



## *The Strangeness of Allegory*

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### Chapter 9. After Word

#### Porisms

Pynchon's congeries of ritual and comedy, mystery story and Mystery play, religious language and secular fact – in short, the whole complex of strange attractors that creates the intellectual currents and eddies of *The Crying of Lot 49* – returns our pilgrimage through allegory to its earliest roots and uses. Allegory serves as a veil to hide deep truths, holy secrets, mysteries, from the eyes and ears of the profane. Jesus recounts the parable of the sower and concludes: "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 13.9). Why do you speak in parables (Vulgate, *parabolas*), the disciples ask him. Jesus responds:

Because it is given unto you to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but unto them it is not given. . . . Therefore spake I to them in parables, because they seeing, do not see: and hearing, they hear not, neither understand. . . . For this people's heart is waxed fat, and their ears dull of hearing, and with their eyes they have winked, lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their hearts. (13.11-15)

Jesus's language is parabolical rather than straightforward precisely so that its meaning may stand in plain view and yet remain unknown. It is revelation garbed as apocalypse, the overt hidden and displayed within the covert. The knowledge reserved for the elect is reserved – preserved secret and separate even as it is published – by virtue of their ability to hear and understand, to see and perceive. What constitutes the thickest veil of allegory's meaning is the predictable laziness and obtuseness of most of its audience, "waxed fat . . . and dull of hearing." The complacency of an audience that knows it already knows it all blocks the reception of the new gospel: Jesus has no more need for undercover work than allegory does for the standard devices of figuration. The simplest of indirections – parables, parallels, byways, curves and arcs and leaps of language – constitute misdirections for an audience predetermined to hear only what it already knows and to read only what it expects to read.

In the realm of allegory as in the realm of religious mystery, indirection does the work of misdirection, and apparent communication amounts to miscommunication, and it does so just as deliberately as in Jesus's seemingly transparent parables. Allegory is unabashedly an elitist mode: who has ears to hear, let him hear; the rest of you, get out. The epiphany comes to the reader prepared for it, the reader who is "in the know," who speaks the language – and the language is ordinary language, which everyone speaks. Its very ordinariness is its disguise. The allegorical text does not distinguish itself at the outset from any other text. It wears no sign that says "Allegory: Read Me Other Wise." At the beginning, its devices and figures, its style and

diction, seem no different from any other text's: nothing intrinsic to them but, rather, what it does with those elements makes a text an allegory.

Allegory creates itself in operation: like pure negativity, it is not an entity in itself but a process, an action whereby old meaning – expected, conventional, predictable, safe – is evacuated and room is prepared for new meaning or new meanings.<sup>1</sup> What is crucially important to recognize is that this is not accomplished by any special means or any devices unique to allegory. All the devices of conventional rhetoric and conventional figuration stock allegory's arsenal – but no more than that. Allegory has no secret weapon. Indeed, in a very profound sense allegory has no secrets at all. Everything is in plain view, just as it is at the opening of *The Faerie Queene* – and just like Red Crosse Knight and Una, most readers flee from the plain into the shadowy coils of errancy and error. The flight from the plain statements of the allegorical text is understandable. Allegory is contrary: what it plainly says all too often contradicts our received notions of the way books are supposed to work. It flies in the face of our conventional readerly expectations. Dante the Pilgrim and Red Crosse Knight *should* be personifications. The meaning of *Heart of Darkness* ought to be inside and paraphrasable, a message for us to take back outside the text and display as our trophy: See? I read it – I got it!

In all other forms of speech and writing – save the lie – language and figures of speech work to clarify meaning, to fix it and intensify it, to underline it and call attention to it, to present it forcefully or significantly or movingly. Only allegory runs counter to all the rhetorical uses of language and opposes the primary purpose of rhetorical figuration. Only allegory uses all the tools of figuration and all the disingenuity of plain speech to conceal meaning, to hold it back, to make the auditor and audience work for it.

Only by watching the simple words of allegory with the intensity and patience and receptiveness of a secularized *via negativa* can one see the transformation by which a novel or a poem or a play becomes an allegory – in part, because it only becomes an allegory *in the reader*, when the reader has at last learned enough of its language to be “in the know” – and in part too because the qualitative change that metamorphoses ordinary language into allegory results from simple quantitative changes, from the sheer accumulation of conventional figuration (and disfiguration), from the piling up of metaphors and images and attractors until they achieve a kind of linguistic and intellectual critical mass, a conglomeration of data and linkages that superinforms the language, defeats the simple-minded cipher-substitutions of conventional criticism, and produces – intellectually and verbally – simultaneous fission and fusion, connection and separation, explication and complication, clarification and obfuscation. At that moment, in the ebb and flow of that dual activity, in the reader and in the text, allegory comes into being.

Allegory comes into being at that point as a metalanguage or paralanguage contained within and surrounding, penetrating, pervading ordinary language and conventional literary language.

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, see Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, editors, *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Their introduction bears importantly on this aspect of allegory: see especially pp. xi-xiv. See also, in the same volume, Jacques Derrida's comments on the negative theology of Dionysius (“How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” 3-70; the section on Dionysius comprises pp. 20-30 and passim; see especially p. 24).

