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis,
Incipit and a form to speak the word
And every latent double in the word,

Beau linguist. (VIII, ll. 4-10)

In the following stanzas, the speaker examines the possibilities and implications of his human abstraction from a variety of angles. The foremost consideration of such a figure relies on his abstract and universal quality: “The major abstraction is the idea of man / And major man is its exponent, abler / in the abstract than in his singular” (X, ll. 1-3). Indeed, “major man” seems to be the ultimate achievement of this first section. However, a third important element of the Note can be realized by
acknowledging the aporetic situation which comes after Stevens’s meditations on
idealism but before his proposal for the imagination’s human surrogate. As “a thinker
of the first idea” (VII, l. 2), the speaker is caught between the real and the ideal and
yet free from the oppressive systems of western religion: “It feels good as it is
without the giant, . . . . Perhaps / The truth depends on a walk around a lake” (VII, ll.
1-3).

At this juncture in the narrative, Stevens knows that he must offer up a
possibility for belief to achieve his supreme fiction, and yet he seems to delight in the
suspense, in the fundamental tension between the “essential imagination” and the
necessity of “a thing created by the imagination.” The inherent paradox of this
tension reveals its aporetic situation: the imagination is supreme because of its ability
to access naked existence and experience, the reality of the first idea. In Derridean
terms, the aporia “stems from the fact that there is no limit” to the agency of the
imagination. “There is not yet or there is no longer a border to cross” precisely
because Stevens purposefully delays such a crossing (Aporias 21). At the same time,
the necessity to devise a representative of imaginative power negates its idealist
capability. However abstract and universal “major man” remains, he is still
representative of an attenuation of the imaginative potency.

Above all, the speaker must feel the immensity and impossibility of the
poem’s intent, and yet he is strangely euphoric. “Perhaps there are times of inherent
excellence,” he remarks ecstatically, “As when the cock crows on the left and all / Is
well” (VII, ll. 9-11). The dialectical circumstance experienced by the speaker, as a
witness among opposing forces of real and ideal, between the first idea and the
realization of the necessity of idea accumulation, is similar to the rhetorical
circumstance of the Chinese literary genre of the kōan. In his introduction to Opening
a Mountain: Kōans of the Zen Masters, Stephen Heine succinctly defines the kōan,
which began in China during the T’ang era (618-917), as “a brief, enigmatic anecdote
or dialogue between two contesting parties.” Heine further distinguishes the genre by
identifying its essential element as the “quixotic, paradoxical, and often absurd
utterances” which negate the possibility of logical thought processes and cause a
“spiritual breakthrough to a realm beyond reason” (1).

Some of the most canonical kōans can be found in the classic Zen text Mu­
mon-kan which can be translated as “no gate barrier” or, as it is translated by Paul
Reps and Nyogen Senzaki in Zen Flesh, Zen Bones, “The Gateless Gate.” Reps and
Senzaki provide further explanation of this collection, which was first compiled by
the Chinese master Ekai, also called Mumon, (1183-1260), as well as the literary
genre of the kōan:

The work consists of narrated relationships between ancient Chinese
teachers and their pupils, illustrating means employed to sublimate the
dualistic, outgoing, generalizing, intellectualizing tendencies of
students in order that they might realize their true nature. . . . The
whole intent was to help the pupil break the shell of his limited mind
and attain a second eternal birth, satori, enlightenment. Each problem
is a barrier. Those who have the spirit of Zen pass through it . . . as if they were seeing the unseen and living in the illimitable. (159-160)

Two elements of this passage connect the kōan to the figure of aporia: the assertion that “each problem is a barrier,” and the identification of the kōan as a method of “sublimat[ing] dualistic . . . tendencies.” Much like poetic instances of aporia, the kōan emerges from two or more competing epistemic or rhetorical assertions. These assertions create an impasse or aporia precisely because they contradict each other. The contemplation of such contradiction, in the Zen tradition, is what allows the “pupil” to achieve “enlightenment.” This enlightenment is often explicitly linked to an idealist realization, the acknowledgment that “reality” is subject to the perceiver. Consider Case 29 from “The Gateless Gate”:

Two monks were arguing about a flag. One said: “The flag is moving.” The other said: “The wind is moving.” The sixth patriarch happened to be passing by. He told them: “Not the wind, not the flag; mind is moving.” (Reps 208).

The competing assertions of movement are presented as individually plausible. However, together, they cannot both be an accurate assessment of experience. The patriarch’s response to the two monks adds yet another assertion to this group of contentions; yet, it is an assertion which attempts to demonstrate the concept of
idealism. However, the patriarch’s response is not presented as a solution to the aporia of the two original contentions; rather, his assertion only magnifies the paradox. “The Gateless Gate,” like most collections of kōans, includes commentary on each case. Mumon further extends the aporia of this case by emphasizing the patriarch’s utterance and challenging the reader to contemplate that utterance: “The sixth patriot said: ‘The wind is not moving, the flag is not moving. Mind is moving.’ What did he mean?” (209).

