American Gothic

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"Think of him," she said, placing a finger against the front-view portrait of the blond young man. "Think of those eyes. Coming toward you." Then she pushed the pictures back into their envelope. "I wish you hadn't shown me."

TRUMAN CAPOTE, *In Cold Blood*

A "theory" of gothic cultural production in the United States is necessarily invested in a poetics of terror—a tropics, a recurring turn of language. If such generally structuring turns are most strikingly conceptualized in particular moments, then this brief excerpt from Capote's work suggests the multiple, inevitable, and even casual ways in which narrative might take a decidedly gothic turn. These chilling words are spoken by Marie Dewey—the wife of Alvin Dewey, an agent of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation—late in 1959 as she studies the photographs of two men who, without apparent motive, murdered a farm family "on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call 'out there'" (3). While the photographs give a face, a human agency, to a crime whose horror lies in its absence of meaning and its distance from the rationally explicable, her discourse betrays the desire to situate the static image of the face in a narrative, a desire from which she immediately recoils. What is most striking in Marie Dewey's language—what is most suggestive of the gothic turn—is her syntax of reiterated imperative. "Think of . . ." insists upon both the imaginative reconstruction of a historical event—a moment just prior to violent
annihilation—and what might be called “being out there,” an intuitive, visceral knowledge of terrible affect that approaches the experiential. In the queerly hybrid “nonfiction novel” that Capote attempted in the writing of *In Cold Blood*, Marie Dewey’s brief appearance signifies both the act of reading “America” and the writerly turn toward the fascination of the fearful, a fascination that, she implies, ought not to be indulged but inexorably is.

Her fleeting comments suggest that the gothic tendency in American culture is organized around the imperative to repetition, the return of what is unsuccessfully repressed, and, moreover, that this return is realized in a syntax, a grammar, a tropic field. Once instigated, Marie Dewey’s impulse to narrate the body that violates and the violated body can only escalate in the structure of haunting textual return: the photograph of Richard Hickock’s face, especially his eyes, gives her what might be colloquially called a “turn,” which is turned into a narrative obligation, which subsequently recurs in the rumor that Hickock bequeathed his eyes “to an eye doctor. Soon as they cut him down, this doctor’s gonna yank out his eyes and stick them in somebody else’s head” (338). This final gothic turn provides a compositional vanishing point in which there is no vanishing; horrific history acquires a body, a face, a figure that recedes into futurity. The failure of repression and forgetting—a failure upon which the entire tradition of the gothic in America is predicated—will be complete in those conscious eyes. Such a return is not merely monstrous and unthinkable, it is uncanny. And the writing of the uncanny is the field—or, more precisely, the multivalent tendency—of American gothic, an imaginative requirement by which, as Leslie Fiedler pointed out, “the past, even dead, especially dead, could continue to work harm” (131).

In the thirty years since the publication of *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler’s genealogy of American gothic has remained vitally suggestive; indeed, his broad connections between historiography and psychoanalysis have shaped the parameters of subsequent conceptualization. He insists on the absolute centrality of the gothic in American literature, for “until the gothic had been discovered, the serious American novel could not begin; and as long as that novel lasts, the gothic can-
not die” (143), while gesturing toward its essentially paradoxical status in “America,” that eighteenth-century construction “pledged to be done with ghosts and shadows, committed to live a life of yea-saying in a sunlit, neoclassical world” (144). Influenced by his argument that “the whole tradition of the gothic is a pathological symptom rather than a proper literary movement” (135), much post-Fiedlerian analysis has been preoccupied with accounting for the role of the gothic as a negation of the Enlightenment’s national narratives. Maggie Kilgour and Anne Williams, whose work in British contexts is often applicable to American ones, understand both the binary logics that have required a darkness as the Enlightenment’s Other and the interlinearity of gothic cultural production and the rise of psychoanalysis. Williams argues, via Foucault, that “Enlightenment thought characteristically ordered and organized by creating institutions to enforce distinctions between society and its other. . . . Like the haunted Gothic castle, the Freudian discourse of self creates the haunted, dark, mysterious space even as it attempts to organize and control it” (248). Kilgour’s declaration that “psychoanalysis is a late gothic story” (221) surveys the cultural matrix that enabled the narrativization of irrepressible Otherness.