Allegory transforms its own medium, re-natures it as an *immedium*. This means that there exist, simultaneously and apparently indistinguishably (*in micro*, at least) two radically different modes of literary figuration. Conventional literary figuration (the sorts of metaphor and symbol that animate, for instance, most of Wordsworth and Coleridge), is roughly consonant with other modes of discourse, at least insofar as its aims and general methods are concerned. No matter how conscious it may be of the slipperiness and multivalency of words, such figuration works to formulate meaning, no matter how complex or subtle, to fix significance, to emphasize and clarify. It does so by empowering quotidian language, exploiting the nuances and ambiguities of words, linking the familiar with the unfamiliar. All that is within the ken of ordinary language and of “discourses” as diverse as poetry and philosophy and history, fiction and advertising. This kind of figuration depends upon, in fact presupposes, a tacit contract, an agreement between text and reader or speaker and interlocutor, that both are speaking the same language. That basic bond functions as the least common denominator and the glue that holds such discourse together: its banner and motto and war-cry is the semi-punctuational “You know what I mean?” of everyday speech.

That is the mode of figuration, familiar and unchallenging, from which most allegories begin and which, characteristically, they very quickly subvert and undo. Allegories start by showing that they are speaking another language, the language of Other, and that “speaking the same language” is merely the veil that conceals them. The radically different figuration of allegory, of which this study is only the shallowest scratching of the surface, impoverishes language to enrich it, disfigures it to energize its (fictitious) factuality, overcharges language with referentiality to render it paradoxically but effectively immediate, while at the same time using all the uncertainties introduced by mediation not to whittle away meaning but to increase it, to hyper-enrich the informational load that words can embody. Its banner depicts a muted post horn.

For all that allegory does to and with texts, to and with language, allegory is not and never can be a purely textual or linguistic matter. Texts are the material cause of allegory; readers are its final cause. Allegories are embodied in texts potentially and actualized in readers when all of each allegory’s data and linguistic manipulations, all its strange attractors and verbal figurations and disfigurations, coalesce in moment of understanding and comprehension in the mind of a participatory reader. Until that point, allegory is merely latent, a possibility, at most a process, awaiting the consciousness that will – and can – activate it.

When that consciousness approaches, when it empowers the allegory to come into being, it effects a fusion and fission of its own, and what it brings back “to the world” from the allegory is no message but a perception, a view: a worldview, a *gestalt* perhaps, but more a sense of the way things fit together, a sense of different patterns and shapes “in the world” than were perceived before that reader’s consciousness “entered” the book. The mind that has passed through allegory, that has participated in allegory, is changed by allegory, and it returns to itself different from what it was, like a book’s hero after a long and arduous journey. In a manner of speaking, it returns almost home.

At the end of the most recent modern allegory, *Vineland*, after Prairie has won back her mother and her family, she ritually re-enters the forest, seeking vision, awaiting a visitation from the

spirit of Brock Vond, the disruptive lover of her mother, whose shade, like those of *The Odyssey's* unwelcome suitors, has already been conducted to the underworld. In some of Pynchon's loveliest, most magical prose, Prairie drifts to sleep:

The small meadow shimmered in the starlight, and her promises grew more extravagant as she drifted into the lucid thin layer of waking dreaming, her flirting more obvious – then she'd wake, alert to some step in the woods, some brief bloom of light in the sky, back and forth for a while between Brock fantasies and the silent darkened silver images all around her, before settling down into sleep, sleeping then unvisited till around dawn, with fog still in the hollows, deer and cows grazing together in the meadow, sun blinding in the cobwebs on the wet grass, a redtail hawk in an updraft soaring above the ridgeline, Sunday morning about to unfold, when Prairie woke to a warm and persistent tongue all over her face. It was Desmond, none other, the spit and image of his grandmother Chloe, roughened by the miles, face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes, wagging his tail, thinking he must be home.

Much that *Vineland* has long ago set in motion converges on this moment: themes of identity and its discontinuities, of inheritance and its losses, history and its repetitions and changes, gender and its mutations, as well as narrative and ideological attractors as various as all the novel's *Odyssey* parallels and differences, and all its play with *Ulysses* too, and all the grade-B Lassie movies that underlie it – Odysseus awaking to find himself returned to Ithaca, his faithful dog Argus's recognition and pathetic death, Molly Bloom's erotic night-time reverie and remembrance, Lassie tracking down her family over hundreds of miles, the book's persistent animism (everything lives in *Vineland*) and especially its persistent, serio-comic anthropomorphization of Desmond the dog, grandson of Chloe (and Daphnis?), who closes the book for us, "thinking he must be home."

He isn't, of course, and neither are we. Allegory doesn't let us "go home" again, not to things as they were. We can return from allegory; we can withdraw from the text; but when we turn back from it to ourselves, we will find – as Desmond will too – that "home" has changed. Just as it is for Odysseus, the price of our *nostos* is – *entre nous* – a new *nous*. We have been initiated: we can hear and see now. We can reclaim our names from the Witness Protection Program or from Polyphemos's curse or Hera's wrath – but the egos those names cover have been changed, changed utterly by immersion in allegory, in undifferentiatedness. Allegory makes us, however briefly, Other – and that experience, I hope you now see, is not the goal but the origin of allegory.