ALLEGORIES OF KNOWING AND
THE DESIRE FOR MEANING
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I sincerely believe that the best criticism
is the criticism that is entertaining and
poetic; not a cold analytical type of
criticism, which claiming to explain
everything, is devoid of hatred and love,
and deliberately rids itself of any trace of
feeling, but since a fine paining is nature
reflected by an artist, the best critical
study, I repeat, will be the one that is the
painting reflected by an intelligent and
sensitive mind. Thus the best accounts of
a picture may well be a sonnet or an elegy.

— Charles Baudelaire, "What is the Good of Criticism?"[1]

Allegorēsis, or allegorical interpretation, is the interpre-
tive mode of finding a "truth" or meaning concealed in
words or images, regardless of whether this truth was
intended by their composer. The Homeric allegorists
are the earliest known practitioners of this tradition,
which predates the kind of intentional allegorical con-
struction that began in Late Antiquity with Prudentius's
Psychomachia and dominated the tradition through the
Early Modern era. Commonly identified by the name of
their European "discoverer" as "The Bradshaws," the
Gwion Gwion paintings of the Kimberley region have
inspired much of this kind of *allegorēsis*. A major goal
of western investigators is to make a reasonable claim
about the meaning of this peculiar rock art. In other
words, to allegorize it. All such attempts at *allegorēsis*,

and the apparently overwhelming desire to find meaning beyond the literal images, indicate an unwillingness to experience the images as unknowable and further, an inability to resist appropriating the images into a western way of knowing. Aboriginal views of the rock art are generally ignored or dismissed as inferior to the scientifically substantiated theories of western researchers. Just as the voices of Aboriginal peoples are often inaudible in the current political and social contexts of Australia, their experience of the rock art itself is overwritten with knowledge, or what might better be called "allegories of knowing."

Generally, Gwion Gwion images are not treated as works of art, but as artifacts, objects of scientific study. Grahame L. Walsh describes his approach to "The Bradshaws" as a "systematic scientific approach" and produces a historiography of genres and styles, creating a credible chronology.[2] Jack Pettigrew first engaged with this rock art as a scientific specimen in a study of DNA and microbial organisms.[3] He then supplemented his scientific study with a cross-cultural study that finds meaning for the images through external comparison to the San culture of Africa.[4] These are scientific treatments that appropriate the Gwion Gwion into a metaphysical structure for which they are merely an object of inquiry. Even aesthetic treatments subject the rock art to a metaphysical system of meaning-making. To treat the Gwion Gwion as they are and as works of art, I argue here, requires the kind of reading that resists interpretation, that resists the act of scientific or even aesthetic appropriation. Instead of an explanation of its representative figures, the work of art requires an experience of its presence. We need to learn to read the Gwion Gwion without needing to know them.

And so we need to consider first, what is it to read, and can we *know* what we read? As Paul de Man pointed out, an image of someone reading represents the person in the act of reading but reading itself cannot be represented. At the point at which the act of reading becomes an act of understanding, a "reading" becomes a meaning, and the ruse is accomplished. As de Man famously put it, there can only be "allegories of reading." However, we mistake such allegories of reading for understanding, an unrepresentable experience for a kind of knowledge.

By reading we get as we say *inside* a text
that was first something alien to us and which
we *now make our own* by an act of understanding.
But, this act of understanding becomes at
once *the representation of an extra-textual
meaning.* (emphasis added)[5]

Against what might be called a "metaphysics of reading," a hierarchized process by which meaning is produced and graded, De Man proposes a rhetoric of reading that stays closer to the text. With attention to the allegorical process of reading, de Man resists the metaphysical drive (or leap) towards meaning, focusing instead on the rhetorical modes by which meaning is produced. As evidenced in some of the last essays he published, collected in *Aesthetic Ideology*, by resisting a metaphysics of meaning-making, he was also resisting the demands of aesthetics. Aesthetics is the philosophical appropriation of art for its own ends, determining its value and classifying its significance. An allegory of reading suspends this determination and classification. Instead, De Man's rhetorical approach dwells in the space between reading and meaning, it replicates the act of reading by occupying the space of this suspension.

