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Ex Ante Allusions

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Abstract: We tend to think of allusions as indirect references to objects that already exist. Here I argue against this post facto orthodoxy and for the view that certain cases of allusion count as ex ante allusions (i.e. allusions before the fact). I argue that the standard view conflates the epistemic dependence of allusion (knowledge of the object of allusion) with an existential dependence (the object must already exist). As an adequate account of allusion should explain both the apparent paradoxical character and the possibility of ex ante allusions, I propose that literary allusions should be understood in terms of what might be called reference from rather than reference to.

We tend to think of allusions as indirect references to objects that already exist. Here I challenge this post facto orthodoxy, and propose an alternative account of literary allusion not as reference to but as reference from. In particular, I argue that the notion of ex ante allusion—literally ‘from before,’ i.e. to objects that do not yet exist—is perfectly coherent despite its paradoxical veneer, that there are actual examples of such allusions in select literary works, and that although these examples are generally hard to verify, the fact that they do exist suggests important revisions to our concept of allusion.

To begin, take the definition proposed by William Irwin in his important philosophical analysis, ‘What Is an Allusion?’: Irwin defines allusion as ‘a reference that is indirect in the sense that it calls for associations that go beyond mere substitution of a referent’¹—we might compress this for now into ‘reference by association.’ What Irwin intends here is twofold: first, to distinguish allusion from other sorts of reference, typically more direct references; second, to identify the psychological mechanism (i.e. association)

that makes it work and that characterizes its special indirectness. To take an example, in Leonard Cohen's poem 'Thousand Kisses Deep,' the lines 'And maybe I had miles to drive / *And promises to keep*' rather clearly allude to Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,' in particular the lines 'But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep. . .'² By contrast, and taking Irwin's definition strictly, the phrase 'the gloomy Dane,' though certainly a reference to Hamlet, is too direct (as it constitutes 'mere substitution of a referent') to be an allusion to Hamlet, though perhaps not too direct to be used to allude to *Hamlet*.

For a discussion case, Irwin offers 'I am not Prufrock' as a candidate allusion, though not to the character in Eliot's poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.' It is an allusion rather to some facet(s) of the subject that we are meant to associate with the Prufrock character in the poem—whatever that might be, perhaps that the subject does not consider himself as insignificant or as life having passing him by.³ This is clearly a literary reference, and we even sometimes speak of such references as literary allusions even though the literary referent is not identical to the object of the allusion. We may sympathize with the complaint that such a literary reference is too direct to constitute a literary allusion insofar as it is not itself referred to by association; rather, it is the literary basis of the allusion to something else, and in this sense we should distinguish two types of literary allusion: allusion to a literary work (as with Cohen's allusion to Frost) versus allusion through a literary work (as with the Prufrock example). I suggest that we designate these 'type 1' and 'type 2' literary allusions, respectively. Although allusions can occur outside the confines of literature and art generally—allusions that have nothing to do with art; neither in, nor about, nor that use it at all—it is artistic, and chiefly literary, allusions that concern me here.

To understand the associative link between allusions and their objects it will be helpful to revisit Hume's distinction among principles of association. The *Treatise* famously distinguishes among three principles by which ideas suggest one another: resemblance, contiguity, and causation.⁴ It is by resembling the person that a portrait tends to make one think of the person. Likewise, it is by the resemblance between Cohen's 'miles to drive/promises to keep' and Frost's 'promises to keep/miles to go' that Cohen alludes to Frost. Turning to contiguity, thinking about Canada may bring to the mind its neighbour to the south, the United States. In the same way, at a presentation characterized by unusual levels of bombast and platitude, I might whisper to a colleague 'So he advises Laertes,' thus alluding to Polonius, a contiguous character in the same play. In this way too we can allude to a work by quoting it, in that the quotation is contiguous with the other parts that together constitute the whole. Although it may not be immediately apparent, the principle of causation also figures into allusion. In typical cases, the object of allusion inspires, and so is part of the causal story behind, the allusion itself. More important for my purposes, if I am correct in my claim

that there is such a thing as ex ante allusion, the associative principle of causation will help explain how such allusions work.

I

Before arguing that the notion of ex ante allusions is coherent, however, it makes sense first to outline what I call the post facto orthodoxy, which is part of the standard view of allusions that, both pre-critically and theoretically, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, denies the very possibility of ex ante allusions.