In the American scene, it may be that broad generalizations about the gothic—overshadowed as they are by the genealogical tracing of British and continental influences—have reached a limit of conceptual or explanatory usefulness, and further particularization is urgently required. Louis S. Gross is surely right to read the gothic as a “demonic history text” (2) in Redefining the American Gothic and to grasp its “common thread” as “the singularity and monstrosity of the Other: what the dominant culture cannot incorporate within itself, it must project outward onto this hated/desired figure” (90). However, this observation raises the question of how the project of narrating “Otherness”—which indeed is a “dominant” cultural mode—embodies a “figure” that it “cannot incorporate within itself.” I suggest that the difficult task of such incorporation—of gesturing toward that which resists an explicit lexicon—has situated American gothic continuously in a tropic field that approaches allegory: the gothic is most
powerful, and most distinctly American, when it strains toward allegorical translucency. Given the thinness, the blankness of the American historical past and much of the American landscape, allegory—which is not, properly speaking, a “figure” but which is supremely conducive to the ghostly figures that we commonly associate with gothic, particularly prosopopoeia—provided a tropic of shadow, a kind of Hawthornian “neutral territory” in which the actual is imbued with the darkly hypothetical, a discursive field of return and reiteration. It is, of course, the lesson of Melville that nothing is so terrible as nothingness itself, the absence of a coherently meaningful symbolic: it is precisely the semantic impoverishment of allegory, the haunting consequences of its refusal of transparency, that impelled American gothic’s narrativization of Otherness toward its insubstantial shadows, and vice versa.

Like allegory, the gothic is a fluid tendency rather than a discrete literary “mode,” an impulse rather than a literary artifact. Such thinking seems to prompt Anne Williams’s refusal to consider the gothic—“a ‘something’ that goes beyond the merely literary”—as simply a genre, a tradition, or a set of conventions; rather, in asking “what noun would ‘Gothic’ appropriately modify,” she suggests the term “complex,” which denotes “an intersection of grammar, architecture and psychoanalysis” (23–24).

A model of gothic “complexity” that tends toward allegory—and I shall have more to say about the particular figures that are generated by allegory—is a useful corollary to theories of the historiographical orientation of gothic narrative.

“American gothic” does not exist apart from its specific regional manifestations; the burden of a scarifying past is more typical of New England and southern gothic than, for example, that of the prairies, yet common to all is a narrative site that tends to be an epistemological frontier in which the spatial division between the known and the unknown, the self and the Other, assumes temporal dimensions. The gothic cannot function without a proximity of Otherness imagined as its imminent return; consequently, allegory’s rhetoric of temporality—its gesturing toward what cannot be explicitly recovered—aspires to a narrative of the return of the Other’s plenitude on a frontier in
which "geography" supplements the impossibilities of language, of both national and personal historiography.

According to David Mogen, Scott P. Sanders, and Joanne B. Karpinski, "gothicism must abide on a frontier—whether physical or psychical"; despite the specific locatability of frontiers in various cultural moments, American gothic historiography generally "derives from [a] conflict between the inscribed history of civilization and the history of the other, somehow immanent in the landscape of the frontier" (r7, my emphasis). A symbolic Otherness that is "somehow immanent," that must be figured forth in narrative, suggests the resonance between gothic historiography and the haunting insubstantialities of allegorical trope. Also conducive to the allegorical corollary—a mode of narrative that is organized around semiotic gaps or "rifts"—is their model of the historical matrix that is inhabited by the gothic. "Gothicism results," they argue,

when the epic moment passes, and a particular rift in history develops and widens into a dark chasm that separates now from what has been. The history that suffers this rift is the inscribed past, the literal re-presentation to ourselves of a [hi]story that integrates people, events, and places, and makes of the world and its landscape a locale ... whose experience is comfortable, confident, coherent and known. This inscribed history is privileged; it functions as the logocentric past. ... When we become aware of breaks in the logocentric history, of gaps in the authorized text of the past, the inscriptions of another history break through into meaning. (r6)

