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Allegory as Literary Method

By ALAN SWALLOW

IN TERMS of a broad metaphor, we may speak of the *intellectual climate* of an age. Of course no age is singular or simple: the Middle Ages cannot be entirely opposed to the Renaissance; the Age of Pope contained strong elements of Romanticism. But the literary historian justifiably speaks of intellectual tendencies and of the dominance of one tendency over another at any particular time; and the philosopher may indicate, in each age, a dominant rationalization of the world and of man's place in the world. Various critics, particularly the Marxist and sociological critics, have pointed out origins of such intellectual climates in the social and economic organization of the periods considered. They have also demonstrated that the artist is necessarily influenced by the thought of his time and that the intellectual scope, at least, of the artist's work is governed by that thought.

So far, then, we have attained a certain view of historical influences upon the creative process, a view which moves from the material organization of society, through the *intellectual* organization of that social order, through the artist's dependence upon the thought of his age, to the intellectual element in the art work. Obviously this is an incomplete picture. For one thing, it shows little or nothing concerning the element of technique or method in the art work. But just as each age may be characterized by a dominant intellectual climate, so it may also be characterized by a dominant general literary method: the poet of the twentieth century, for example, does not write as the Victorian poet did; and the method of Shakespeare's tragedies is not the method of the medieval fall-of-princes tragedy. I propose to demonstrate, with reference to the Middle Ages, that such a general literary method is inherently related to and rises out of the intel-

lectual climate of an age, and, further, that an artist can only with difficulty satisfactorily use the method of an age characterized by an intellectual climate foreign to the thought of his own period.

II

The student must look beneath the dry surface which allegory presents to the modern mind and understand that allegory was, for the people of the Middle Ages, a mode of thinking, a method by which they apprehended truths which were vital to them in their day-to-day lives. Allegory came with the Middle Ages and had its rise, according to C. S. Lewis in *The Allegory of Love,* in the conditions which attended the triumph of the Christian over the pagan religion. The gods of the pagans had been anthropomorphic gods, superhuman individuals possessing human appetites to be satisfied. But in the last days of the pagan religion the gods became a strange mixture of abstractions and concrete individuals; often appeared an abstraction to be worshipped, not appeased. These Romans worshipped Fides and Concordia side by side with Jupiter and Mars.

With the rise of the Christian religion people became aware of the unity of things, of the single God, of the One. What were the old multiple gods good for under such a religion? Lewis suggests that they became "aspects, manifestations, temporary or partial embodiments of the single power." In other words, they became the personified figures in the allegorical struggles which appeared in the literature of the Christian era, became Wrath, or Reason, or Love.

The Christian is much concerned with conduct. According to Christian doctrine, sin led to punishment and good deeds to the rewards of a just God. Thus the early Christians were deeply conscious of the divided will, the will to good and the will to evil. Such a conflict in the inner, psychological world may be easily dramatized in an allegorical fashion. The various whims, desires, and forces in that inner world can become personified, and through the strug-

Swallow: Allegory as Literary Method

gle between these personifications the introspective life of man can be represented. Thus, as Lewis points out, allegorical conflict became the natural method of dealing with psychology in this period. One will recognize the convenience of such a method if he remembers that a faculty psychology has only rather recently given place to a more empirical one.

Allegory is a means of expressing the immaterial in a drama of some kind. The figures of the drama may be either abstractions or real persons, but in all allegories there are two meanings or levels. There is the literal level of the conflict represented; then there is another level which the author had consciously in mind, something else which he meant by the movements of his characters. By what habit of mind, though, could these writers mean one thing when they were talking about another?

Allegory is a natural tool to that mind which holds to a dualistic philosophy in which the spiritual, or God, is assumed to be in some measure immanent in the material world; and this doctrine is a fundamental of Christian philosophy, which held that in Christ two worlds had been united, the world of God and the world of matter. To the Middle Ages these two worlds were permanently connected. In logic, though the medieval thinkers said that every event and every phenomenon had four causes, the two with which they were most concerned were the efficient and the final causes. They conceived of the world as a vast machine, and the efficient cause, which was the immediate, materialistic cause, functioned within this machine. But what, they asked, set this vast machine in motion, and toward what end did it move? This they accounted for by the final cause, the cause described by De Wulf as "the attraction exerted on every efficient cause by some good towards which it tends." That good is God: God created both worlds, and the purpose of the Creation was to build and, finally, to consummate the City of God.