Consider first various characterizations of allusion in prominent literary reference books. *A New Handbook of Literary Terms*: ‘When a literary work engages in allusion, it refers to—plays with, makes use of— *earlier* pieces of literature (or, sometimes, history)’ (emphasis added).⁵ *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines allusion as the ‘deliberate incorporation of identifiable elements from other sources, *preceding or contemporaneous*, textual or extratextual’ (emphasis added).⁶ Even when such a restriction is not explicitly put on allusion, it is usually, if less obviously, present in the form of an implication; for instance, take the definition of allusion from the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*:

An indirect or passing reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work, the nature and relevance of which is not explained by the writer but *relies* on the reader’s *familiarity* with what is thus mentioned (emphasis added).⁷

Although there is no explicit requirement here that the object of allusion already exist, this does seem to be implied by the stress placed on reader familiarity, for a reader cannot be familiar with a text or something else that does not yet exist. This is what I mean by the phrase ‘the post facto orthodoxy,’ which amounts to ruling out the possibility of ex ante allusions, since these different characterizations of allusion are intended to express not just what is typical of such reference but what is essential to it.

The post facto orthodoxy is not merely part of the establishment view of allusion as expressed in literary reference books. It is a commitment shared by many philosophers as well. Consider first the conceptual analysis proposed by Göran Hermerén, which amounts to the following necessary and sufficient conditions. According to Hermerén, an allusion has occurred if and only if:

- (1) The artist intended to make beholders think of the *earlier* work by giving his work certain features.
- (2) As a matter of fact beholders contemplating his work make associations with that *earlier* work.
- (3) These beholders recognize that this is what the artist (among other things) intended to achieve (emphasis added).⁸

Leaving aside the fact that some objects of allusion are not works of art,

this is a clear, explicit commitment to the post facto orthodoxy. We likewise see such a commitment in the explication of allusion (specifically in film) offered by Noël Carroll:

Allusion, as I am using it, is an umbrella term covering a mixed lot of practices including *quotations*, the memorialization of past genres, the *reworking* of past genres, *homages*, and the *recreation* of “classic” scenes, shots, plot motifs, lines of dialogue, themes, gestures, and so forth from film *history* (emphasis added).⁹

As above, even when it is not explicitly part of a definition of allusion, the post facto orthodoxy tends to reveal itself in the interpretation of the definition’s scope. For instance, although Irwin’s definition of allusion as reference by association does not obviously rule out ex ante allusions, in developing his account Irwin makes perfectly clear that he embraces the restriction. As he puts it, ‘Only a divine author, outside of time, would seem capable of alluding to a later text.’¹⁰

Irwin makes this claim as if it were not expected to be in any way controversial. Indeed, it is not particularly controversial, which reflects the fact that the post facto orthodoxy is often taken for granted, and so constitutes an important yet, I argue, challengeable part of the conventional view of allusions.

II

Let us turn now to three candidate cases for the label ‘ex ante allusion,’ which I have chosen for various reasons. The first two cases are intended to demonstrate the coherence of the concept, to stand as possible cases of ex ante allusion. The third case, though rather obscure by contrast with the first two, is intended to stand not merely as a possible instance but as a confirmed actual case.

The first case comes from Ernest Hemingway and *The Sun Also Rises*. The book’s protagonist is Jake Barnes, and the novel is written in the first person from Jake’s perspective. There is reason to interpret Jake as Hemingway’s fictional stand-in, including the common interpretation of the novel as a roman à clef. Early on in the novel, another character, Robert Cohn, in the context of what can only be described as an existential conversation, asks Jake, ‘Do you know that in about thirty-five years more we’ll be dead?’¹¹ Note that: thirty-five years; and note that the novel was originally copyrighted and first published in 1926. Add 35 to 1926, and you get 1961; and 1961 was the very year Hemingway committed suicide!¹² At the very least, the juxtaposition of such a fictional prediction with covert real-world implications, apparently fulfilled many decades after the fact, is apt to give one pause.

To be absolutely clear here, my claim is not that this necessarily *is* a case

of ex ante allusion. My claim is only that it *might* be. It is at least possible that Hemingway had the intention, in 1926, to commit suicide thirty-five years later, and that he also had an intention to allude, covertly, to this eventuality by putting the prediction in the mouth of a fictional character addressing, in fictional disguise, Hemingway himself. I admit, openly, that this case is likely just a coincidence, that the timing of the suicide was not deliberate or, if it was, had nothing to do with the novel's apparent if merely possible prediction. Well and good. The point remains, however: although this was, in all probability, mere coincidence, it might not have been. The suicide might have fulfilled an ex ante allusion, and if so, what an astonishing moment in literary history!—Hemingway coming to fulfil the prophecy of his first great work, and thereby enhancing its greatness, with a unique and profound, ultimately the grandest, gesture.