The metaphysics of reading, as I am calling it, looks

a lot like the conventional understanding of how allegory works: a literal level becomes the means to increasingly more abstract levels of metaphoric significance, like the three higher levels often cited for medieval and early modern works of allegory. De Man challenges this metaphorical reading and practices instead what might be described as metonymic reading. To read metonymically is first of all to read linearly and literally, rather than hierarchically and figuratively, to stay with the words on the page, or the images on the wall, rather than springing away from them. Instead of an interpretative reading, which is always already "a representation of an extra-textual meaning," De Man's rhetorical reading strives to sustain the ambivalence, or the polysemy, of the work. It is not merely ironic that de Man calls this mode "allegories of reading," using the very term most blatantly affiliated with hierarchies of meaning and with the reduction of a work to its representations. De Man is actually trying to refocus our reading of allegory itself, questioning whether, like reading, allegory can only reveal itself allegorically. In *Structures of Appearing*, I argue that allegory is a "work of art that brings art (and allegory) to appearance." Allegory is "*able to be art* but also uniquely able to *present art* (without representing it)."[6]

In the phenomenology of allegory proposed in *Structures of Appearing*, I define the work of art as "simultaneously two things, what it is and what it brings to appearance." Allegory is complicit with the work of art in that allegory "bears the relation between what it is and what it brings to appearance," such that allegory *is* the structure of the "mode of appearance" particular to works of art, including but not limited to overtly allegorical works. I argue that all art is allegorical because it depends on this structure of appearance.[7] If the Gwion

Gwion are works of art (which I believe they are), then this formulation of allegory might provide an alternative way to consider them *as* works of art, as appearances, without appropriating them by means of aesthetic or scientific modalities. With a Gwion Gwion work of art, we have only what it is, the materiality of the image, without any knowledge of *what* it brings to appearance. Overt or intentional allegories are usually self-referential. They capitalize on the simultaneity of their multiplicity, their polysemy. The Gwion Gwion are allegorical, but we do not and cannot know what they are allegories *of*. This disrupts the equation of knowledge that the allegorical structure of the work of art usually makes possible. This disruption not only challenges a western epistemological appropriation of the Gwion Gwion, but in turn, the Gwion Gwion challenge the western systems of knowledge and meaning-making. This forces a western reader into the uncomfortable position of reading, *only* reading, and an acute awareness that anything other than reading is an imposed *allegorēsis* that reflects the mind of the beholder rather than the appearance manifested by the work of art.

Implicit in De Man's critique of allegorizing interpretations is a challenge against claims to knowledge itself, at least when claiming knowledge of works of art. If the reading that gets us "inside a text" immediately becomes "the representation of an extra-textual meaning" by an act of appropriation, then the knowledge manifested as a representative understanding rests on an absent foundation. While I would argue that this realization applies even to the most widely accepted canons of knowledge, it is most evident, and helpful, and important, when we are confronted with something that is impossible to know. The Gwion Gwion are an excellent

case. Grahame L. Walsh devoted a great deal of his life to knowing them and to formulating a defensible theory of their origin, to defending that knowledge, and to denying (or ignoring) other claims of knowledge, including that of Aboriginal peoples of the Kimberley.[8] When considering the status and acceptance of knowledge in the figural and literal "landscape" of an indigenous place, the claims to knowledge often translate substantially into claims of ownership.[9] Ian Wilson, in a kind of biographical travel narrative, also claims knowledge of "The Bradshaws," though far less systematically than Walsh. Nonetheless, he has no difficulty in dismissing Aboriginal claims to knowledge as convenient and problematic.[10] Jack Pettigrew, in the wake of his scientific discovery of the bacteria that continues to re-inscribe and paint the images, developed a comparative study by which he asserts that the "Bradshaw people" must have had a shamanistic culture,[11] giving credence to a culture thousands of miles and a treacherous ocean away.

