

# **POETIC** *machinations*

*allegory,*

*surrealism,*

*and*

*postmodern poetic*

*form*

*michael* **GOLSTON**



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"Clark Coolidge's photographic meta-process, Lyn Hejinian's alphabet, Susan Howe's 'Pierce-Arrow,' what Lorine Niedecker learned from surrealism, what language writers learned from Czech and Russian formalism, what Craig Dworkin learned from everyone—Michael Golston's provocative, ambitious, learned, and useful book unifies these discoveries under the banner of allegory, a term capacious enough to include the many ways that Golston's challenging present-day writers highlight the invention, the arbitrariness, and the continuing meaningfulness of their estranged and yet explicable forms. If you care for those writers—and I do—you will be glad to read *Poetic Machinations*."

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POETIC MACHINATIONS

*allegory, surrealism, and postmodern poetic form*



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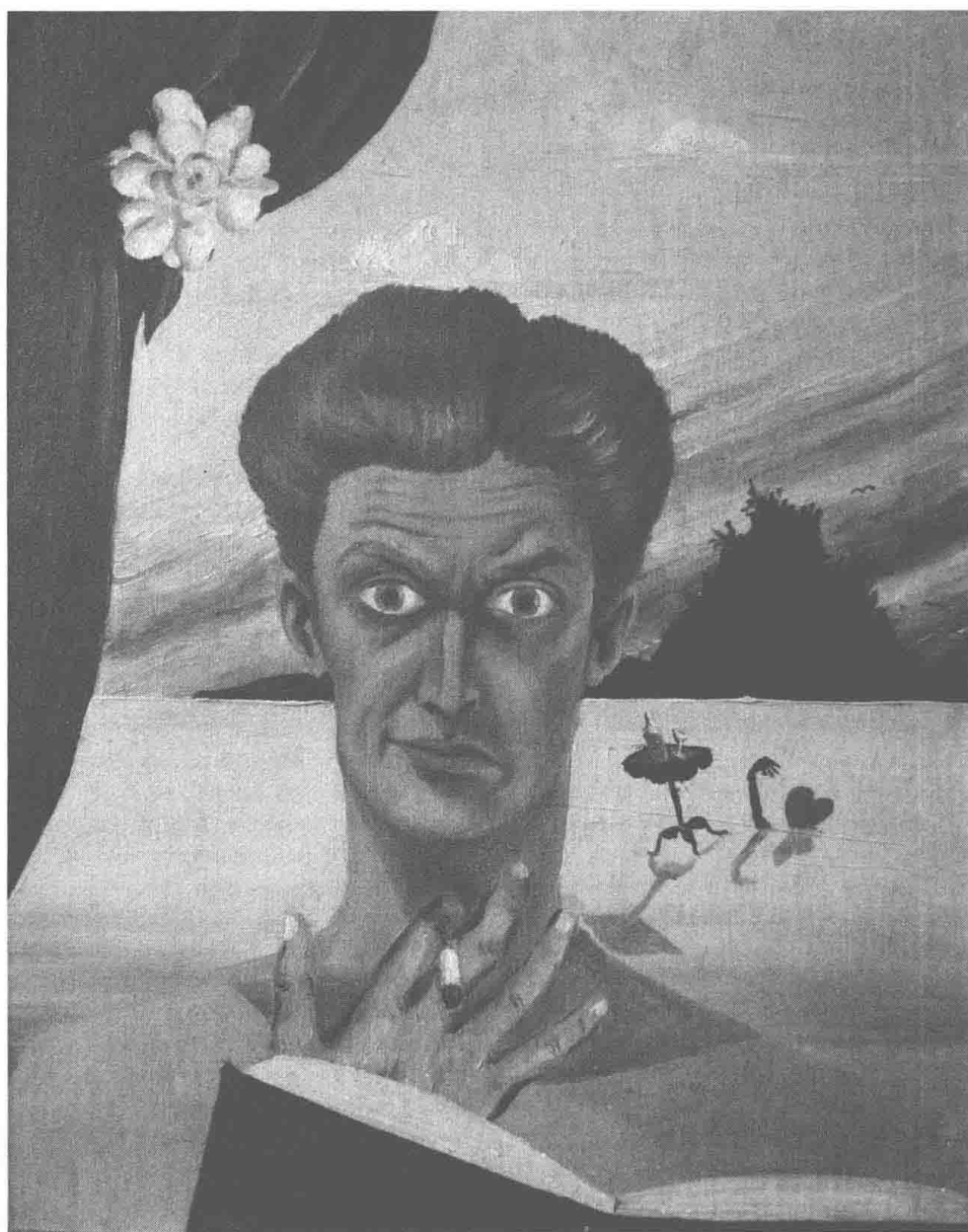
## POETIC MACHINATIONS