The medieval philosophers went one step further. Not only were the spiritual and the material worlds governed by

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New Mexico Quarterly, Vol. 10 [1940], Iss. 3, Art. 3

one will, which was the divine will of God; but also the two worlds were similar and correspondent. And since the two worlds were correspondent, knowledge of one gave knowledge of the other. For example, it was evident that God was a Trinity, or Three in One. So man combined the spiritual, the intellectual, and the material in one body. Further, God was the head and ruler of the universe; thus the principles of headship and obedient subordination were the patterns for human societies: monarchy was the best form of government; the father was the supreme head of the family.

The philosophy permits also the opposite argument, from the material world to the spiritual. A study of material phenomena will tell something of the spiritual world. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, "From material things we can rise to some kind of knowledge of immaterial things"; and, "we know God through creatures, according to the Apostle (Rom. 1, 20), *the invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.*"

Allegory was the method of such a philosophy and of such a psychology. The people of the Middle Ages admitted that events had a literal meaning of their own. But every event in the natural world and every product of human effort was an allegory; in fact, medieval thinkers commonly traced four meanings, the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. The last three meanings were classified by St. Thomas as spiritual. The presence of four meanings in the same work was expected, and was defended by St. Thomas: "Inasmuch as the Author of the Scriptures embraceth all things at once in his intelligence, why should not the same sacred letter . . . contain several senses founded on the literal? . . . The multiplicity of sense in the Writ produceth neither obscurity nor ambiguity; for these senses are multiple . . . not because the words have several meanings, but because the things exprest by the words are themselves the expression of other things."

The temper of the Middle Ages was such, then, that an allegorical meaning in any natural or literal account was

expected, looked for, and considered true. The allegorical meaning was considered the better meaning because it was the spiritual, and thus the more nearly true, meaning. And the method of allegory provided a means of expressing the inexpressible and unknown in terms of the expressible and known, the abstract and spiritual in the form of the concrete and material.

Dante was a medievalist, and to him the things concerning which he wrote were loaded with overtones of spiritual meaning. Those spiritual meanings were not entirely precise, for the merely human mind could not know exactly the reality of the spiritual world. But he could conduct temporary explorations into that domain by writing an allegory. Dante surely did not believe that the state of souls after death, in hell, purgatory, and heaven, was literally as he conceived it. And that, as he wrote a patron (at least the letter is attributed to Dante), was the literal subject of *The Divine Comedy*. And surely he did not believe that the exact rewards and punishments he pictured were the rewards and punishments of God, which was his allegorical subject, as he explained in the same letter.

Dante's imagination, as T. S. Eliot has said, is visual. "It is a visual imagination in a different sense from that of a modern painter of still life; it is visual in the sense that he lived in an age in which men still saw visions." And for Dante, his vision was saying some truth about life after death; though he, being human and using material objects, was not saying the complete truth, the possibilities of his statement must have been for him almost limitless. So he made no effort to deliberately control and point out a specific allegorical interpretation. The allegorical meanings were naturally there and never questioned.

Dante's *problem* as well as his imagination, I should like to suggest, was primarily a visual one. His problem was to give an exact transcript of his vision; and the more sharp and at the same time complicated it appeared at the literal level, the more the allegorical meaning would be extended

New Mexico Quarterly, Vol. 10 [1940], Iss. 3, Art. 3

and become rich. It is for this reason, I believe, that there is in Dante a use of metaphor and simile which is not characteristic of the later use of allegory. When his problem was to see as precisely as possible, he had to use metaphor to describe, on the literal level, as exactly as possible. Thus, we have such famous similes as the one singled out by Eliot, and by Arnold before him, of the crowd in Hell who "sharpened their vision (knitted their brows) at us, like an old tailor peering at the eye of his needle"; and the simile of the stooping Antaeus as Carisenda, the leaning tower of Bologna.

