"SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING BLUE"
SOME PROBLEMS IN THE CRITICAL METHODOLOGIES OF PETER EISENMAN

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INTRODUCTION

The critical environment plays a tremendous role in shaping the focus of teachers, their students, and ultimately, their student's work. The lack of fiercely contested critical ground for architectural criticism has made the field open to the introduction of trends, movements, or positions from other areas of inquiry which may appear to provide the methodological framework which is lacking. The enthusiasm of early modernists for technology, or the eclectic for a particular period of historical intensity is well known. No modern theorist has been more aggressive in this pursuit than Peter Eisenman.

Deeply concerned with the search for the essence of architecture, which he has defined as residing in the operation of formal relationships, he has, therefore, sought to consider the powerful methodologies for the analysis of form developed in other fields of inquiry, such as structural linguistics and "deconstructionist" literary criticism. This consideration has, however, gone beyond the evaluation of general principles to substantial and explicit efforts to apply directly the methods and vocabulary of the disciplines "borrowed" or "invoked" directly to form-making.

An explicit analogue to the "deep and surface structures" proposed in Noam Chomsky's transformational linguistics guided the development of dual systems of formal elements, one physically structural, the other conceptual, which were employed in the early houses (House I, House II, and House III.[1] (See Figure 1) House III, for example, concerned itself, in part, with the rotation, fracturing, and interpenetration of two grids of organization. More recently he explored the form implications of "deconstruction" in a series of urban design studios at Harvard. A statement made in one of the seminars illustrates the emphasis upon textual analysis and close reading characteristic of the method:

> There is a difference between a text which has metaphoric representation, and a building, which is a metaphor. The text is a reading event, and writing demands reading and speaking. Building is usually thought of as a speaking event. I am interested in it as a reading event.[2]

FORMALISM AND STRUCTURALISM

The difficulty many architects have had in accessing this work is certainly related to the obscurity of the specialized vocabulary combined with the fact that this work must be understood as resting upon the accumulation of prior explorations of formal analysis which have lead from formalism to post-structuralism. Crucial to this is the conflict between art understood as a transparent elucidation of themes "seen through" the work, versus the idea of the work as an autonomous object itself. Writing for Peter Eisenman's new book Houses of Cards, Rosalind Krauss outlines this development and connects formalism to the idea of opacity:

> The kind of reading formalism, demanded was one that converted transparency into opacity; one that both acknowledged the work of art itself and insisted that it force or promote that conversion. Transparency is used here in the sense that Sartre invokes it to speak of prose writing as something the gaze looks through towards a meaning . . . . Against this, Sartre distinguishes the language of the poet as opaque, the phrase-object; the work turned thing.[3]

Writing of the modern conceptual sculpture of Robert Morris as an analogue for the interpretation of Eisenman's work, Krauss defines the new role implied for the observer:

> With this art, the cognitive project is therefore redirected. It is not about the intuition of the object as a goad to or confirmation of the viewer's capacities to initiate

meanings. Rather, it confronts him with a multiple set of meanings that are already in place at the time at which he encounters them.[4]

And finally she describes the leap from the formalist to the (post?) structuralist model:

> Formalist opacity depends on the isolation of the signifier (the work, the pictorial. element, the architectural member) in order that it become a cognitive object. But the abstract meaning, which it then yields, takes on the quality of an isolated mental entity. From what has been said up to now about the Saussurian analysis of language and the insistence that meaning takes place only through an opposition of terms rather than the perception of this terms as absolutes, it is clear that formalist assumptions are difficult to maintain in relation to a linguistic model. It is structuralism which, by embracing that model, posits an entirely different ground for meaning, insisting on the notion of a limitless field of oppositions or differences . . . .If we have been characterizing formalism as strategic conversion of transparency into opacity, we must understand the structuralist procedure as one that performs a very different conversion: the dispersal of unities into a field of differences.[5]

It is important to clarify here that Eisenman is not often concerned with the real in the sense of the buildable, perceivable form, but also with Freud's "psychic entity."[6] Freud of course proposed the most fundamental opposition, the conscious and the unconscious, interacting in complex patterns of mutual influence, without simple closure. Freud's approach to the human psyche resonates with the subsequent evolution of the literary critical theoretical posture of "deconstruction."