*Michael Golston*

*Columbia University Press    New York*

*This one's for Cork.*





Self-portrait, by the author's father, Lawrence (Tuck) Golston (1940)

## POLEMICAL PREFACE

The great misunderstandings. Yes. That's a whole history of art, isn't it?  
—Clark Coolidge, "An Interview with Clark Coolidge"

This book sets out to describe a line or, perhaps more accurately, a practice of postmodern American poetry that I maintain is fundamentally allegorical and that early on finds its inspiration in certain aspects of surrealism, to which it later maintains varying degrees of affiliation. The trope plays a key role in American avant-garde poetry in nearly every decade from the 1930s to the present, and poets as distant in time and style as the objectivist Lorine Niedecker, the language writer Lyn Hejinian, and the conceptualist Craig Dworkin can, I argue, be classified as allegorists. During this same ninety-year period, allegory also consistently appears in critical discussions and period histories: it is alternately pronounced the "armature" of modernism (Walter Benjamin, Angus Fletcher); the characteristic signature of postmodernism (Fredric Jameson, Craig Owens); and the principal mode of a kind of post-postmodernism (Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place). Every time a new direction in poetry is announced or discerned over the past hundred years, the trope is invoked: some configuration, whether critical or creative, of the literary avant-garde periodically declares allegory its principal mark of difference.

This claim immediately calls for qualification: American avant-garde writers have more often than not condemned allegory as artificial, antique, formalist, reactionary, painterly, "European," or otherwise degraded. The most familiar branches of experimental or innovative poetry in America—that is, those deriving from Ezra Pound and imagism or from the early

William Carlos Williams or from objectivist, Black Mountain, Beat, or language poetics, to mention only a few—are not in any overt sense allegorical. Not coincidentally, these movements are also generally not friendly to surrealism.<sup>1</sup> The matter is complicated by the fact that allegory has never entirely lost its early affiliations with surrealism, although the philosophical entanglements of the two are problematical: they share certain formal strategies, but not all surrealism is allegorical, not all allegory surreal. The ongoing dynamic between the rhetorical trope and the art movement is part of what I deal with in this book.

The trajectory I trace goes like this: carried to American shores along with surrealism during the early 1930s, allegory is embraced for a time by Lorine Niedecker and then largely dropped until rediscovered by John Ashbery in the late 1950s. Clark Coolidge picks up the impulse in the 1960s, and it travels on to certain of the language poets in the 1970s and 1980s and into the works of writers such as Susan Howe and Myung Mi Kim in the 1980s and 1990s, after which it winds up informing present-day conceptualist poetics.<sup>2</sup> Along this nearly hundred-year journey, as I said, allegory simultaneously becomes the subject of a great deal of critical consideration—attaining a structuralist cast at midcentury, *allegory* develops into an important term for deconstructive semiotics and as a means for critics to angle back to writers such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Walter Benjamin, and Roman Jakobson, and it ultimately evolves into a principle concept in discussions of postmodernism and post-structuralism.<sup>3</sup> Often described and even used without being named, allegory accrues to itself a number of postmodern myths. For instance, a common conceit in the critical literature concerning allegory is that somehow the social, political, and cultural circumstances of a given historical period account for the period's proclivity for (or its allergy to) the trope; the scholar uses the absence or presence of allegory in the literature of a given period as a kind of critical thermometer for determining the pitch of the fever, so to speak, of the cultural moment. This is already central to Benjamin's idea of allegory as the "armature" of particular period aesthetics such as the baroque as well as to Jameson's notion of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel as an architectural "analogon" for the postmodern subject's inability to navigate de-centered global political environments. According to Stephen Greenblatt, "One discovers that allegory arises in periods of loss, periods in which a once powerful theological, political, or familial authority is threatened