These theories about the "Bradshaws" and their meaning are allegories without a ground because the literal significance is itself unknown and unknowable. If an interpretive allegory has no specific literal meaning, the metaphorical possibilities are, literally, endless, and bear out a criticism often levied against allegory itself, that "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything" (as Walter Benjamin put it).[12] In a recent essay and in the new Afterword to the re-issued *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Angus Fletcher worries about a world in which allegory is "without ideas." That is, a world in which allegories "fail to possess the universal character of [...] ideal gatherings of similar things." Without such universals, allegory becomes trapped in an "infinite regression" of particulars.[13] The

inverse problem of an allegory without ground is equally and similarly problematic. To find meaning in, or the meaning of something as enigmatic as the Gwion Gwion requires systematic substitutions of one thing for another, creating an extended metaphor that "reveals" otherwise unrealized (or otherwise unrealizable) connections. These kinds of "revelations" lie in the eye and the pen of the beholders. The artwork itself recedes from view, the experience of seeing it replaced by allegories of knowing it. The more convincing the metaphor, the more valid the claim to knowledge. And the more the claim to knowledge asserts itself, the easier it is to forget the metaphor, as Nietzsche wrote in "On Truth and Falsity in the Extra-moral Sense."[14]

Jacques Derrida cites the famous passage from Nietzsche in the exergue to the essay, "White Mythology," partnering it with the "problematic of fetishism" in Marx and "the scene of exchange between the linguistic and the economic."[15] Derrida begins the essay with a simple sentence, "From philosophy, rhetoric." The lengthy essay interrogates this relationship between philosophy and rhetoric and in a move reminiscent of De Man and typical of Derrida, the essay that begins, "from philosophy, rhetoric," inverts its terms and shows how from rhetoric (from metaphor), comes philosophy. Derrida argues that philosophy *uses* language, playing on the double sense of the French verb *usure*, to use up or deteriorate through use, and to charge a high rate of interest (usury).[16] Philosophy wears away its language and simultaneously extracts too much value from it. By analogy to a coin, a figure and concept borrowed from Anatole France's *The Garden of Epicurus*, Derrida investigates the relationship between philosophy and the language it *uses* as an economic one, and eventually, a

rhetorical one. Not surprisingly, Derrida deconstructs the rhetorical use of metaphor in philosophy by reading a literary text, by reading the text without appropriating it for meaning, that is, he does not read like a philosopher (but like a literary theorist). Derrida asks a literary text, Anatole France's *The Garden of Epicurus*, to respond to the question of metaphor in philosophy. The literary text responds:

> The very metaphysicians who think to escape the world of appearances are constrained to live perpetually in allegory. A sorry lot of poets, they dim the colors of the ancient fables, and are themselves but gatherers of fables. They produce white mythology.[17]

This last sentence is Derrida's rendering of what would more literally be translated as: "Their output is mythology, an anemic mythology." That "anemic mythology" is the founding myth of the white world, as Derrida reads the text:

> metaphysics—the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of what he must still wish to call Reason.[18]

By erasing this "fabulous scene" of the production of its own fiction, inscribing it in "white ink," metaphysics forgets the allegorical structure of its knowledge, and not only the knowledge of itself, but the knowledge it claims over everything else.

As Adam Jasper argues elsewhere in this volume, the westernized perception of art finds it nearly impossible to entertain alternatives to the aesthetic and/or meaningful interpretation of works of art. However,

in the case of Gwion Gwion art, non-western ways of knowing must be considered because western aesthetics simply cannot accommodate the closedness of the works, their silence. A turn to one of the fundamental and surprisingly common features of Aboriginal culture can suggest a structure for an alternative experience of these works of art. In what is known as the Dreaming, a parallel, co-existent, world holds ancient ancestors and "past history" but is also accessible to living persons who can cross into it. The Dreaming is an actively co-present dimension of shared space and an alternate concept of time, time that is not linear but cyclical and permeable. The stuff of ancient times in the physical world can be accessed in the Dreaming in a coterminous present. Western metaphysics has no way to deal with the Dreaming except to put it into a chronological context and to dismiss it as myth. The "Dream*time*" moniker characterizes and limits the Dreaming to a mythic scheme, an *Ur*-time that explains origins, appropriating the Aboriginal supernatural into the structure, function, and attributes of Greek and Roman myth, folding it into a metaphysical and progressive scheme of history.

