



The Strangeness of Allegory

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Chapter 2. Light

At these first stages of our exploration, by far the most important item on the agenda for us is to pin down the little we do know for certain about allegory and to make sure that we all mean the same thing by the terms we use to speak about it.

And – by no means insignificantly – the first thing we all know about allegory is that it is a troublemaker. Its reputation describes it as obscure in meaning and difficult to decipher. Its etymology describes it as an action of alienation, of distancing, both of audience and of meaning: it is other-speaking or speaking-otherwise. Whether that etymology properly means to speak other than one appears to or other than one intends to, whether the aim of other-speaking is to conceal meaning or to embellish it or, paradoxically, to make clear its inexpressibility, its mystery – these are matters about which even the earliest commentators on allegory widely disagree.¹ Nevertheless, the first of allegory's many paradoxes is that allegory eschews clear speech. It seeks deliberately to subvert the conventional relation of artist to audience, to undermine all the ordinary effects of rhetorically patterned speech. Allegory

¹ The bibliography on allegory is of course vast, but – putting aside for the moment the deconstructionist preoccupation with its own specialized notion of allegory – for me the most significant works on the subject are the following:

Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: the Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1964)

Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966; original edition 1959)

Theresa M. Kelley, *Reinventing Allegory* (Cambridge University Press, 1997)

Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory: Some Notes toward a Theory of Allegorical Rhetoric in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, 1969)

A. D. Nuttall, *Two Concepts of Allegory* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967)

Jean Pepin, *Dante et la tradition de l'allegorie* (Montreal, 1970)

Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979)

Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books and Their Posterity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966)

Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987)

For discussions of the earliest meanings and uses of the term, see Whitman, *Allegory*; Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1986); and my own "Saying and Meaning: Allegory and the Indefinable," *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* (1980), 248-61.

apparently runs counter to almost all other artistically controlled language conglomerates.² Persuasion seems far less its goal than initiation, revelation much less its point than concealment – perhaps, in the second of allegory's paradoxes, both at once: allegory hides and shows, excludes and admits simultaneously. The knowing may enter the holy of holies; the profane stop at the door of the shrine. Only those who can understand allegory can understand it. So in terms of the conventional definitions and normal uses of the various rhetorical tropes and figures and devices, allegory presents itself as opposed, as contrary. Even more important, by its adaptation to its own ends of conventional literary tools, allegory becomes *de facto* subversive of them all. In contemporary parlance, allegory constitutes in itself a whole deconstructive genre (or mode, or trope), a literary phenomenon by its very nature counter to all its kin and their purposes.

Subversion

All criticism, all language theory, that is rooted however distantly in Aristotelean formalism accepts – in fact, demands – the principle of non-contradiction. Its boundaries are their boundaries: a thing cannot be and not be in the same respect at the same time. Binary thinking defines a closed world where more is more, less is less, but neither exists save in the apparent absence but continual relational presence of the other. Only in a world bounded by such polarities must a this imply a that, a one engender a many, a negative demand a positive, an off shadow an on. Reject the principle of non-contradiction, adopt for instance a Cusan vision of the coincidence of opposites or a Heisenbergian principle of indeterminacy, or any of a half a dozen other options, and the reader/writer steps outside the closed world of binary choices and enters the infinite universe of possibility.

Allegory accomplishes that: it steps beyond Aristotelean boundaries by positing not just a polarized opposite meaning but multiple and multiplex meanings.³ What I am trying to suggest here is difficult to describe this early in our exploration: coming to know allegory is a cumulative experience, a gradual initiation, in which, as in an allegory or any initiation, one acquires the language by which to know and to say things otherwise ineffable. I am not just talking about unrecognized alternatives to false dilemmas, like Gulliver, torn between his physical links to Yahoos and his intellectual links to Houyhnhms and failing to see himself as a viable *tertium quid*, a being different from and partaking of both. Such alternatives still partake of binary thinking, still work in terms of opposition and balance.