with effacement" (1981b, viii); or, as Deborah Madsen puts it, echoing an older modernist formulation, allegory "registers a dissociation of sensibility" (1996, 126), appearing, for instance, "as the individual genius valued by Romanticism gives way to the culturally constituted discursive subject prized by poststructuralism" (123). Generally speaking, she says, allegory is "conceived as a way of registering the fact of crisis" (119).

Critics thus often strike a moralizing note, construing history as a tragic narrative of ongoing loss while mourning the passing of a mythic time when language supposedly had more "power." Maureen Quilligan writes that "allegory as a form responds to the linguistic conditions of a culture" (1979, 19): due, she says, to the "context of a renewed concern for language and its special potencies . . . we have regained not only our ability to read allegory, but an ability to write it" (204), and she goes on to declare that allegory "will flourish in a culture that grants to language its previous potency to construct reality" (236). But was language previously—or for that matter *ever*—more "potent"? And did "we" at some point really *lose our ability* to read and write allegorically? At this late date, there is something quaint about the idea that language "constructs" reality or that it has levels of "potency" that change from one historical period to another or that a literary trope could have much to do with such momentous circumstances. Sayre Greenfield goes so far as to claim that "allegory, as one of the most complex and indirect forms of reading, reveals the limits of how we think" (1998, 154).

This last statement raises many questions. What exactly are the "limits" of my thinking? How would I know when I have reached them? What if there are no limits to thinking? Why should there be? Do all people in every culture fall into allegorizing at the limits of their thinking? How can we know? As it turns out, no one has proven that different languages limit thinking in different ways or, for that matter, that they limit thinking whatsoever or that language in any meaningful way constructs reality or that particular languages have anything to do with particular cultures—that, indeed, language has anything *at all* to do with culture—or that specific languages carry specific politics or "worldviews" or "epistemologies." The bulk of theoretical and experimental work done in linguistics over the past half-century suggests otherwise. Language, it turns out, is finally not destiny: Swahili is just as elastic and dynamic as German or Maori or Chinese—and vice versa. No worldview is built into the grammar of



Hopi. A speaker of Ebonics is neither incapable of saying or thinking things that a speaker of standard English might say or think, nor can she say or think things that a native speaker of Nahuatl can't say or think. To hold otherwise is not only to ignore decades of scientific research but also to entertain a discredited linguistic essentialism every bit as pernicious as the old racial and cultural essentialisms that everyone in the humanities has worked so hard over the past fifty years to discredit and disavow.

The notion that allegory crops up only during periods of cultural crisis is equally untenable—What hard evidence do we have for this assertion? One should probably not extrapolate from the formal structure of a literary trope to a given historical period's sociopolitical circumstances; this relationship might be the biggest myth of all in the modernist postbag (see, for example, Ezra Pound on the thickness of line in painting as an “analogon” of a culture's tolerance of usury, which he goes on to describe as a “hormone” that can infect an entire civilization) as well as in the postmodernist post office (Is there finally any real difference between Pound's “hormonal” analysis and Jameson's fable about his uneasiness in an edgy new hotel lobby?). Homology itself is grounded on the flimsiest of logical pretenses, the constructing of analogies: it is no wonder that surrealism and allegory are the tikis guarding the structuralist longhouse. One comes away from the literature on allegory distressed by the sheer insouciance with which untested and untestable pronouncements about cognition, language, history, and culture get made.