DECONSTRUCTION

Deconstruction is a movement in postmodern literary criticism which emphasizes the text and the interaction of its elements as the source of alternative structures of meaning. This is a criticism which assumes opacity (thing-ness) in opposition to the more traditional assumption of transparency ("seeing through"). A series of short definitions of deconstruction best represent the character of the movement and its critical concern for displacement:

> There are many ways of describing the force of literature. The priority of language to meaning is only one of these, but it plays a crucial role in these essays. It expressed what we all feel about figurative language, its excess-over any assigned meaning, or, put more generally, the strength of the signifier via-a-via a signified (the "meaning") that tries to enclose it. Deconstruction, as it has come to be called, refuses to identify the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning and shows how deeply such logocentric or incarnationist perspectives have influenced the way we think about art. We assume that, by the miracle of art, the 'presence of the word' is equivalent to the presence of meaning. But the opposite can also be urged, that the word carries with it a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning. Literary language foregrounds language itself as something not reducible to meaning: it opens as well as closes the disparity between symbol and idea, between written sign and assigned meaning.[7]

> Deconstruction is an investigation of what is implied by this inherence in one another of figure, concept, and narrative[8]

> For Derridean deconstruction proceeds by way of displacement, first reversing the terms of a philosophical opposition, that is, reversing a hierarchy or structure of domination, and then displacing or dislodging the system.[9]
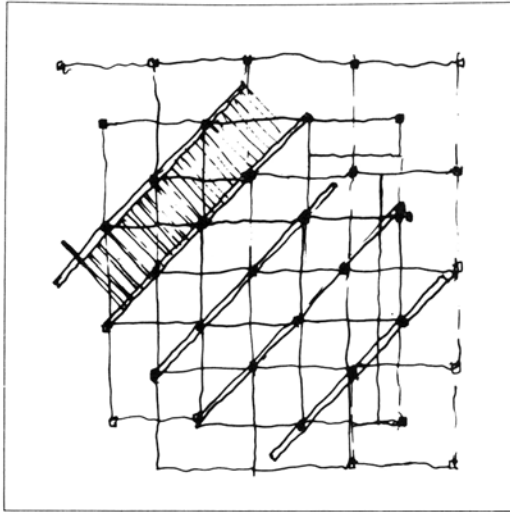
Figure 1 (upper left)[10] Design study drawing from House III (1971) a focus upon the transformational processes gridding, rotation, shearing, splitting, and combinations thereof.
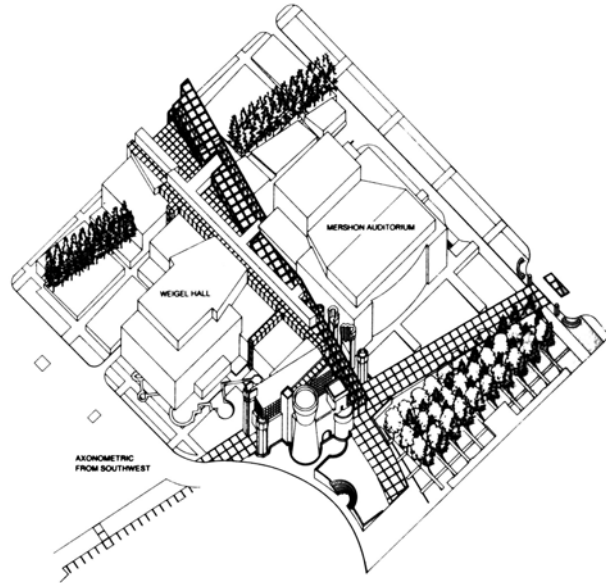
Figure 2 (upper right)[11] The Ohio Center of the Visual Arts (1985). Interpenetration of campus and town grids used as ordering principle. Reconstruction of memory object of armory.