In later writers of allegory, such as the Renaissance Spenser, the medieval philosophy and psychology had been subverted, and the use of allegory had changed. In them allegory is used as a cloak for abstract thinking. But in Dante there is the reverse process, as nearly, I believe, as it can be distinguished. He is thinking on a literal level, and that literal account has an expected and an accepted allegorical meaning behind it. The elements of *The Divine Comedy* are symbols, for the material expresses something of the immaterial. Dante, the man of the Middle Ages, was interested in both meanings of his work; Spenser, an abstract thinker, as we shall see, was mostly interested in the allegorical meaning of his work; the literal level is shadowy and fantastic.

III

In the court of love tradition, allegory was used as psychological method. It provided a means of exploring and representing the subtle psychological states of the person in love. By this method, the courtly love poets transformed feeling, desire, and emotion into the sensible and dramatic. In the *Romance of the Rose*, for instance, the lady does not appear at all. She is distributed among her personified "faculties," which include Bialacoil, or good-address, Trespass, Shame, Chastity, Pity, Danger, and so on. The lover who woos her never encounters her in person; rather, he encounters these personifications, and thus the intangibles of the courtship are made tangible in a drama. The object of the

lover's action is to achieve the rose (*i. e.*, the consent of the lady) ; and in this effort he is aided by some of the personified faculties of the lady, and is hindered by others.

But in the period from the *Romance of the Rose* to Spenser, allegory lost its vitality as method. It was no longer used for symbolical purposes, as in Dante, or as a means of psychological analysis and exploration, as in the *Romance of the Rose*. Instead, certain externals of the allegorical poem became conventionalized decorations of poems whose real method was not allegorical at all. One of these conventions was the dream framework: once that framework was set up, the poet of this period launched out on the real work which he was doing. Within the dream framework of *Confessio Amantis*, for example, Gower set three types of work: the didactic lesson about virtues and vices, over a hundred stories told for their exemplary purposes, and an encyclopedic account of the knowledge of his time.

Stephen Hawes, in the early sixteenth century, combined the didactic, erotic, and encyclopedic uses of allegory and added to them the Italian romance, necessary in *The Passetyme of Pleasure* as a narrative thread upon which to string the various uses of allegory. Thus he prepared the way for Spenser. But Hawes' descriptions of allegorical personages take on, as Berdan has commented, the character of tapestry work. His figures are not symbols nor are they used for psychological purposes; instead, allegory has provided him with decoration and with a stock means of getting his poem under way.

During the early Renaissance, allegory lost its vitality because its philosophic and psychological base was gone. With Aristotelian Christianity in the twelfth and following centuries, great values had been discovered in the secular and naturalistic world, and after that discovery had come a gradual shifting of attention away from the exclusively spiritual. The realm of values which was given most attention had shifted from the spiritual to the natural, from heaven to earth.

New Mexico Quarterly, Vol. 10 [1940], Iss. 3, Art. 3

At the end of the sixteenth century Bacon was protesting vigorously against final causes, the investigation of which he considered a deterrent to "the severe and diligent inquiry of all real and physical causes":

> For to say that the hairs of the eyelids are for a quickset and fence about the sight; or that the firmness of the skins and hides of living creatures is to defend them from the extremities of heat or cold; or that the bones are for the columns or beams, whereupon the frames of the bodies of living creatures are built; or that the leaves of trees are for protecting the fruit; or that the solidness of the earth is for the station and mansion of living creatures and the like, is well enquired in Metaphysic; but in Physic they are impertinent.

And Bacon knew what method was needed for the study of material causes: the observation of facts; that information should come before generalization.

This method contrasted greatly with the allegorical. The sensible world was to be investigated for its own causes or in its relations to man, not for what it symbolized. It meant a new method in literary composition. The Renaissance poet tended more and more to analyze and represent the psychological world not in terms of abstractions of man's "faculties," but in terms of metaphor, conceit, and the dramatic relationship between persons. In tragedy, whereas mutability of man's fortunes had formerly been considered the result of a wheel of fortune over which man had not control, the Renaissance dramatist interpreted mutability of fortune in terms of human causes, in the terms suggested by Shakespeare's Cassius:

> Men at times are masters of their fates:
> The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
> But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

Thus Spenser, a man of the Renaissance, not of the Middle Ages, chose the allegorical method quite arbitrarily. The philosophical and psychological climate of his time did

Swallow: Allegory as Literary Method

not require that method; it called, if for anything, for a quite different method. His problem in *The Faerie Queene* seems somewhat clear. He desired a method which would bring together and fuse several materials. Those materials may be classified as moral and historical. The large plan of the poem is moral: there were to be twelve knights-errant who personified the twelve moral virtues, and in addition there was to be Prince Arthur, or Magnificence, who was to combine all the virtues in one character. In addition to this moral plan Spenser, like many Elizabethans, wished to have historical references in his work. He wished to justify Elizabeth's reign, both her political and religious policies. How could he combine these elements into a single, unified poem?