While Stevens’s “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction” does not include explicit commentary on the aporias it presents, the work does share another formal similarity to the kōan. Stevens’s speaker’s instructive address, in the beginning of the first “Note,” to the “ephebe” or young man parallels the tradition of address in the kōan as a “narrated relationship between . . . teachers and their pupils” (Reps 159).

But what of the more immediate purpose of the kōan? Is it extreme to argue that Stevens’s aporias, like kōans, allow for enlightenment or satori? Perhaps, but the comparison is not completely speculative. Examination of the Eastern tradition not only demonstrates how Stevens produced a literature which is heavily dependent upon kōan-like duality and contradiction, it also reveals the aporetic requirement of the kōan. If it cannot be called an “enlightenment,” perhaps “awakening” is more appropriate. After all, it is what Stevens names the experience of “inherent excellence” further on in Canto VII:

Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academics like structure in a mist. (VII, ll. 17-21)

The fact that Stevens’s supreme fiction is fulfilled not in his major human abstraction, but in a fulfillment or awakening gained through conflicting rhetorical and poetic thought processes is ultimately indicative of an argument which favors process over product, which perceives process as product. Such an argument is not, however, without critical support. In a study of imaginative tropes in twentieth-century American poetry, Charles Altieri asserts, among other major claims, that Stevens’s treatment of the imaginary is characterized by his valuing of the “intensity” of the “experience” of imaginative processes, rather than the object or product of such (85). What Altieri fails to realize, however, is that the value of such processes is inherently dependent upon Stevens’s attempts at production. Bates makes a similar critical mistake by classifying, and thus separating, the three “Notes” into two distinct modes of idealism and pragmatism: “The idealist component of the supreme fiction is most evident in the cantos of “It Must Be Abstract.” The pragmatist component emerges in “It Must Change,” in “It Must Give Pleasure,” and most explicitly in the epilogue” (49). It is not the severance or separation of modalities of pragmatism and idealism that lends the poem its potency and fulfills the supreme
fiction, but rather their overlapping and dialectic struggle. To return to Canto VII once again, Stevens seems to allude to such interdependence of the two tropes in the lines immediately following his first recognition of the experience of "inherent excellence" during which "all":

Is well, incalculable balances,
At which a kind of Swiss perfection comes

And a familiar music of the machine
Sets up its Schwärmerei, not balances
That we achieve but balances that happen (VII, ll. 11-15).

Of course, Bates's fundamental classification is useful, but its rhetorical implications do limit the realization of the poem's aporetic achievement. The second Note, "It Must Change," is pragmatic in the sense that Stevens pays less overt attention to the concept of the first idea and focuses more on the specific necessities of the supreme fiction. Foremost among those necessities is the requirement of modification. And yet, the speculations in this section are still inextricably linked to the conception of the first idea; the supreme fiction must remain dynamic to refrain from becoming a cliché, a victim of idea accumulation, to stay as close as possible to the first idea. Consequently, the trope of change becomes yet another exploration and commemoration of the essential aporetic situation which is itself the source of such
Two things of opposite nature seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copular, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come. (IV, ll. 1-6)

Here again the speaker comments on the fulfilling effect which occurs through the contemplation of differing forces. The speaker’s assertion that “two things of opposite nature . . . depend on one another” rather than contradict or cancel out each other further qualifies the poem’s aporetic type as identified by Derrida. The dual contentions of the apORIA support each other in a specific impasse in which “there is no opposition between two sides” (Aporias 21). The final significance of the section, then, lies not in its pragmatism but in its negation of the pragmatic achievement of the first section. By demanding change, Stevens disqualifies his human abstraction of the supreme fiction, the “major man.” To continue to elaborate this manifestation is to violate the second Note. Instead, the speaker concludes the section with the following dictate: “The casual is not / Enough. The freshness of transformation is /
The freshness of a world. It is our own, / It is ourselves. The freshness of ourselves”
(X, ll. 14-18).

Like the second Note, the third and final section, “It Must Give Pleasure,” is also concerned with further requirements of the supreme fiction which must be arranged “To speak of joy and to sing of it, borne on / The shoulders of joyous men, to feel the heart / That is the common, the bravest fundament” (I, ll. 1-6). The speaker also reiterates that it is process rather than product that is inevitably involved in such a requirement, following these lines with the simple and direct, “This is a facile exercise” (I, l. 7). The music and imagery of this section is especially gorgeous and abstract, and yet the cantos do not veer from the original exigencies of the first two sections. The speaker is still very concerned with the essential concept of the first idea and the aporias that surround that concept. However, the circumstances of that aporia are modified somewhat, in compliance with the second Note, “It Must Change.” In Canto VII, Stevens again celebrates the possibility of communion with the first idea but frames it in the apophatic terms of fiction removal. To approach the first idea, one must relinquish false conceptions until only one remains: “To find the real, / To be stripped of every fiction except one, / The fiction of an absolute—Angel, / Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear / The luminous melody of proper sound” (VII, ll. 17-21).