Figure 3 (lower left)[12] Romeo and Juliet (1985) for the Venice Bienniale. "Unification" Plan of Verona. Use of the themes of Romeo and Juliet to organize work. Sets out to destabilize the three major aspects of architectural discourse: site, program, and representation. "The program for this project was to present the dominant recurring themes of the stories of Romeo and Juliet in an architectural form at the site of the two castles. One way to destabilize this program was to undercut its 'reality' --in this case, to create a fiction of a fiction."
"present elements (in color) [shows as dark], elements of memory (in grey), and elements of immanence (in white)"[13]

Figure 4 (lower right)[14] The Chicago Worlds Fair Studio (1984) project by Kathy Ford The drawing is a result of the process of "grafting" the current Chicago and Burnham's Chicago. Grafting is a term favored by Derrida who is opposed to the idea of collage. Grafting suggests the influence of the interaction on subsequent development in a way collage does not.[15]
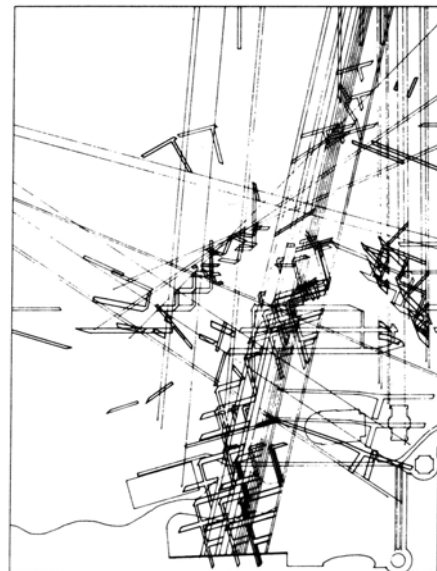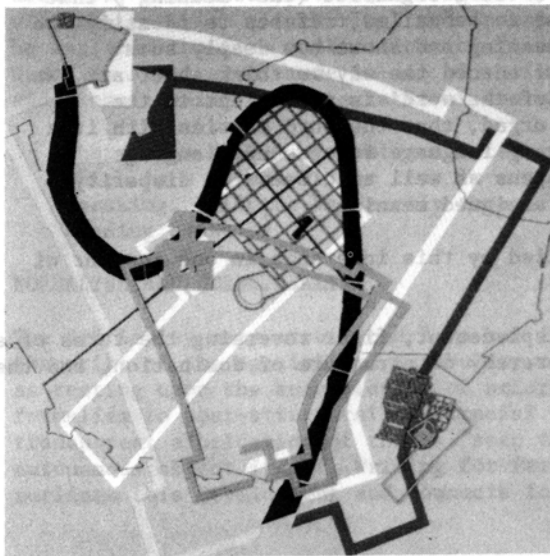
[Deconstruction can be] described as a strategy with several aspects: (1) the noticing of binary oppositions and their hierarchizing or totalizing effects, (2) the inversion and dismantling of the oppositions, (3) the preclusion of the emergence of a synthesizing term that would produce a new hierarchy or totalization.[16]

Deconstruction unsettles the idealisms that provide the ideological justifications for relations of power.[17]

. . . the text must be. . .deconstructed, until fracturing its own expressive texture. Thus the text does not speak any longer of its own 'outside'; it does not even speak of itself; it speaks of our own experience in reading (deconstructively) it.[18]

TOWARD A DESCRIPTION OF FORM-MAKING PRINCIPLES

Three examples from Eisenman's work, and one student project from his studio at Harvard have been selected to illustrate the presence of form making principles he has derived from his reading of linguistic and deconstructive thought. (See figures on preceding page)

A body of form-making principles (tactics?) emerges from this work which can be used to relate it to its sources: (1), an emphasis on form over content (all figures); (2) an overwhelming emphasis on grid rotation and grid adjustment (all figures); (3), an emphasis on the psychic over the physical reality, (figures 3 and 4); (4), "the dispersal of unities in a field of difference", (figure 4); (5) the displacement of meaning from one context to another, (figure 3); (6), the use of physically disparate elements in collage-like relationships, (all figures); (7), concern for the reciprocities of presence and absence implied in the idea of a field of difference, (figure 3); (8) concern for representation as supportive of opacity,(figures 3 and 4), (9) the object as a record of the continuing play of process emphasizing transformations, (figures 1 and 4); and (10), the use of analogue as a generator of form, (figures 2 and 3). Another condition exists in this work, although it is often apparently denied: irony (which is inescapable when dealing with contradiction).