It is obvious that his problem is a theoretical as well as a poetical one. And William Butler Yeats suggests in his essay on Spenser that the poet had a highly theoretical mind. "He began in English poetry," Yeats also observes, "despite a temperament that delighted in sensuous beauty alone with perfect delight, that worship of Intellectual Beauty which Shelley carried to a greater subtlety and applied to the whole of life." Spenser attempted intellectual fusion of his materials by the method of allegory. The characters were allegorical characters: they could just as well represent two things as one. Thus Artegal is a personification of justice in the moral sphere, and in the historical material which underlies Book V of *The Faerie Queene* he represents Lord Grey, Elizabeth's governor in Ireland. Thus Duessa, in Book I, is the personification of deceit and represents Mary Queen of Scots and, for a time, even Queen Mary, daughter of Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon. And so on with most of the other main characters.

Spenser's use of allegory is purely common-sense and practical. It is a far cry from the vital function of allegory as a literary means of expressing the inexpressible, of investigating either the spiritual or the psychological found in the work of Dante and the early court of love poets. Perhaps

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this will explain the thin, abstract quality of most of the poetry of *The Faerie Queene.* Spenser's poetic problem was to give body to an abstract pattern, and at times he did not achieve that body; generally his poetry in *The Faerie Queene* is either merely sensuous (in the pauses in the allegory) or merely abstraction.

Spenser's use of allegory was, then, the reverse of Dante's, for Dante proceeded from the body of experience to the meanings which, through the allegorical habit of mind, he found behind it. The more exactly he examined the sensible world the more minutely he filled out his meaningful pattern. But Spenser started with the organization of abstractions and meanings; he had nothing to visualize but the fiction he created. It is almost more than any poet could have expected, to make such a world sensible, human, and concrete.

IV

Though it was dictated by the intellectual conditions of a period long past, and though Spenser's work has demonstrated that the method can only with difficulty be used satisfactorily by a poet in a different period, allegory as a literary method is still used today. In fact, there is current today a fad for what might loosely be termed allegorical writing. The fad is expressed in the popularity among writers of the work of Franz Kafka; in Horace Gregory's plea, in his preface to *New Letters in America,* for the writing of what he calls "fables," a term he applies to Kafka's work; and in the popularity of some recent poetry. Without considering here the value of this work, I wish to point out that the method, in an age which is not congenial to it, involves a very grave danger, a danger which felled much of the work of Spenser.

Most of this work is finely realized at the abstract level. Once the conception has been reached, the literary problem has been, as with Spenser, to give body to the abstract conception, to give thought bones, flesh, and blood. Very possibly this problem is one incapable of completely

satisfying solution. At least one may say that it involves the more difficult procedure.

Anyone who has a nearly automatic and "easy" explanation of the world's phenomena risks this danger particularly. Very likely the explanation will come first and the experimental data which underlie the explanation will come next. Such writers would do well to remember that each creative work should repeat what Marxists call the "dialectical" process: it should proceed from the material to the framework, emotional as well as conceptual, which explains it. In this way writers would have more assurance that their work would have the "body" requisite for important literature.

Homunculus: a Vignette

By TERENCE HEYWOOD

Snatches of news and scraps of information,
a day of insistent trifles and minor incidents,
cigarettes and snacks, small talk and petty squabbles;
back to the flatlet in the baby austin,
nibbling of food, dips in a cut-up culture
(a culture now for spiritual microbacteria)—
the mean diminuendos of short days
prolonged by tablets, truncated by trivialities,
fragmentary, and with slight emotions:—
a little man with pimples, teased by midges,
subject to touches of flu and minor illnesses,
living on dividends, on snacks and snippets,—
all the discrete particles of whose experience
have never been fitted into the finical mosaic
of a philosophy.
O God, protect us from this
enormity of miniatures! And give us
a diminution of diminutives!