

Preliminary Theses on Allegory (1977)

Note 2020: This polar star for all my orientation in literature was debated with a friend from 1971 on and finally written in 1976. The last two sentences and a few other words were added for this book as having been implied in these Theses all along but only articulated later.

The problem of allegory is the obverse of the problem of “fiction,” that is, of the relationship of art to truth, or imagination to normative doctrine. Allegory and its problematics have to do with both the production and the perception of organized (formalized, artful, and transmittable) discourse: *what can the artificer/producer say* and *how is the user to perceive what was said* – the what and how referring to epistemological and political possibilities and taboos. Allegory is thus a *via magistra* (royal road) to basic questions of human creativity and its historical determinants.

Within literature – here defined as the whole body of transmittable, organized, and artful discourse in word statements – allegory appears as a sign of clear relationships between true (sacred or numinous) and feigned (profane) texts, between socially normative doctrine embodied in a privileged body of texts – tribal cosmogony and bestiary, Holy Writ, mythical historiography legitimizing the rulers-that-be, scientifico-philosophical orthodoxy, etc. – and new creativity *generically discontinuous* from that privileged body. Since in class history the normative doctrine and its interpretive system are as a rule closed and presumed ahistorical, all admissible new creativity is supposed to be written around it, officially in the status of secondary illustration and lower, expedient genres. New texts claiming equal or contiguous generic status with the canon are then in competition with these doctrinally privileged texts; they are socially disallowed, declared apocryphal and heterodox (or indeed heretical).

Allegory is thus a more or less clearly admitted relationship between a new literary statement – chronologically and ideologically consecutive and in that sense secondary – and an already existing privileged doctrine whose statement it reproduces (*egoria*) in a variant and estranged (*allos*) way.

The new statement gains its social legitimacy from outside itself, from the pre-existing statements. Yet being generically different, the new statement has necessarily a different horizon (Aristotle's *telos*). There is an inherent tension between faithfulness (piety) and creativity, the static diachrony of doctrinal tradition and the deviating synchrony of social observation. Since in order for any new text to exist at all, the old has to be reproduced in a variant way, allegory can only fulfil its basic function or be significant when it is “faithful after its own fashion.” Even the most believing creators are uncomfortable allies for priests.

Further differentiations within allegory can be undertaken based on such different interactions between the letter and the spirit, the vehicle and the tenor, the narrative or manifest level, and the informing belief or meaning.

One should distinguish “small forms” of “low,” oral origin – such as the riddle, the non-human fable, and the parable, all containing an element of paradox, of *conflict of authority* provoking the user's transference of judgement – from mythical or religious allegories in the strict sense, which are scribal “large forms” assumed into “high literature.” The latter may or may not contain a conflict, but their overall tenor lies within the hegemonic horizon of a *confirmation of authority*, effected by precise parallels between the doctrinal meaning and elements of the text. The structure of the allegorical “low forms” is determined by a tension between the experiential relations within the narrative (however fantastically transposed) and the informing doctrinal belief. The structure of “high” allegorical forms tends toward aprioristic determination of all its significant elements by the belief hardened into a doctrine. The low forms are often witty; the high forms are often wooden.

Conflictual allegory communicates with the doctrinally innocent or naive (Schiller) user disposed to hear a startling proposition. *Confirmational allegory* communicates with the doctrinally informed or sentimental user disposed to hear a reinforcement of the doctrine. The Dantean practice – and

theory – of polysemy tends toward a compromise, fusing the strength of the large form with the elasticity of the conflictual mode. Such a fusion is approached by all great practitioners of allegory (e.g., in drama, frequently in trial or judgment scenes: Aeschylus, Aristophanes, some medieval Mystery writers, D. Lindsay, some Shakespeare, Brecht).

Conflictual allegory uses mimetic realism on the narrative level (e.g., the parables of Yehoshua in the Bible or of Brecht), while confirmational allegory tends not to (e.g., the absurd episode with the key called Promise in *Pilgrim's Progress*). From this vantage point, the eighteenth–twentieth-century “realism” can be envisaged as an ensemble of agnostic literary movements that does not openly admit to a clear relationship with a privileged doctrine. Yet the doctrine, thrown out through the main door, is reimported through the back window in the shape of makeshift, fragmentary, and often competing doctrines of “natural reality” and its “imitation” or “reflection,” unified by the twin axioms of individualism and positivism. In the twentieth century, it is precisely the collectivistic reintroduction of an ambiguous and elastic allegoresis that accounts for the neo-medievalism of our narrative and dramatic literature.

Literature abhors vacuum of belief.

In this light, “non-fictional” writings pertaining, say, to the philosophy of science are also within the allegorical mode. *Das Kapital*, *The Special Theory of Relativity*, and the Synoptic Bible are conflictual allegory; Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, your normal handbook of physics, and Stalin's *Problems of Leninism* are confirmational allegory.

Further, “Realism,” pretending to zero-degree allegory, is usually a shamefaced allegory of a zero-value system – say, critically (the price is made clear) in Balzac or uncritically (the price is occulted) in the aforementioned handbook of physics.

Indeed, if we defined “literature” as in point 2, the problem becomes how to avoid simply changing that label to that of allegory. But then, labels too are a shorthand for a supposedly pre-existing content. Perhaps the only way out of this impasse is to begin radically doubting the initial religious notion of sacred production vs. profane reproduction. Every Judgement Day is also genesis (Bloch), and Genesis is every day: today is the first day of the rest of our existence.