Gregory Ulmer has commented directly on a related process in his discussion of deconstruction and Constructivism:

The experimental production of optical illusion directly in abstract forms (rather than indirectly, as in the mimetic tradition, in forms subordinated to representational demands), is relevant to an understanding of Derrida's attempt to identify the illusory effects of grammar is a similarly pure way.[19]

The foregoing is intended to locate the physical work in the context of the ideas referenced. The reader has been subjected to an exceedingly short introduction to deconstruction and a correspondingly brief review of but a tiny fragment of Eisenman's work. Now is the time to reveal the critical program of this text, which is the identification of problems in four areas characterize the immediate critical effort: (1) problems of definition, (2) the exclusion of figural elements, (3) the social science connection, and (4) the objective of a science of architecture.

PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

Much violence has been done to architecture as built form in order to make it work with the deconstructionist schema. In order to focus upon Freud's psychic reality, the physicality of architecture must be minimized as in the comment above about architecture as "reading event" or the following effort to define the textual elements of architecture also from the Harvard studio of 1984:

"The textual structure of architecture is not color or materiality or texture. The structure of architecture is lines and planes."[20]

This definitional problem can be summarized as the consequence of the attempt to bring (stuff?) architecture into the structuralist scheme. A basic problem which must be confronted in relating architecture to language is the definition of the elements. Although deconstruction tells us that words are very imprecise and as things they set off contradictory patterns of meaning, they are far more

precise than the "words" of architecture. No one has yet satisfactorily defined the elements of architecture in this way. The ambiguities of architecture are larger than those of language. The fact that built architecture is at once visual, spatial, experiential, and possibly verbal, implies multiple languages on multiple levels. The deconstructionists are quick to point out that each word in a text carries both its literal meaning and its history as a word which may and writing at the <u>same time</u> in several different foreground languages, each of which has numerous implied or background references. Architecture, too, completely fractures the initial linearity of text through its spatial presence. The conveying of meaning by absence as well as presence has far more force in architecture than in literature because of the fundamental and unavoidable reciprocity between material and void through which space is defined. This sets up two linked systems of presence and absence, that of the built form, and that of the spatial form. Further complexity is introduced when one considers that the framing of space is read through different cultural filters, which again may interpret any of the texts.

An interesting problem follows from the above-mentioned reciprocities when the discontinuity of forms prevalent in deconstructive work is considered in light of the fundamental reciprocity of form and space. Discontinuous forms imply continuous space; the great goal of the discredited modernism. Is this emphasis on form a more seamless extension of modernism than previously thought?

Difficult as all this may be, the larger definitional question is still one of form. Sensuality has form. Experience of space has form. As is obvious to dancers and musicians, movement and sound have form. Events as well as buildings have form. Activity has form. (including economic activity). Formalism, therefore, does not inherently establish a rationale for excluding these realms of form. The focus in this work upon purely static visual phenomena limits its resonance to architectural experience and is not required by deconstructive theory. It does however increase the probability that this work will be understood stylistically and not substantially. Part of this is, of course, the most common criticism of Eisenman's work, the exclusion of function, culture, and tangible experience from his architectural explorations.

The analogues made to fit architecture into this framework don't hold up. One could make a far richer application of deconstruction to architecture if one did not attempt to be so literal in the search for direct parallels (authority?) in the literary sphere, by considering the many manifestations of form. The analogues developed thus far are primarily geometric.

EXCLUSION OF FIGURAL ELEMENTS

Although implied by the above discussion of definitions, the exclusion of figural elements from the project is worthy of its own critical attention for a crucial reason. The context in which deconstruction evolved included a quintessential post modernist debate within the literary field; the revival of interest and respect for the nineteenth century Romantic poets. One need not go far to find that this language is extremely rich figurally. Concrete images abound as do references to classicism. The parallel to the rehabilitation of the role of both the classical and the eclectic in architecture is obvious. The "great debate" which helped define the deconstructionists was the dispute over whether Romanticism was a displacement of religion to a secular mode of meaning, or whether it was characterized by independent works of art each revealed by its own text. Mark Krupnick, quoting in part the deconstructionist critic J. Hillis Miller states the position of the New Critics:

> "there is no 'essential continuity, no preservation of value and meaning between the
> work and its 'source"... An earlier text ... can never serve as [an] unequivocal principle of
> explanation or meaning of the later text."[21]

This statement, an elegant argument for the autonomy of the text, in no way excludes the realism of the figural imagery so characteristic of these poems. It is ironic that the critical movement used with such vigor by Eisenman to "deconstruct" patterns of architectural order was itself founded in part to argue a view on the interpretation of highly figural work. Deconstruction as a critical technique can be applied to any work. This framework then applies as much to Venturi, Rauch, and Scott-Brown as it might to Eisenman. The use of figural elements out of context with multiple opportunities for meaning is of course a condition of much postmodern work.

Once the relentless drive for opacity of the formalist is sacrificed for the infinitely extendable play of the structuralist, the door is again open for variable levels of transparency, thus re-introducing the possibility of invoking meaning. With this comes also the possibility, apparently abhorrent to Eisenman, of losing control of that meaning or of allowing it to operate in a larger frame. This desire to escape meaning entirely is difficult to sustain in view of the genealogy of deconstruction and structuralism in the social sciences.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE CONNECTION

No discussion referring to structuralism or semiotics in this context would be complete without acknowledgement that the source of many of the insights of this field of inquiry have their origins in the social sciences. Claude Levi-Strauss, the father of structuralist thought, developed his ideas in the context of anthropology.[22] All new work in the social sciences is methodologically aware of this source, as for example Dan Rose's important study of black street life in Philadelphia.[23] Roland Barthes has proposed numerous languages of cultural meaning including food, furniture, garments, and architecture.[24] Although not working in an explicit semiotic frame, Denise Scott Brown clarified the false dichotomy between architectural formalism and social concern in her article, "On Architectural Formalism and Social Concern: A Discourse for Social Planners and Radical Chic Architects."[25] Eisenman is, of course, under no obligation to be inclusive rather than exclusive, but it is important not to perceive the underlying "borrowed" disciplines as themselves antagonistic toward a richer view of architectural experience.

THE SCIENTIFIC OBJECTIVE

The last problem is one of motivation. Why do this? Is this not another attempt to develop a science of architecture? There seems to be a desire to "get to the bottom of architecture" by developing a system of formal relationships which will finally offer an unassailable authority for decisions of form. This issue has been broached in a different context by no less than the noted deconstructionist critic, J. Hillis Miller who wrote:

> As is abundantly apparent in criticism at the present time, rhetorical analysis, 'semiotics,' 'structuralism,' 'narrartology,' or the interpretation of tropes can freeze into a quasi-scientific discipline promising exhaustive rational certainty in the identification of meaning in a text and in the identification of the way that meaning is produced.[26]

Miller has concluded that:

> . . .'deconstruction', which is analytic criticism as such, encounters always, if it is carried far enough, some mode of oscillation. In this oscillation two genuine insights. . . inhibit, subvert, and undercut one another. This inhibition makes it impossible for either insight to function as a firm resting place, the end point of analysis.[27]

Does not deconstruction in architecture thus deconstruct itself?

TOWARD A METHODOLOGY OF BORROWING

As this is written, attempts are underway to define a new movement closely identified with deconstruction and the ideas of Peter Eisenman. It is hoped that the analysis here has shown that the process of invoking deconstructive theory in architecture is far from complete and is filled with severe conceptual difficulties. Borrowing is possible, and both structuralism and deconstruction have much to offer to architecture. This contribution will be made only when the difficulties are understood, encountered, addressed, and presented as such. This has not yet happened. Maybe Harold Bloom was suggesting a conclusion for the current study when he quoted Friedrich Schlegel: "The irony of irony is the fact that one becomes weary of it if one is offered it everywhere and all the time."[28]

We have forgotten, I mean forgotten
Things that don't seem familiar when
We meet them again, lost beyond telling,
Which were ours once.