This model suggests that logocentric historiography is an essentially nostalgic mode, if nostalgia is understood as a will to sustained cultural coherence, a desire for the seamless authenticity of national narrative; the fracturing of this mode by the irruption of "another history" is explained by Mogen, Sanders, and Karpinski as an ever-widening "dark chasm," a spatial or structural metaphor that, once again, evokes an allegorical temporality. This chasm is opened by the strategies of gothic signification, for it is not simply the case that a horrific "alternate" history emerges as a cohesive or fully explanatory corrective that
is superimposed upon nostalgic history. Rather, it irrupts by fits and starts in a semiotic that is fragmentary, one that is more suggestive than conclusive. As such, the gothic “turn” toward compelling but unthemmatizable narrative might be conceptualized as the emergence of the Lacanian Real, which, according to Judith Butler, “is that which resists and compels symbolization” (70). The congruent and compatible strangenesses of gothic and allegorical image manifest what Anne Williams describes as “a pattern of anxiety about the Symbolic” and reveal “the fragility of our usual systems of making sense of the world,” for “an extraordinary number of Gothic conventions . . . imply disorder in the relations of signifiers and signifieds” (70–71).

While gothic narrative emphatically refuses nostalgia, it seems to be the case that nostalgic representations of “America” veer toward the gothic with remarkable frequency; invariably associated with self-consciously “late” cultural production, this turn problematizes nostalgia’s simplicity by invoking a darker register that, ironically, emerges as the very consequence of nostalgic modes of knowing. A prototype might be Henry James’s return to America at the turn of the century: his late writing explores the contrast between sunny myths of return and the pull toward a tropics of devastation and the attractive threat of a hypothetical, unlived American life. Such contrasts recur but in very different terrains: in the spring of 1996, the highly popular film Twister locates the terrible in the vertical that descends from the sky upon the horizontal stretch of America from Iowa to Oklahoma, geographically contiguous with the mythic “West” that, according to Jonathan Raban, is a “bleak and haunted landscape” that “looks like a landscape in an allegory” (81). While its primary nostalgic referent is The Wizard of Oz, the narrative turns and twists in its uneven course toward gothic historicity.

In one spectacular sequence, a tornado spirals through the face of a cinematic screen at the Galaxy Drive-In, upon which is projected the most memorable scene from Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 film of Steven King’s novel The Shining. In a perfect moment of ironic congruence, the tornado destroys the image of Jack Nicholson axing through a door, behind which Shelley Duvall cowers in terror. The point of this intertextual strategy is
thoroughly allegorical; while it is in keeping with a long tradition in American gothic of attributing terrible violence to the muteness of landscape, it “explains” this terror by juxtaposing nature—literally—against cinematic culture, against what it is not, in an escalating spiral of signification that laminates the Symbolic into a coherent order even as it blows it apart. *Twister’s* framing of the cinematic screen—the cultural face fleetingly inhabited by Nicholson and then imploded—mediates an exchange of attribute between human and natural agency in an aesthetics of the gothic sublime; the tornado itself veers toward allegory, a personification of the qualities of Nicholson’s performance which David Thomson describes as “the wicked naughty boy, the thwarted genius, the monster of his own loneliness. No one else could have been so daring and yet so delicate” (546). Yet, such a maneuver is not entirely new; it represents a further development of what Fiedler called “the grafting of Jamesian sensibility onto the Southern gothic stem” (476). Such are the strange, defamiliarizing uses of the gothic in a late culture that wants nostalgia simultaneously to have a playful edge and to approach the unthinkable.