Post-contact, post-colonial ideologies are now being exposed in Australian society and academia. The "renaming" of the Bradshaws to the Gwion Gwion (or Gwion) is one result, a not unresisted attempt to give the Aboriginal claim to them a higher preference. In their respective articles, both Anthony Redmond and the co-authors Ian McNiven and Lynette Russell, review the embedded colonialist and Eurocentric ideologies that ground the work of most Euro-Australian and western-based researchers. Redmond shows how the current controversy over Aboriginal cultural claims to the Gwion Gwion parallel an earlier refusal to admit

Aboriginal connections to the now-indisputable sacred sites of Wandjina rock art. In the 19th century as now, the western researchers (or self-styled "discoverers") found that the quality and sophistication of the "discovered" paintings indicated that there was a "radical disjunction" between the rock artists and the current Aboriginal population, who were understood as "too primitive" to have produced them.[19] Walsh's naming of the pre-Wandjina period as the "Erudite Epoch" represents his deep-seated belief that an alien race, unrelated to the Aboriginals, mysteriously appeared and disappeared from the Kimberley, with the rock art the only evidence and explanation of their existence.[20] It is not surprising that only rock art and some scant archaeological evidence is all that remains after tens of thousands of years in a harsh climate. It *is* surprising that a mysterious alien migration by an inexplicably sea-faring people makes more sense than a distant relation to the Aboriginal peoples who are believed to have inhabited the Australian continent for at least 50,000 years. While Walsh's argument subtly but forcefully subscribes to an imperialist ideology (despite his relationships with certain Aboriginal elders) and Pettigrew's has a more social-scientific basis, both theories largely ignore the likely contiguity with the Aboriginal peoples of the region because of an unrealized western blindness.

McNiven and Russell point out the ingrained "Inside-Outside schema" that continues to dominate knowledge claims in post-colonial contexts, in Australia as elsewhere. "In the Inside-Outside schema, Europe is 'humanistic' and 'historical' while the Outside world of 'savages' is 'natural' and 'ahistorical.'"[21] While such prejudices are now sometimes acknowledged, these perceptions are deeply ingrained and not easily exorcised. These

hegemonic ideologies remain influential and prevalent because self-propagating and impressively stubborn.[22]

The desire to know should not overwrite the limitations any researcher, no matter how thorough or committed, is bound to face. Desire is always for something that cannot be had because once a desire is fulfilled, it is no longer a want and an unknown. We cannot have metaphysical knowledge of the Gwion Gwion because we cannot have literal knowledge of the images. All we have is the material artifact, the literal images. Interpreting them is a creative endeavor, not a scientific one. The inability to claim knowledge about the Gwion Gwion does not, however, preclude reading them, experiencing them, and engaging with them. It does, however, require a resistance to both the desire for meaning and the resultant allegories of knowing. It requires a mode of reading that is metonymic rather than metaphoric, and a way of knowing that can accommodate multiplicities of meaning without hierarchizing them. Metaphoric language depends on a relationship between what it is not (its referent), with only secondary consideration of the language that makes this signifying possible. Metonymy works on a continuum, arguably one that includes metaphor, pulling language in a more horizontal direction (rather than a vertical one). I propose an allegorical mode that focuses on the phenomenology of appearances rather than the metaphysics of representation.[23]

To be in the physical presence of Gwion Gwion requires perseverance, money, and a bit of luck. They are located in a remote part of Australia, across a vast area. While perhaps nothing can replace that immediate experience, it is possible, given the interest in them and the beautifully photographed images and skillful drawings provided by Walsh and others (including Joseph

Bradshaw), that we might share a "limit experience"
of them (a term I borrow from Maurice Blanchot). This
would be to engage in a potentially infinite relay of ex-
periences and information that would engage with the
Gwion Gwion in the impossibility of their own terms, as
readable but unknowable.