² The other exceptions are figures (or tropes) like irony, sarcasm, and riddle, between which and allegory early grammarians saw a very close connection.

³ It might very well be argued, by someone who knows the history better than I, that the formulation of the principle of non-contradiction was in fact an attempt to provide a rudimentary agent of syntaxis or hypotaxis for a world normally perceived paratactically (as it is, for instance, in the Homeric poems): to create, as it were, a Maxwell's Demon to sort an overwhelmingly diverse and random reality into manageably neat piles of opposites.

Allegory does more than that. Allegory says otherness into existence, draws it out of the shadow realm of the unsaid and unsayable, and gives it a local habitation and sometimes even a name. It maps the kinds of *terrae incognitae* that change their shapes in the act of measuring them. Allegory leads into the realm of ideas for which there exist as yet no language, no terms of art: if you want to be Jungian or Freudian about this and describe it as bringing unconscious or latent contents to light, that's fine,⁴ but you could just as easily go back behind Aristotle to Plato's fable of the cave to analogize the allegorical actions I'm describing. Allegory synthesizes the one and the other, points to complications and infoldings of meaning apprehendable by the mind at its most receptive and agile but beyond our verbal power to explicate or unfold. Derrida and De Man are quite right in insisting that language contains far more than we suspect – but it also contains far more than they suspect, especially as language is constellated in allegory. Allegory is the literary equivalent of the theory of relativity: it tracks a universe in constant motion, a linguistic galaxy that is re-ordered by each act of reading and whose motions appear different from the perspective of each measurer. Neither text nor reader tyrannizes in allegory: they must meet each other with equal openness for allegory even to come to be. Each allegory's articulation of its central secret, its marriage of spoken and unspoken meaning, constitutes the *fiat* that calls its world into being and the syntax that orders that world – but each reader's forays into that world render it in a different dialect, with different accents.

Uncomprehending Darkness

To create such a world, to make it accessible to readers, allegories must, in the same way I am attempting here, undo all our customary assumptions about language and how it means. In *Inferno*, for one very great instance, Dante subverts our quotidian language, imploding it to its central node of absolute specificity, embodied in Hell's deadening fixity in time and place. There is no allegory (in any of the senses in which that word is ordinarily used) in *Inferno*, though *Inferno* provides the ground for all of *Commedia's* allegory and is itself subsequently transmuted into allegory (of a very different sort) by the rest of the poem. But on its own terms, instead of allegory, *Inferno* offers only language, language of relentless literalness. Indeed, Dante makes Hell a language, or perhaps even more rudimentarily an alphabet or a syllabary of ideographs, the hard rock bottom of semiosis or signification. Dante makes us see, in each of the damned of *Inferno* and in ways far richer and more awesome than Milton's impoverished version of hell, something of the horror that Marlowe's "Myself am Hell, nor am I out of it" hints at.

⁴ Erich Kahler, for instance, in *The Inward Turn of Narrative* (trans. Richard & Clara Winston; Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1973, Bollingen Series LXXXIII), articulates, in explicitly Jungian terms, such a function for the novel as a form (if it be a form).

Language is the means of human self-expression, the primary mode by which we externalize our inner reality, make known to others what goes on inside our minds: so is Hell. Hell, as Dante reveals it, is where people finally and literally mean what they say – forever. In Dante’s hell, people are what they say. The damned are their own fate, their own choices, their own language. That is why the pilgrim, the poet, and the reader all enter Hell through words engraved on rock. *Inferno* is a concentration of univocation.

THROUGH ME YOU ENTER THE WOEFUL CITY,
THROUGH ME YOU ENTER ETERNAL GRIEF....
ABANDON EVERY HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER.