If allegory is the strangest house of fiction, haunted by a referentiality that struggles to return in a narrative mode that is committed to repress what it is compelled to shadow forth (for allegory’s suspension between avowal and disavowal must somehow fail to repress if it is going to “work”), then it is not surprising that the house is the most persistent site, object, structural analogue, and trope of American gothic’s allegorical turn. Consider a partial catalog of American gothic houses: Poe’s House of Usher, Hawthorne’s Custom House, James’s house on the “jolly corner,” Sutpen’s Hundred, Stephen King’s Castle Rock, and Capote’s Kansan farmhouse are structures whose solid actuality dissolves as they accommodate (and bring to spectacular figure) a psychic imperative—the impossibility of forgetting. In accounting for this imperative, Freud reveals the gothic origins of his conceptual lexicon by bringing forward the gothic’s major architectural metaphor; to illustrate his theory of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) as “something repressed which recurs”—resonant
with “Shelling’s definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light”—he points out that some languages “can only render the German expression “an ‘unheimlich’ house’ by ‘a haunted house’” and suggests that “this example [is] perhaps the most striking of all, of something uncanny” (“The Uncanny” 241).

Freud’s illustration seems to confirm the participation of psychoanalysis in gothic epistemology and narrative structures; he asserts that “psychoanalysis, which is concerned with laying bare these hidden forces, has itself become uncanny to many people” (“The Uncanny” 243). What is the status, the discursive materialization, of such “hidden forces” in narrative? Can language ever “lay bare” the Other? The entire tradition of the gothic suggests that a “haunting” return requires a poetics of the ephemeral and the indistinct. Crucially important for this project of conceptualizing the gothic as a tropic field is the narrowing focus of Freud’s translation across languages and cultures, the figurative turn toward a spatialized, “architectural” psyche in the slide of signifiers from unheimlich to “uncanny” and its gothic equivalent, “haunted.” If the Freudian text, and its translation, might be understood as allegorizing the uncanny in its figurative turns, then it does so under the auspices of the gothic’s tendency to generate an allegorical sign—a human agency, a prosopopoeia—that returns the repressed Other to the vitally performative.

The psychic “house” turns toward the gothic only when it is “haunted” by the return of the repressed, a return that impels spectacular figures. More specifically, prosopopoeia may be conceptualized as the master trope of gothic’s allegorical turn, because prosopopoeia—the act of personifying, of giving face to an abstract, disembodied Other in order to return it to narrative—disturbs logocentric order, the common reality of things. Paul de Man observes not only that “prosopopoeia is hallucinatory,” because “to make the invisible visible is uncanny” (49), but also that such uncanny trope generates epistemological incoherence: “it is impossible to say whether prosopopoeia is plausible because of the empirical existence of dreams and hallucinations or whether one believes that such a thing as dreams and hallucinations exists because language permits the figure of prosopopoeia.
The question 'Was it a vision or a waking dream?' is destined to remain unanswered. Prosopopoieia undoes the distinction between reference and signification upon which all semiotic systems... depend" (49–50). This theory can be broadly extended to the gothic's allegorical turn, which, in complicating the "distinction between reference and signification," veers away from the clarity of denotation toward the ghostly realm of connotation: accordingly, the gothic registers a trauma in the strategies of representation as it brings forward a traumatic history toward which it gestures but can never finally refer.