John Ashbery[29]

0 chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
0 body swayed to music, 0 brightening glance
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

William Butler Yeats[30]

FOOTNOTES

[1] House III published: "House III", <u>Progressive Architecture</u>, May 1974, 92-99. General discussion of linguistic connection in "On Reading Architecture", <u>Progressive Architecture</u>, March 1972, 68-87.

[2] transcript of seminar discussion published in <u>Investigations in Architecture, Eisenman Studios at the GSD: 1983-85</u>, Jonathan Jova Marvel, Ed., (Cambridge: Harvard GSD, 1986) p. 29. This statement, although quoted from the transcript, is unattributed.

[3] Rosalind Krauss, "Death of a Hermeneutic Phantom: Materialization of the Sign in the Work of Peter Eisenman", in <u>Houses of Cards</u>, Peter Eisenman, (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 168.

[4] Rosalind Krauss, <u>ibid.</u>, 179.

[5] Rosalind Krauss, <u>ibid.</u>, 179-180.

[6] see for example Peter Eisenman's introduction to Aldo Rossi, <u>The Architecture of the City</u>, (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1982), 4.

[7] Geoffrey Hartman in <u>Deconstruction and Criticism</u>, (New York: Continuum, 1975), vii-viii.

[8] Paul De Man <u>op cit.</u>,

[9] Mark Krupnick, <u>Displacement: Derrida and After</u>, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983), 1.

[10] Illustration. Peter Eisenman, <u>Houses of Cards</u>, Peter Eisenman, (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), permission applied for.

[11] <u>Progressive Architecture</u>, January 1985, 98. Permission applied for.

[12] Illustration "Unification" in, Peter Eisenman, "Moving Arrows, Eros, and Other Errors", in <u>Precis 6,</u> (New York: Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning, Columbia University, 1987), 140. Permission applied for.

[13] Peter Eisenman, "Moving Arrows, Eros, and Other Errors", in <u>Precis 6,</u> (New York: Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning. Columbia University, 1987), 139-143.

[14] Drawing by Kathy Ford in, Jonathan Jova Marvel ed., <u>Investigations in Architecture: Eisenman Studios at the GSD: 1983-85</u>, (Cambridge: Harvard GSD, 1986), Permission applied for.

[15] Jacques Derrida, interview in, <u>Precis 6,</u> (New York: Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning, Columbia University, 1987), 48-49.

[16] Ralph Flores, <u>The Rhetoric of Doubtful Authority</u>, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984), 9. Flores also cites Jacques Derrida, <u>Positions,</u> (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 56-57.

[17] Mark Krupnick, <u>op cit.</u>, 3.

[18] Umberto Eco, <u>Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language</u>, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 154.

[19] Gregory Ulmer, "Op Writing", in Mark Krupnick, ed., <u>Displacement: Derrida and After</u>, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983), 39.

[20] transcript of seminar discussion published in <u>Investigations in Architecture: Eisenman Studios at the GSD: 1983-85</u>, Jonathan Jova Marvel ed., (Cambridge: Harvard GSD, 1986), 28. This statement, although quoted from the transcript, is unattributed.

[21] Mark Krupnick, <u>Displacement: Derrida and After</u>, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983), 10.

[22] E. Nelson Hayes and Tanya Hayes, eds., <u>Claude Levi-Strauss: The Anthropologist as Hero</u>, (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1970)

[23] Dan Rose, <u>Black Street Life in Philadelphia 1969-72</u>, (Philadelphia, Univ. of Pennsylvania UP, 1987)

[24] Roland Barthes, <u>Elements of Semiology</u>, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 63.

[25] Denise Scott Brown, "On Architectural Formalism and Social Concern: A Discourse for Social Planners and Radical Chic Architects", <u>Oppositions 5</u>, Summer 1976, 99-112.

[26] J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host", in <u>Deconstruction and Criticism</u>, Geoffrey Hartman ed., (New York: Continuum, 1975), 249.

[27] J. Hillis Miller, <u>ibid.</u>, 252.

[28] Harold Bloom, <u>op.cit.</u>, 16.

[29] John Ashbery quoted in Bloom, <u>op cit.</u>, 30.

[30] William Butler Yeats, "Among School Children", part of last stanza, in <u>The Poems of W. B. Yeats</u>, Richard J. Finneran, ed., (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 217.