These words of obscure color I saw inscribed over a portal; whereupon I said, “Master, their meaning is hard for me.” (*Inferno* III.1-2, 9-12)⁵

The gateway into hell is language. Not the rock but the words are *duro* (hard), and in many senses: difficult to understand, difficult to accept, harsh, unyielding, univocal, and hard as rock. What may be hard for the reader is to see just what puzzles Dante the pilgrim here: the words he – and we – read are crystal clear. Rock speaks at the entrance to *Inferno* to inform us that we are about to enter a world where word and meaning coincide, where words and things only denote, where all connotation, overtone, equivocation, nuance, subtlety have been shorn away to leave only the bedrock of single definition, eternal fixity – and on that rock Dante builds his poem.

Before this point (and still, as the pilgrim’s puzzlement indicates), he dwelt in (inadequate) figurative language:

Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood.... Ah, how hard it is to tell what that wood was, wild, rugged, harsh.... It is so bitter that death is hardly more so. (*Inferno* I.1-2, 4-5, 7)⁶

⁵ PER ME SI VA NE LA CITTA DOLENTE,
PER ME SI VA NE L'ETTERNO DOLORE....
LASCIA TE OGNE SPERANZA, VOI CH'INTRATE.
Queste parole di colore oscuro
vid' io scritte al sommo d'una porta;
per ch'io: “Maestro, it senso lor m'e duro”

The text of Dante quoted here and throughout is that of Charles Singleton: *Dante Alighieri: The Divine Comedy*, 6 volumes, Bollingen Series 80 (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1970).

⁶ Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura...
Ahi quanto a dir qual era cosa dura
esta selva selvagia e aspra e forte....
Tant' e amara che poco e piu morte....

Not only is life metaphorized – pallidly – as a road, but its entanglements are imaged equally tritely as a dark forest. That is the linguistic universe in which Dante lives, a world where words do not mean exactly what they say but stand at a distance from precise denotation. That is why it is difficult for the poet to speak of that commonplace forest: because it is a forest of commonplaces. The dark forest is language itself: not just the *silva* (woods, forest) that furnishes the matter of medieval philosophy but also the *silva* that provides the materials of medieval rhetoric.⁷ The pilgrim reads *parole di colore oscuro* once again over the gate of Hell, and he there finds their meaning *duro* (III.12) in the same way that rock’s words describe itself as *duro* (III.8): they are hard because they are precise and unequivocal. That “shadowy” forest and “shadowy” color – it is the shadowy colors of rhetoric, of course: the metaphor or allusion is barely submerged in the consistently imprecise language – ought to remind us how closely, in the ancient grammarians, allegory was linked to enigma.⁸ The pilgrim dwells in enigma, and only allegorical vision can lead him to clear sight and clear speech. That is why he is penned in by the leopard, the lion, and the she-wolf. He is circumscribed by trite and fundamentally empty images: emblems, symbols, signs to which any number of meanings (as the history of Dante scholarship bears witness) can arbitrarily – and with equal (dis)satisfactoriness – be assigned.

Dante the pilgrim has not yet acquired the semiotic skills of Dante the poet, who understands his real plight, that the three emblematic beasts “pushed me back, little by little, to where the sun is silent (*a poco a poco/ me ripigneva la dove ‘l sol tace,*” 1.59-60), to where the light has lost the power to speak. That is why too the pilgrim is unsure whether Virgil, who appears to him at this moment, is man or shadow⁹ (*ombra*, 66) and why, most ironically, Virgil looks to him like “one who seemed faint through long silence” (*chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco*, 63). The pilgrim goes on to describe Virgil as “that fount which pours forth so broad a stream of speech” (*quella fonte/ che spande di parlar si largo fiume*, 79-80) and “my master and my author...from whom I took the fair style that has done me honor” (*lo mio maestro e ‘l mio autore,/...da cu’ io tolsi/ lo bello stilo che m’ha fatto honore*, 85-87). Despite his claim to have studied Virgil’s *volume* (84: the word will return with new dimensions in *Paradiso* XXXIII.86, almost symmetrically, and exactly where you would expect it), Dante the poet makes it very clear that all the pilgrim has gleaned from his labor is the surface of the *Aeneid*, the style – *lo bello stilo* – and not the substance. And that, in turn, is why pilgrim and poet alike must now imitate the substance of the *Aeneid* by descending through language into an underworld of changeless reality. Virgil guides the pilgrim out of the moral ambiguities of the material forest into the