Paradoxically, the various kinds of trauma represented by the gothic—the proximity of Otherness which occasions allegorical approximation—constitute both a return and a loss, and the gothic might be broadly conceptualized as a cultural ritual of inscribing the loss of coherent ego formation, the negation of national imaginary, and the fragmentation of linguistic accountability. For the uncanniness of the gothic is simultaneously terrible and melancholy, and the conjunction of fear and sorrow is powerfully annihilating of the ego's investment in things as they comfortably "are." This conjoined gothic affect is to be located not exclusively in the irruption of the id or in Lacan's revision of the death drive that posits the id's overwhelming of the ego but perhaps more immediately in the agency of the super-ego. This is suggested by a striking repetition in Freud's diverse writings that move toward the conceptualization of the super-ego. In his 1919 essay on "The Uncanny," he takes up the gothic figure of the double, which he seems to understand as an allegorization of the splitting of the ego: while the double originates in primary narcissism, its Otherness becomes "the uncanny harbinger of death" in later stages. "A special agency is slowly formed there, which is able to stand over against the rest of the ego, which has the function of observing and criticising the self." This "special agency" is arguably the site of the uncanny return of the repressed both in psychosis and in the paranoid gothic, for "in the pathological cases of being watched, this mental agency becomes isolated, dissociated from the ego... able to treat the rest of the ego like an object" ("The Uncanny" 235). The superegotistical double emerges into discourse, into narra-
tive, through allegorical personification, a turn that entails both the loss of a coherent self and the fracturing of a transparent, clearly referential lexicon of the self, a turn that marks loss as terrible. Previously, in his 1917 essay on “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud explained that melancholia arises from the traumatic loss not of an object but in regard to the ego, and he did so in virtually the same language. The “melancholic’s disorder,” he argues, manifests when “one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object” (“Mourning” 256). If gothic trauma can be understood as the imminence of the ego’s violation, as something to be scared of, then such possibility is signifiable only through the tropic turn toward the hypothetical face of the Other, a face that haunts the house of the psyche and its allegorical narrativization.

The doubleness of American gothic’s allegorical impulse—which represents “trauma” in a traumatized discourse that splits the sign from the referent—appears early in the tradition, most remarkably in Poe’s architecture of remembering and return, “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Poe’s “house” might be called a master text for the subsequent history of American gothic, both in its sense of what might accrue as “story” and its indirect strategies of narration, the complex that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as “the difficulty the story has in getting itself told” (14). The content of Gothic story remains radically inaccessible: the occasion of the Ushers’ melancholia inheres in the strange relation between Roderick Usher and his sister, Madeline, a historical dimension that lies in the realm of the proscribed and the unspeakable and as such is not subject to recovery. Consequently, the narrative must gesture toward the absent explanatory core of the story by organizing a tension between two allegorical currents. The first represents what might be called the volition toward repression: Madeline must die, and her body must be interred in the deepest recess of the house. The second represents the return of the repressed secret, the rise of the Real, the irruption of history in Madeline’s ascent as revenant, uncannily anticipated by, or predicated upon, the act of reading an old romance.

In the work of conceptualizing a poetics of American gothic,
the narrative trajectory of Poe's "House" is less important than the allegorical signs it generates, the most striking of which occurs in the final moment of Madeline's interment, when the narrator allows himself to gaze upon her face:

we partially turned aside the yet unscrewed lid of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the tenant. A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them. Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead—for we could not regard her unawed. (329, my emphasis)

This passage sustains and is organized around a complex resistance between its literal level—the gaze upon the face of the dead—and its allegorization of this gaze as an act of intuitive, incomplete historical reconstruction. As a sign, the countenance of Madeline Usher remains stubbornly mute in its somatic materiality, yet Poe's "gothic" emerges precisely as such only when this sign turns faintly toward prosopopoeia and generates the narrator's allegory of reading, a moment in which Poe's writing performatively gestures toward the reading of the gothic text by hermeneutic energy in the text. I regard this passage as typical of how American gothic requires a discursive matrix of preterition: an unspeakable, irrecoverable historical preterite is marked, and its consequences brought forward to the present, only in a species of circumlocution. Thus, Madeline's face becomes the text of the double, the twin, the Other, inscribed with the faint traces of an illegible history of "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature." Poe anticipates the fullness of prosopopoeia, Madeline's return as revenant, in the metaphor of tenancy, of a house within the House of Usher: Madeline is not completely consigned to the realm of the dead, nor is her historical significance; a mere "tenant" of the coffin, she will return to consciousness. Perhaps it is a critical inevitability to read an allegorical sign allegorically, that is, to situate it as a suggestive trope in an explanatory narrative of one's own; I argue that the entire tradition of American
gothic can be conceptualized as the attempt to invoke "the face of the tenant"—the specter of Otherness that haunts the house of national narrative—in a tropics that locates the traumatic return of the historical preterite in an allegorically preterited mode, a double talk that gazes in terror at what it is compelled to bring forward but cannot explain, that writes what it cannot read. Such a model might go far in expanding the American grain of the gothic that Donald A. Ringe sees as fully realized in Poe's refusal to "vacillate . . . between the rationally explained and the frankly supernatural" and his assumption of "a position that can best be called noncommittal" (151). If American gothic flourished in the noncommittal strategies of the allegorical, then the overarching tendency of the gothic has been toward a suspension between the immediacy of terrible affect and its linguistic and epistemological unaccountability.