The philosophical excesses of postmodernism are too well known at this point to require any systematic treatment, and at any rate this is not my purpose here. Many grand and ultimately unsupportable claims about allegory were made during the past fifty years, during which time the trope took on transcendental dimensions, explaining everything from the dynamics of money to the structure of language and the nature of consciousness itself. In other words, the term *allegory* has ended up a keyword in the catalog of the pieties of postmodernism, which has become its own weird old arcade, dusty shops full of the twentieth century's intellectual Kewpie dolls and the dented helmets of the war before the (culture) war before last, all of it awaiting the demolition team from the latest boulevards project. But I am less interested here in what is true or false regarding theories of allegory and language than in the ways that the philosophical fictions of a period enable, compel, or reflect a shift in poetic sensibili-

ties. No serious person today believes that the dialects of rural people are nearer to “the language of the heart” and therefore a more fit medium for expressing human sentiments than are the dialects of urban people, but we know that a branch of romantic poetry was founded on just this bad premise. Likewise, the myths of linguistic determinism or the hundred Eskimo words for snow or the homological structure of human societies or the mirror stage of child development at one point made possible—and to some extent still do—certain developments in American poetry and poetics. The truth-value of these claims and theories—all of them discredited long ago, though they are still current in English departments across the land—is not what is at stake here. What is of interest is the literature that they made possible.

For the purposes of the present study, then, I take—under consideration—contemporary theories of allegory as seriously as they were taken a quarter of a century ago in order to think about a historical shift in the nature and function of poetic form. I go over what is no doubt familiar ground to some people—if there is a certain nuts-and-bolts quality to what follows, it is because the topic of allegory has largely faded from contemporary scholars’ BlackBerry screens and disciplinary journals: there is these days a whiff of the archaic and the esoteric about an issue that was once, allegorically speaking, *burning*. However, what I say about contemporary poetry in this book has not, to my knowledge, been said before, which, I hope, is its real contribution. All but two of the eight poets I have chosen to discuss are still alive and writing (Lorine Niedecker and Louis Zukofsky died in 1970 and 1978 respectively). All of them, with the exception of Zukofsky, write a poetry of formal allegory that is signally unlike any poetry written before. The chronological anomaly here is Niedecker, whose work from the early 1930s, derived directly from her encounters with surrealism, was a precursor of—albeit not an influence on—the later poems I treat in this book.

I came upon the topic for this study as I was finishing my previous book, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (2008), the final chapter of which examines the triadic stanza and the variable foot of W. C. Williams’s late poetry. Beginning in the late 1940s, Williams begins arranging much of his poetry, including large sections of *Paterson*, into roughly identical stanzas, each comprising three regularly staggered free-verse lines. Some critics have complained about the seeming randomness of this stanza, seeing

it as marking a decline of formal integrity and purpose in Williams's poetry, but what struck me about it was precisely its *arbitrariness*: Williams suggests in a number of places that the stanza signifies "relativity," for him the primary condition of modern American life—and although this relativity might be easy to see in the "variability" of the variable foot, nowhere does he speak of the rationale behind his three staggered lines. It is as if his decision to cast his poetry into triads was as "relative" or arbitrary as any other choice might have been.<sup>4</sup> But, more to the point, I came to realize that in these poems *form works allegorically*: the triadic stanza and the relative foot themselves "imply another set of actions, circumstances, or principles, whether found in another text or perceived at large," to quote the definition of *allegory* in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* ("Allegory" 1993, 32). In an abrupt departure from any previous mode of modernist poesis, Williams begins in the late 1940s to work out a distinctly postmodern poetics—a poetics based on the arbitrary relation of content to form in the service of an "allegorical impulse," as Craig Owens's (1992) felicitous phrase puts it. This is the formal shift in poetry after 1950 that I trace in this book.

As I was preparing this manuscript, a colleague advised me to take the word *allegory* out of the title; he warned me that academic readers would have a bad taste left in their mouths from their encounters with the topic in graduate school. This may be true; the term does have a certain staleness about it: after all, it was practically designed to induce academic melancholy. But as I demonstrate here, the use of allegorical form is one of the major strategies of postwar American poetic writing, and the trope is very much alive and kicking in American poetry at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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