The kind of reading I am proposing is best expressed
through an analogue. In *The Infinite Conversation*, Mau-
rice Blanchot's unknowable object is the French philoso-
pher and writer Georges Bataille, about whom he at-
tempts "to think in proximity to an absence," to eschew
the kinds of knowledge about Bataille that are available
through his books and biography.[24] In contrast to criti-
cism and commentary, Blanchot proposes only a starting
point, "a point from which one would better hear what
only a reading can bring forth."[25] Blanchot implies a
reading that does not resolve itself into knowledge but
becomes what Bataille himself called "interior experi-
ence," which is centered in the subject and brought on
by what Blanchot describes as the limit experience: "The
limit experience is the response that man encounters
when he has decided to put *himself* radically in question"
(emphasis added).[26] To not know thyself is to be and not
be a single self, and it is to experience the self as differ-
ence rather than as identity. This is a radical challenge
to western conceptions of the self, and to an impressive
drive towards sameness.

A person can do this when claims to knowledge are
no longer the driving force, when a lack of desire consti-
tutes desire, and when it is possible to experience "what
is outside the whole when the whole excludes every out-
side [...] the inaccessible, the unknown itself."[27] In other
words, it is to meet the absolutely other at the limit it
shares with one's self and to resist the urge to reach out

and grab it, or break it, or appropriate it. It is a mode of "presence without any thing being present."[28] There is no object to appropriate, there is no thing to know. There is only the experience of experience itself, "thought thinking that which will not let itself be thought."[29] This is the mode in which I propose we experience the Gwion Gwion. I cannot speak for the Aboriginal peoples who do not (for whatever reason) speak for themselves on this matter (not until recently, and still not very often). However, the very silence of the Aboriginal voices about what they "don't know" is an example a western viewer might benefit from following. The challenge is to resist the fetishization of the object, to refuse an aesthetic valuation, and instead, simply to respond.

And so, what if we do not allegorize the Gwion Gwion, first of all, by refusing to refer to them as Bradshaw rock art? To refer to these works by the problematic name of their European "discoverer," is already to appropriate them into a colonial narrative. What would it be to consider the Gwion Gwion as works of art rather than as objects of study? As belonging to an other world that is otherwise closed to us, leaving only the art on the rocks? It would require a relation that is based on presence rather than representation, on a limit experience rather than an allegory of knowing. The Gwion Gwion require reading, but they resist allegories of reading. I have attempted in this essay, as have other writers in the collection, to read the Gwion Gwion on the terms they themselves give. In our own terms (which may not be at all endemic to the works): Beautiful, alluring, perhaps even magical in the kind of spell they cast; mysterious, cryptic, unknowable. The best a western reader can do for and with these works of art is to write an allegory of unknowing, that is, to write a "criticism" that is itself a

work of art, a "critical study" that is full of feeling — that is indifferent to a knowledge of its object, that has no desire to reveal meaning.

Because of the remoteness of the Gwion Gwion images in the Kimberley, most people, even the contributors to this volume devoted to them will not ever be physically in their presence. And yet, the premise of this collection seems to be about being present with the Gwion Gwion, or the Bradshaws, or both. Rather than encouraging a metaphorics of meaning for the Gwion Gwion, the editors of this volume have encouraged metonymic relations to them, contiguous articulations that relate and connect without appropriating or overwriting. The editors have created the conditions through which a community of antipodean proximity can appear. In contrast to the levels of meaning typically ascribed by *allegorēsis*, the volume layers intersecting revelations in something like a circulating palimpsest that manifests a limit that can be shared with the Gwion Gwion, and in turn with the readers of the book, an engagement with a past that continues to live, and with a presence not constrained by the present.