⁷ The best known manifestations of this tradition in English are Ben Jonson’s prose *Timber: or, Discoveries*, whose secondary title seems to be *Silva*, and his collections of poetry named *The Forest* and *The Underwood*.

⁸ See my “Saying and Meaning,” 251-52, and the discussion of Isidore below, as well as Struck, *Birth of the Symbol, passim*.

⁹ The verb “shadow” will become central in allegorical writing, denoting the way in which a literal figure includes other meanings beyond the apparent or foreground.

certainties of a spiritual world. At the same time, Virgil in (or as) the *Aeneid* guides the poet out of the semantic ambiguities of the rhetorical forest into the exactness of a new semiotic order.

If the world outside the gate of graven words is marked by linguistic ambiguity, the world inside declares immediately its semantic orientation. As soon as the pilgrim enters “the secret things” (*le segrete cose*, *Inferno* III.21), as soon as he quite literally passes through the letter or beyond the letter into the spirit, speech provides his first sensation, his first experience – and it is an unequivocal datum, affecting the pilgrim directly and immediately, even though his intellect still needs help interpreting it:

Here sighs, laments, and loud wailings were resounding through the starless air, so that at first they made me weep. Strange tongues, horrible outcries, utterances of woe, accents of anger, voices shrill and faint, and the beating of hands among them, were making a tumult (*Inferno* III.22-28).¹⁰

In fact, the pilgrim still belongs to the outer world of linguistic ambiguity. When he asks Virgil a question about the inhabitants of the First Ring, Virgil must decipher and answer the real question, a process Dante the poet pointedly labels “my covert speech” (*parlar coverto*, IV.51). Even more significantly, in the Second Ring, where Hell proper begins, the pilgrim’s first reported, prolonged encounter with damned souls – the touching story of Paolo and Francesca – involves a very ambiguous response, on the part of the pilgrim, to a tale that turns not only on love but just as importantly on books and reading.

One day, for pastime, we read of Lancelot, how love constrained him; we were alone, suspecting nothing. Several times that reading urged our eyes to meet and took the color from our faces, but one moment alone it was that overcame us. When we read how the longed-for smile was kissed by so great a lover, this one, who never shall be parted from me, kissed my mouth all trembling. A Gallehault was the book and he who wrote it; that day we read no farther in it. While the one spirit said this, the other wept, so that for pity I swooned, as if in death, and fell as a dead body falls. (*Inferno* V.127-42)

This extraordinarily moving episode affects every reader of the poem with the pity that moves Dante, though certainly not to the same extent. But that pity is a disturbing reaction: after all, Paolo and Francesca are damned souls. Is Dante – are we – questioning divine justice? How much does our pity for the sinners exculpate their sin? Just how mortal a sin are we willing to admit it is? And – more important – how much of Dante’s extreme reaction is due not just to pity but to guilt? Is it guilt as a lover? Or – more serious yet – guilt as a writer? After all, it was

¹⁰ Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai
risonavan per l’aere senza stele,
per ch’io al cominciar ne lagrimai.
Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
parole di dolore, accenti d’ira,
voci alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle
facevano un tumulto . . .

a book that led Paolo and Francesca to sin, and even though their mode of reading is not the way the Middle Ages – or modern criticism, for that matter – advises you to read, it remains typical of the effect of books on many even sophisticated readers: the idea of “identifying” with the protagonist of a fiction or a play and the concomitant esthetics of emulation are not yet entirely dead. Perhaps that luscious *dolce stil nuovo* that Dante the pilgrim was so proud of just a few cantos ago (and by which this episode is rendered so very powerful) is beginning to show its other face?