The second case comes from Leonard Cohen, and is similar to the first insofar as it is intended to demonstrate the coherence of the concept of ex ante allusion without serving as a verifiable case, at least given the information now available to us. Whereas Hemingway is dead, Cohen is, at the time of writing this essay, still living, and so unlike Hemingway might provide evidence that his case counts, or fails to, as ex ante allusion. The case is as follows: in his 2001 song 'That Don't Make It Junk,' Leonard Cohen speaks of having closed, as he calls it, the Book of Longing. This could well have been an ex ante allusion to his poetry collection published five years later, *Book of Longing*.¹³ That is, Cohen could have written the line about closing the Book of Longing with the intention of alluding to an envisioned but not then existing work. I am not suggesting that an intention to allude is sufficient for an allusion to have occurred, but rather only that such intent is a key ingredient of and so good evidence for allusion.¹⁴

There are two reasons why this might not count as an ex ante allusion. First, Cohen might have written the line and only *later* come to consider that it would make a good title. In this case the possible ex ante allusion may simply reduce to typical self-influence. Second, it might seem too direct a reference to count as an allusion proper. Although the first concern cannot be answered at this point, something may be said to the second. Although it seems 'the Book of Longing' is a rather direct reference to *Book of Longing*, it is rather perhaps more indirect than it appears. The original phrase includes the definite article, lacks italics, and in context is better interpreted not as a book in its own right but as either a metaphorical book or an imagined biblical book. In any event, if this reference is too direct, it might have been made less directly. So again, even if we cannot say for sure that this is an actual case of ex ante allusion—that it may amount to no more than post facto influence, that it might be too direct—it could have been otherwise and so further illustrates the possibility of such.

The third case is an obscure one but, in a way, more to the point, illustrating, I claim, not merely the coherence of the concept, but an actual case of ex

ante allusion. An experimental novel was published in 2003 by a relatively unknown writer named Jason Holt, bearing the title *The Black Books Addiction*. Nothing in the novel itself suggests the title, except for the paperback's cover, which is self-referentially black. Any expectation of exploring the suggested theme of literature-as-narcotic is disappointed by the novel itself, although ultimately fulfilled by the author's 2009 follow-up, *A Tangent at 3:15*, which takes literature-as-narcotic as its key plot point. Unlike the Hemingway and Cohen cases, where we as yet lack information to confirm or confute an ex ante hypothesis, in this case the author has confirmed the intention, when writing the 2003 book, to allude to the then-unwritten one.¹⁵ The presence of such an intention allows us to rule out the confuting possibilities remaining live in the Hemingway and Cohen cases. This obscure novelist has, it seems, provided us with a verified case of ex ante allusion.

III

In discussing ex ante allusions and their implications I want to explain both why they have such a paradoxical veneer and why it is only that, a veneer. I also want to sketch a view, suggested by this discussion, of literary allusions as reference *from* rather than reference *to*.

First, at least part of what makes ex ante allusions seem paradoxical is a failure to appreciate the distinction between the object of allusion being *extant* and the object of allusion being *known*. In typical allusions, the object is known in virtue of, among other things, existing already. Cohen's allusion to 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,' for instance, depends on his knowing that poem, which is knowledge he would not have if the poem did not exist. This is not because such knowledge depends on the poem already existing, but because, given Frost's authorship, Cohen was not in a position to have such knowledge until the poem had already been written. However, this is decidedly *not* the case for Cohen's epistemic access to his own envisioned but unexecuted works—e.g. the possible ex ante allusion to *Book of Longing*. This is obviously a special kind of knowledge, the knowledge on which ex ante allusions depend, as the same person is responsible, as alluder, both for the allusion itself as a kind of prediction, and for fulfilling the prediction by bringing the object into existence later on. Whether this counts as knowledge by description or a special kind of knowledge by acquaintance—through the vision that inspires and shapes the later object's creation—such knowledge, though special, is indeed possible.

Skepticism about ex ante allusions could be motivated by the fact that very often we might not be able to tell whether we have an ex ante allusion rather than an instance of the far more common phenomenon of post facto influence. But this does not alter the fact that there *is* a real difference between these ex ante and post facto scenarios, a difference both causal and psychological, even if we are rarely able to sift the ex ante from the post

facto. Even if Cohen never reveals it—and artists, we know, are often coy about such things—there is a fact of the matter about whether he had alluded ex ante to *Book of Longing*. Skeptics may also note that in the end ex ante allusions amount to a special and interesting form of foreshadowing, and no one doubts existence of such a common artistic device. Of course the key difference between common foreshadowing and ex ante allusions is that typical foreshadowing is of later elements in the *same* work, where ex ante allusions take objects that are decidedly extrinsic to the work. Other interwork connectors, such as cliffhangers, will often seem less like ex ante allusions and more like formal placeholders for future filling in.¹⁶