The prevailing tendency of critical discourse to explain gothic's allegorical strategies by a reversion to allegory itself suggests the tenacious power that gothic tropologies and epistemologies continue to exercise. In particular, the architectural metaphor of the haunted house is frequently transferred from its gothic origin—where, as I have suggested, it functions simultaneously as site and structure of narrative, as the vehicle for representing the return of the repressed Other and the prosopo­poeial mode of its signification—to deconstructive and queer theoretical projects. Here, the "house" denotes both the text that is inhabited by the specters of referentiality and the subject who is haunted by the repudiated Other. It is not surprising that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's model of homosexuality's closet and its epistemological rigors emerged from her work in The Coherence of Gothic Conventions (1980), where she locates the gothic convention's requirement that the "self is spatialized": at issue within this architectural model is self-knowledge, which is urgently compelled even as it is preterited. In the turn toward personification allegory, "it is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access. . . . The inside life and the outside life have to continue separately, becoming counterparts rather than partners [which creates] a doubleness where singleness should be" (12–13). She
compares the occluded knowledges of gothic narrative to “the Watergate transcripts. The story does get through, but in a muffled form, with a distorted time sense, and accompanied by a kind of despair about any direct use of language” (15).

Sedgwick’s model of the psychically spatialized self is predicated upon the social construction of “normative” and “Other,” and the function of the gothic is to trouble “the stable crystalline relation . . . that enforces boundaries with a proscriptive energy” (38). The gothic disrupts the regulatory relations of proscription by returning the “blocked off” Other from the temporal field of the preterite to signification: in this sense, the gothic might seem to arise when the will to preterition fails. Yet, while preterition resembles a discursive tactic of repression, the two are not identical; more accurately, the “muffled form” of the gothic is constituted by the double impulses of preterition, which, as a particular manifestation of allegory, articulates indirectly what it cannot obliterate. Suspended between a knowledge that is blocked and a knowledge that is repudiated, preterition tracks and mobilizes, marks the course while it serves as a discursive recourse, of “return” across violated boundary. As both “form” and “content” of narrative, it figures the uncanny while it uncanily figures, which might explain why the gothic houses the Freudian “uncanny” in the several senses connoted by the adjective “queer,” an adjective that strains toward prosopopoeial nomination.

Predictably, the recent queer theoretical project conceptualizes the interplay between repression and preterition by re-deploying the allegorical tropes of the gothic, in particular by personifying the haunting “Other.” Diana Fuss broadly surveys the domain of queer critique through a revisionist cartography of the unstable borders between heterosexuality and homosexuality: “[e]ach is haunted by the other, but . . . it is the other who comes to stand in metonymically for the very occurrence of haunting and ghostly visitations.” Current work in the field of gender and sexuality, she observes, reveals “a certain preoccupation with the figure of the homosexual as specter and phantom, as spirit and revenant, as abject and undead.” Thus, she concludes in a statement that marks the convergence of the queer
and the tropic field of the gothic, “homosexual production emerges . . . as a kind of ghost-writing, a writing which is at once a recognition and a refusal” (3–4). It is ironic, perhaps, that the current academy—driven by the imperative to illuminate the margins of America’s national narratives, to bring the occluded and excluded others of sexual, gendered, and racialized difference to presence—performs its revisionist work in the conventional house of the gothic’s allegorical structuration, epistemology, and tropic discourse. However, these cultural and discursive returns indicate not a failure of the critical imagination but rather the revolutionary potential of American gothic, its long history of accommodating new interventions.