The logical impossibility of such a paradoxical task, much like the competing modalities in the first Note, creates an aporetic situation which causes the speaker to doubt his own directive and launch into a series of questions in which he interrogates
his own assertions concerning formulations of the absolute (the angel mentioned in the previous passage): “What am I to believe? . . . Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied? / Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air? / Is it he or is it I that experience this?” (VIII, ll. 1, 8-10). Such questioning is ultimately indicative of the poem’s fulfillment of Derrida’s final specification of the second aporetic type which emerges from the condition of a limit which is “too porous, permeable, and indeterminate” (Aporias 21). The speaker’s doubt, his inability to accurately realize a definite course of belief, arises from a comprehension of the indeterminacy of the absolute. And again, much like the stanzas of Canto 7 in “It Must Be Abstract,” the dilemmatic eventually leads to the ecstatic as the speaker experiences another “awakening” of kōanistic proportions: “there is an hour / Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have / No need, am happy, forget need’s golden hand, / Am satisfied without solacing majesty . . . there is a time / In which majesty is a mirror of the self: I have not but I am and as I am, I am.” (VIII, ll. 11-14, 16-18).

Despite the rapture apparent in these lines, critics continue to doubt the success of Stevens’s major work. Gregory Brazeal, for instance, recognizes the poet’s desire to construct a “supreme fiction” which might act as a creative surrogate for “the idea of God” but asserts that such an endeavor is never actually achieved:

‘Notes [Toward a Supreme Fiction]’ as the title suggests, does not present us with any examples of supreme fiction; rather, it offers some preparation of the grounds for the arrival of one. It leads us in a series
of peregrinations toward a supreme fiction, but stops short of the promised land. (99)

What is evident in this passage is that Brazeal fails to consider that Stevens’s supreme fiction is not dependent upon any concrete product, an “example” or “arrival” but on the euphoric effects of the flight towards that product. It is Stevens’s “peregrinations” which are, in fact, both the beginning and the end of his fictive realization, an assertion which the poet further maintains in the penultimate Canto of the third Note:

These things at least comprise
An occupation, an exercise, a work,

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,
The way wine comes at a table in a wood. (IX, ll. 9-15)
To refute Brazeal's claim, of course, is to argue that Stevens did, in fact, achieve the supreme fiction. To make this claim, it is necessary to view Stevens's achievement not as his creation of the "major man" abstraction, but rather, as his acknowledgement of the enlightenment which becomes possible within the aporia which inevitably accompanies the immediate difficulties of that creation. Stevens's employment of the aporetic allows enlightenment because he gives a glimpse into an epistemological opportunity: simply, the opportunity to deconstruct subject/object duality. Furthermore, while this process may mirror the functions of the kōan, Stevens does not assert or recommend a renewal of interest in Zen practices, or any religious creed, for that matter. In fact, "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" is representative of a distinctly anti-Christian stance, one which inevitably emerges as atheistic. The intent of this chapter is not, however, to argue that Stevens's negation of creationism ideology, and his creation of a secular "supreme fiction," might serve as a replacement for Christian systems. Instead, the poem should be viewed as a secular vision which allows for an alternate spiritual system, a path to a kind of secular satori in which we might find peace, change, and pleasure at the boundaries of poetic language.

In the previous chapters of this study, I've attempted to demonstrate a tangible shift in the way the figure of aporia is employed in the works of Coleridge and Tennyson. I've asserted that aporetic function in Coleridge's prose and poetry is both inadvertent and debilitating due to various circumstances of biography, literary history, and intentionality. Tennyson's "use" of the figure, I've explained, becomes
somewhat more productive for two reasons: first, the system of the elegy requires that its speaker attempt to attain consolation; and second, *In Memoriam* demonstrates an increased intentionality as Tennyson becomes aware of the dialectical possibilities the figure of aporia affords. In Stevens's poetry, the aporetic becomes both more productive and more intentional. The productive quality of Stevens's work, of course, depends upon the argument that the poet did, in fact, create a secular "spiritual fulfillment" apart from conventional Christian religious systems. Stevens's intentionality may be explained in the fact that the poet deliberately set out to create such a system, and that his employment of kōan-like aporias represent an awareness of the possibilities inherent in the impasse or double-bind. Literary history plays a role in the progressed intentionality of Stevens's aporias as well. As a Modernist, Stevens wrote poetry which exerts a conscious and deliberate aesthetic to deal with the concept of idealism, the rejection of absolutes, and the oppositional pressures between reality and the imagination. That his poetic ambitions were representative of hobby or leisure, at least early in his life, further elucidates his intentional stance. Stevens had neither needed nor wanted to adopt traditional poetic molds. Rather, he desired to experiment, to inquire into the possibilities of poetic thought and language, and to drive such possibilities ever forward to the limits of the imagination. Ultimately, such desire not only explains the productive aporetic mode in Stevens's poetry, it also reveals the final development in the poetic figure's evolution. This development—the achievement and acknowledgement of the productive possibilities of aporia—must not only be recognized and disseminated by literary critics, it must
be utilized by literary artists to create work which is able to positively transform and give purpose to life's doubts, puzzlements, and aporias.
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