The paradoxical veneer of ex ante allusions owes in no small part, I suggest, to their *promissory* nature. Indeed, an intended ex ante allusion may not come off because its envisioned object does not, for whatever reason, come into being. There is, in other words, a kind of fragile contingency unique among allusions to the ex ante variety. That such an allusion may not come off, however, does not mean that when it does come off, it is not what it was intended to be. There are various respects in which ex ante allusions exhibit such a promissory character. First, until their objects eventuate, and whatever the author's intentions, there will be no shared reference with readers—although one of the lessons of modernism seems to be that the opacity of an allusion is no mark against its status as such. Ex ante allusions are also promissory in that they are arguably part of works that remain, until their objects eventuate, incomplete. They are *finished* works, to be sure, as they need no more work to be done on them, yet still lacking some of their raw material, they are not yet complete.¹⁷ Third, ex ante allusions also have an element of self-fulfilling prophecy, and until fulfilled they remain allusions in progress.¹⁸ This is why they suggest Hume's view of causation qua principle of association of ideas. The reference-by-association of an allusion can be achieved ex ante when it itself is productive of, or deliberately part of the causal fabric that ends up producing, its eventual object. An ex ante allusion is its object's causal precursor. Once the elusive object has been realized, readers may associate it with its allusive precursor whether or not they can discern its ex ante status.

If ex ante allusions do belong in the taxonomy of allusions alongside more garden variety sorts, they help motivate changes to our concept of allusion beyond such inclusion, or in other words, beyond mere rejection of the post facto orthodoxy. To return to our earlier examples, we might reconsider whether typical literary allusions, be they type 1 (Cohen alluding to Frost) or type 2 (alluding through Prufrock), as references by association, are actually references *to* literature at all. Suppose we try to account for such reference in terms of a somewhat naïve Fregean story in terms of which Cohen's use of 'miles to drive. . . promises to keep' alludes to Frost's 'promises to keep. . . miles to go' in virtue of expressing a sense that determines such reference. Well and good, except for that fact that (1) this neither accounts for the asso-

ciative mechanism of allusion nor differentiates it from typical reference; (2) it therefore neglects the typical point of allusions, which is subsidiary, often ornamental, as far as their main reference is concerned—in the Cohen case, certain possibilities ('And maybe I...'), in the Prufrock case, an unidentified subject ('I am not...'); (3) it also therefore fails to respect ex ante allusions' veneer of paradoxicality, since it is not even seemingly paradoxical to simply refer, in the usual way, to something in the future.

To account for the allusive part of such references, and their subsidiary, associative, mediating role, and to respect the apparent paradoxical nature of ex ante allusions, I propose that we recast literary allusion as reference *from* rather than reference *to*, in that the main reference is achieved in such cases *via* the literary object: allusion to as reference from. In type 1 cases, like the Cohen example, reference to the literary object (e.g. certain possibilities) is *from* the allusive object (e.g. Frost). Type 2 cases, conversely, exhibit reference *from* the literary object (e.g. Prufrock) to the allusive object (e.g. the unidentified subject). Here we also respect the paradoxical veneer of ex ante allusions: 'the Book of Longing' (perhaps) referring from the later *Book of Longing* to the then-current metaphor, 'thirty-five years more' (perhaps) referring from Hemingway's eventual suicide to *The Sun Also Rises*' fictional future, 'the black books addiction' (definitely) referring from the later book (as plot point), to the earlier one (as title). Thus allusion to as reference from makes sense of such references as a type of framing device.

Having argued this for ex ante allusions both as a coherent possibility and a plausible actuality, and after exploring briefly some of the implications of this position, including an account of literary allusion as reference from, I conclude by acknowledging skepticism about whether this account of can be generalized to account for all allusions. This skepticism owes quite simply to the fact that some allusions no doubt are made for their own sake alone, and need not serve, beyond the pale of art, some other referential or ornamental objective.¹⁹

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NOTES

1. Irwin 2001, 289.
2. Cohen 2006, 57; Frost 1940, 310.
3. Irwin 2001, 287. The particular context often enough will help disambiguate the meaning of this or any other type of allusion.
4. See Hume 1926, 1.1.4.1-5, 19-21.
5. Mikics 2010, 11.
6. Preminger and Brogan 1993, 38-39.
7. Baldrick 2009, 9.
8. Hermerén 1992, 211.
9. Carroll 1998, 241.
10. Irwin 2001, 297 n22.
11. Hemingway 1954, 11.
12. This observation was originally made and discussed in Holt 2013.
13. Cohen 2006.
14. For instance, an attempt to allude via quotation can go awry if the quotation is misattributed or the correct source is unrecognizably misquoted.

15. Personal communication.
16. Similarly, we may also distinguish the type of open-ended, future-directed reference discussed by Hirsch 1994, 552-553. Instead of allowing for future particulars that are as yet unknown, ex ante allusions require prior knowledge of particulars not yet extant.
17. Objects of allusion may be thought of as raw materials just as clay is to sculpture. The *Venus de Milo* counts as a finished but, because of its missing pieces, incomplete work.
18. Typical prophecies, by contrast, are more direct references, their main purpose is to proclaim rather than hint at future events, and they are uninvolved in producing what they predict.
19. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2014 meeting of the Atlantic Region Philosophers Association.

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