Ambiguous response to ambiguous linguistic stimuli: that, all too dryly and – even more sadly – all too accurately sums up the actions of Paolo and Francesca and Dante the pilgrim. All now exist in a world stripped of all such ambiguities, a world where strict denotation is the norm, even though the pilgrim – and the reader – still belongs intellectually and emotionally to the world of the *selva oscura*. That is exactly what the pilgrim and the reader must be educated away from. What Dante the poet is doing here and throughout *Inferno* is paring language back to its most fundamental functions, purging it of confusing connotations so that he can build up from ground zero his own allegorical language, a language not dependent upon conventional symbolisms and pat emblems (or personified abstractions either: they provide one of the most popular sources of competing interpretations for Canto I’s three beasts).

The final vision of *Paradiso*, wherein the pilgrim sees the union of human and divine, the coinciding of mathematic and organic, provided the base from which the poet could remake that language. Even though it is the last thing in the poem, it is the start of the poem as surely as it is its goal. Dante the pilgrim sees the Beatific Vision. Dante the poet saw the Word beyond language, the Word he and St. Paul could not say. Paul couldn’t say it because it wasn’t lawful. Dante can’t say it because it is in the most literal sense ineffable, beyond expression. His entire poem is the saying of that Word, because that single Word includes all words and their meanings. It is, if you like, the ultimate paratactic word that some contemporary criticism seeks. Dante’s allegory – we can say this much, this early – goes beyond paradox but doesn’t eliminate it, least of all from allegory’s fundamental task, speaking other. To say the other is to say the same: that is inescapable. That, too, is part of Dante’s final vision.

That circling which, thus begotten, appeared in Thee as reflected light, when my eyes had dwelt on it for a time, seemed to me depicted with our image within itself and in its own color, wherefore my sight was entirely set upon it. (*Paradiso* XXXIII.127-132)

Each allegory, at its heart, embraces all the opposites in their full paradoxicality. It in one motion recognizes their equality – their paratactical relationship to each other – and arranges them into a system – their syntactical relation to each other. Allegory fuses parataxis and syntaxis: that is one of the things allegory is, but that very fusion makes allegory not one thing but many things.

Allegories as works exist in historical time. They build on each other. We may find it relatively easy to talk about the fusion of humanity and divinity in Dante’s ultimate vision. That is partly because a good many of us no longer believe any of that, and it is always easier to talk about

fictions, no matter how inspired, than about unaccommodating facts. It is certainly because Dante saw that vision, however, that we have any language for it at all: Dante's poem invented the terms by which he could express his vision of the ineffable, and in doing so Dante the poet gave voice to the mute. We may no longer be excited by the sense of the newness, the freshness of Dante's final vision, though I find it hard to imagine a perceptive reader who remains unmoved by it. One generation's ineffable may very well become another generation's commonplace, if only because allegory has found it out and provided ways of speaking of it. We can probably anticipate a similar fate in the future for works whose daring and novelty excite us now, if future generations preserve any language at all.

To quote the beginning of this chapter, our first task – and allegory's – is “to make sure that we all mean the same thing by the terms we use.” That is what Dante did at the beginning of his poem by voiding conventional rhetoric, by emptying predictable figuration of its predictable meaning, by reducing language to its rock-bottom, bare-bones denotation. The damned are what they say they are, without possibility of change: they are trapped forever in the language of their own making. Dante the pilgrim is not, and we his readers are not – but we must first unlearn our own language of entrapment before we can enter the freedom of a new tongue. All allegories preserve language by undoing it and re-inventing it. All start by scraping away the detritus of our dead language and then, bit by bit, initiating us into their new one. So all allegories – like Dante's poem – begin with an ending, and end with a beginning – as do we.