This introductory overview of the representational strategies of the gothic—and their persistence in American cultural work of various kinds—concludes in Iowa, where this collection of essays originates. Much of the preceding argument about the gothic’s straining toward allegory, its historiographical matrix of prosopo­popoeial return that attempts to invoke “the face of the tenant,” is suggested by Grant Wood’s 1930 painting, *American Gothic*, the national icon under which this text is produced. In keeping with the general refusal to interrogate the national symbolic, Grant Wood’s art was dismissed as simplistic, as merely regional, as naively realistic, until a major retrospective of his work in 1983–84 shifted the current of reception. A subsequent flurry of commentary responded to Wood’s implication that the Midwest, in the words of Donald B. Kuspit, “is fertile with more than neat rows of wheat and corn” (139): Thomas Lawson detects “an edge of unsettledness” in Wood’s career that bespeaks “a claustrophobia of the spirit among the rolling fields” (77), while Kuspit sees Wood as a painter of “an inward strangeness” whose enduring subject is “a powerful psychological undertow . . . under the veneer of Social Realism” and whose mode is a “temptation by allegory” (141). The doubleness of allegory is suggested, too, by Karal Ann Marling’s opinion that *American Gothic* inflects nostalgia through irony to frame a “tension between modernism and tradition, between corrosive self-knowledge and delusional retrospection” (97). Representational
“tensions,” like an inconclusive or incomplete turn toward allegory that fails fully to achieve its semiotic, are critical models that are solicited by the liminal, the indirect, the shadow of signification that is cast by *American Gothic*. As James M. Dennis observes, the figures in Grant’s painting “are permanently armed against any conclusive speculation as to what they stand for. . . . The spectator therefore confronts interminably the quiescent couple that haunts the national imagination” (85).

*American Gothic* achieves, among other things, an allegorization of American gothic: like all allegories, its silence inheres in the gap between signification and reference, but, more particularly, this allegory sustains a paradoxically illuminating silence in the space between the planes of composition, between foreground and background, between the couple’s performance of preterition and the historical preterite that resides in the “Carpenter Gothic” house. Wood’s subject is less the stubborn hardness of a mythic prairie character than what Fiedler calls “the pastness of the past” (137), the inexplicable, melancholy continuity between historical suffering and the visible textures of the present. According to Wanda M. Corn, Grant Wood intended *American Gothic* to be primarily a study in vertical composition: the architecture of Carpenter Gothic “appealed to Wood because of its . . . emphatic design—particularly the verticals . . . and the Gothic window, prominently placed in the gable. With his fondness for repeating geometries, Wood immediately envisioned a long-faced and lean couple, ‘American Gothic people,’ he called them, to complement the house and echo its predominantly vertical lines” (129).

I would argue, however, that the energy of the painting is divided between its upward reach—the vanishing point above the gothic arch and the gable peak—and its inward reach that laminates the silent couple to the supplementary resonance of the house across a supremely suggestive narrative gap. If this painting strains toward allegory, then it does so by invoking the historical preterite that resides in that house and haunts the national couple, a preterite that, typically, is preterited. As such, the house allegorizes historical consciousness itself, subject to the imminent irruption, the proximate quality, of the not-
forgotten. Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* suggests the regional precision, the very specificity, of the gothic’s recurring manifestations: it belongs to what Jonathan Raban calls “that sad and un­lamented West where bitterness and fury were the natural off­spring of impossibly great expectations” (62); like all gothic, it haltingly brings forward the underside, the Otherness, of the narratives of national self-construction. The sign of the house yearns not for reconciliation with the past but for inhabitation by the past, the ghosts of return, as it strains toward prosopopoeia. It leaves us more or less in Capote’s “out there,” attending to the “whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat” (343).

**WORKS CITED**