The Gwion Gwion give rise to a community. Here, a community of scholars and writers, but a community not of individuals but of singularities, as Jean-Luc Nancy describes in *The Inoperative Community*.[30] Whereas individuals can only be in a relation of absolute immanence to others, that is, not really a relation at all, the singularity can incline towards others. It is tempting to read in the leanings of the Gwion Gwion figures themselves, perhaps, a way in which the Gwion Gwion art inclines towards us. But we can experience this only if we open ourselves to being singular by resisting claims to individuality, claims of readings and meanings. We can know the Gwion Gwion only by lacking the desire to know.

1 Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 50. See also my discussion of this passage in *Structure of Appearing: Allegory and the Work of Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 195-6.

2 Grahame L. Walsh, *Bradshaw Art of the Kimberley* (Toowong, Queensland: Takarakka Nowan Kas Pubications, 2000), vi.

3 See Jack Pettigrew, Chloe Callistemon, Astrid Weiler, et al, "Living Pigments in Australian Bradshaw rock art," *Antiquity* 84.326 (December 2010), and the report on his current research at http://www.uq.edu.au/nuq/jack/Bradshaw.htm.

4 Jack Pettigrew, "Iconography in Bradshaw Rock Art: Breaking the Circularity," *Clinical and Experimental Optometry* 94.5 (September 2011), 403-17.

5 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 12-13ff.

6 Machosky, *Structures of Appearing*, 25-6. This is an argument I make throughout the book.

7 Ibid., 26.

8 See Anthony Redmond, "'Alien Abductions,' Kimberley Aboriginal Rock-Paintings, and the Speculation about Human Origins: On Some Investments in Cultural Tourism in the Northern Kimberley" *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2 (2002), 57; and Ian J. McNiven and Lynette Russell, "'Strange Paintings' and 'Mystery Races': Kimberley Rock-Art, Diffusionism and Colonialist Constructions of Australia's Aboriginal Past," *Antiquity* 71 (1997): 806.

9 The clearest example of this relationship between claims of knowledge and claims of ownership would be the ubiquitous colonial practice of Europeans "buying" native lands from peoples who had no "knowledge" of this kind of "ownership." Alternate kinds of "knowing," or better put, different kinds of relationships between people and the land, are steamrolled and paved over by the hegemonic epistemologies of European "knowledge."

10 Ian Wilson, *Lost World of the Kimberley: Extraordinary Glimpses of Australia's Ice Age Ancestors.* (Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2006), 258-60.

11 Pettigrew, "Iconography," esp. 404-7.

12 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 175.

13 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. with a new Afterword by the Author (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 400.

14 Derrida's translator uses the term "Ultramoral Sense" (217, n. 14); however the French translation cited by Derrida reads, "*sens extramoral.*" See Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la Philosophie* (Paris: Les éditions minuit, 1972), 258, n. 10.

15 Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass, 216.

16 See the translator note by Alan Bass in ibid., 209, n. 2.

17 Ibid., 213, quoting from *The Garden of Epicurus.* The translator, Alan Bass, notes Derrida's modification of the final phrase.

18 Ibid.

19 See the essay by Adam Jasper in this volume for a more extensive analysis of the problems with Walsh's work in particular and the Eurocentric ideological treatment of Gwion Gwion rock art in general.

20 See Redmond, "Alien Abductions," 55-7.

21 See McNiven and Russell, "Strange Paintings," 802, where they are citing M.L. Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

22 At a conference of the American Association of Australian Literary Studies just a few years ago, when discussing Aboriginal issues, one member of the audience wondered why we were no longer using terms like "half-cast" and "quadroon."

23 The understanding of allegory in relation to phenomenology is more fully developed in my book, *Structures of Appearing*. See esp. the Introduction, 11-12, 25-27. For further discussion of the metonymic qualities of allegory, see chapter 6, "Allegory as Metonymy: The Figure without a Face," esp. 190-96.

24 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 202.

25 Ibid., 203.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 204-5.

28 Ibid., 208-209.

29 Ibid., 209.

30 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, tr. Peter Connor, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 4. See also Machosky, *Structures of Appearing*, 201.