



The Strangeness of Allegory

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Allegory: An Adversarial View

I am writing this book to present an alternative – radically alternative – idea of allegory to the one now apparently universally held, which is that allegory is personification writ large. Put most simply, I hold that allegory is not personification, that while it may sometimes use personification, it can in no way be restricted to it. If it were, it would hardly be complicated, because – whatever rhetorical flourishes one may adorn it with – personification strives for clarity. It is a didactic device that wants to make its message clear: Christian is a Christian, Everyman is every man, and there are no two ways about it.

Allegory, on the other hand, always has at least two ways about it, or else it is grossly misnamed: Saying one thing and meaning another is not a device of clarification but of obfuscation, of misdirection. It is an entirely different and differing figure, or mode, or device, or trope, which is why ancient grammarians linked allegory not with metaphor or simile, figures that discerned likenesses, but with irony, enigma, and riddle, all ways of hiding meaning and submerging likeness. In no way can allegory, if the word means anything at all, be reduced to personification.

Many years ago, a colleague to whom I had just said the gist of what you've just read, replied to me in total bafflement, "If allegory isn't personification, then what is it?" I've spent a lot of years trying to answer that question, and my intention now is to share what I've learned with anyone who is interested to hear it.

Paradoxically enough, one of the most striking things that probing into allegory showed me is that few questions are as open-ended as that one. Rather, I discovered that answers usually precede questions, and questions are usually consciously or unconsciously designed to elicit the pre-decided answer. This is as true of Freud's theory of the interpretation of dreams as it is of any scientific experiment. The corollary of that is that most allegories, I have found, work precisely to explode the usual questions and answers and instead to drive/prod/urge readers to ask new questions with as yet undetermined answers – undetermined except in the sense that the old answers won't do.

Neils Bohr, in his *Codicil to Logic*, says "The opposite of an ordinary truth is a falsehood. But there also exist **great** truths – and the opposite of a great truth is **another great truth.**" Nothing can prepare you better for the study of allegory than keeping that dictum in mind.

Back in what used to be called the Renaissance but is now known in literary studies as the Early Modern period, writers and critics spoke of a "dark style," by which they designated obscure and difficult texts, often highly figurative ones, and often but not always including allegories.

And indeed, allegory, with its ages-old reputation for difficulty and obscurity, seems quite appropriately to belong to, if not to own, the dark style, so the exploration you are about to begin will be at times quite difficult, perhaps even confusing, and I will have to ask your patience as we work our way through the labyrinth. Just to give some sense of what you're in for – a little light at the beginning of the tunnel, so to speak – here is a very brief summary of some of what I will be trying to demonstrate.

I have found that allegory – which is never a static thing – comes into being through either of two narrative strategies: either by hyper-enriching a text's figuration so that its metaphors in effect explode, or by explicitly invalidating conventional figuration. The first is the method of the opening stanzas of *The Faerie Queene*, the latter the method of the opening of Dante's *Commedia*. (I will have much to say in probably too great detail about both of these later.)

In either case, the simple one-to-one relationships of ordinary metaphor, simile, and personification (especially personification) are nullified, and the resulting text is radically open, so that narrative characters and events, as well as all figures of speech applied to or generated by them, are capable of not merely simultaneous multiple meanings but also simultaneous contradictory meanings. In effect, the principle of non-contradiction is abrogated and a universe of wider signification than that of ordinary discourse is created. Because it exceeds ordinary discourse, allegory's meanings are completely unparaphrasable: apprehendable but not articulatable in our quotidian language.

Which, of course, is why it is so very difficult to write about allegory in any simple, lucid way. Bon voyage!



One last caveat before we begin: I worked at this study over many years, and it sat on my desk for many more, before I finally resolved to issue it this way. As a consequence, its documentation is often dated.

In some cases that is because the best work on this subject is the oldest, and in other cases because I haven't brought it up to the moment. I spent too long engaging pointlessly with what I now see as the non-issues raised by the theory wars. I will try to remove most of that sort of argument from my text as I ready it for this digital publication, or at very least I will confine it to a separate section at the end for those who enjoy that sort of argument. You may wonder at some things I say, in that other critics have said similar ones; but I deal with so many texts, from so many periods and languages, that I cannot claim anything like expertise in them all.

I can only assert that I have found no one who is using arguments or data, however similar to mine, to the ends that I am putting them, and I ask you to try to keep that in mind as you read. I no longer have the energy to update my scholarship in the old-fashioned way, by dogged library work, nor do I have the computer skills to do so the new way: The technology has passed me by. I am pleased to be able to assert that I don't think language has.

So, once again, bon voyage.