Edwin Honig

DARK CONCEIT

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Preface

This book explores the methods and ideas that go into the making of literary allegory. The first chapter estimates the biases that obscure the subject, then proposes a different view. The second chapter surveys the changing concept of allegory from a perspective that leads into our own times. In the third chapter the focus is on the typical constructs of allegorical narration, and in the fourth chapter, on allegory as a problem for its makers. The fifth chapter follows the development of three essential verbal modes in allegorical fiction. And, because the best allegory embodies an ideal which is integral to its methods, the final chapter discusses the role of such ideals in allegory and in related types of fiction.

No book of this sort can pretend to give the whole story about allegory. Too little is known, and almost nothing has been written about the subject which does not betray the parochialism of the specialist or the biases of nineteenth-century criticism. Although excellent books on symbolism are available, few—and those only fragmentarily—see the subject in terms of literary creation and literary criticism. The present study deals critically with allegory, and hence moves in an area where the scholarship has not yet been organized. The center of gravity is a group of Romantic and contemporary writers—among them Melville, Hawthorne, and Kafka—who continue the allegorical tradition in literature. Spenser and Bunyan are included because a useful description of allegory in our period cannot afford to omit them. They start the English Protestant evangeli-

cal tradition, with its popular kind of Biblical typology, which links them in many different and significant ways to Melville, Hawthorne, and Lawrence. Swift, though not in this tradition, belongs here too because, like Spenser's and Bunyan's, the core of his allegory is critical and self-embattled. His satire often finds a natural and nearly equal counterpart in Kafka's; together their works tell us almost all we can learn about the confluence of allegory and satire in fiction.

Early bearings on the subject were taken in an essay concerning the treatment of epic in Spenser and Joyce, and in another on the analogue of the Dionysus myth in Henry James' stories. A small part of that material appears here; the articles themselves are "Hobgoblin or Apollo," in *The Kenyon Review*, Autumn 1948, and "The 'Merciful Fraud' in Three Stories by James," in *The Tiger's Eye*, Autumn 1949. A version of Chapter Six appeared in *The New Mexico Quarterly*, Summer 1953, as "The *Ideal* in Symbolic Fictions." Of Chapter Four a substantial portion in earlier form was printed in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art History*, December 1957, as "Re-creating Authority in Allegory." The last section of Chapter Two and the postword appeared in different form as "In Defense of Allegory," in *The Kenyon Review*, Winter 1958. I appreciate the courtesy of the editors of these publications in permitting me to use this material again.

I am grateful to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for the fellowship which gave full rein to my early curiosity about allegory. I am also grateful to the students of Comparative Literature 103 at Harvard University for the radiance of their responses, especially at those times when I had doubts that the subject even existed. Without such encouragement I should probably not have felt the challenge to start this book.

I must record my thanks to William Alfred, Milton Hindus, Kenneth Lash, Harry Levin, Milton Miller, Patrick F. Quinn, and Radcliffe Squires; I admired and tried to take into account their many fertile suggestions for various versions of the manu-

script. I owe much to Richard Ellmann's sympathies and unbiased resistances, and to Northrop Frye, whose personal reassurances and Promethean labors in all areas of literary criticism confirmed my sense of the shape which the book had to take.

The person I owe most to goes unnamed; my indebtedness is so evident to me on every page that mentioning her name here would be less than sufficient, and, the conventions of authorship being what they are, to say more would surely be mistaken for blind devotion.

EDWIN HONIG

Puerto de Alcudia, Spain
January, 1959

If there be nothing new, but that which is
Hath been before, how are our brains beguil'd,
Which, labouring for invention, bear amiss
The second burden of a former child!
O! that record could with a backward look,
Even of five hundred courses of the sun,
Show me your image in some antique book,
Since mind at first in character was done!
That I might see what the old world could say
To this composed wonder of your frame;
Whe'r we are mended, or whe'r better they,
Or whether revolution be the same.
O! sure I am, the wits of former days
To subjects worse have given admiring praise.

SHAKESPEARE, *Sonnet LIX*

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I

Foreground

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images.

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

WALLACE STEVENS, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*

[1]

THERE is a pervasive feeling against allegory, which, like most stubborn biases, springs from a mixture of distaste and half truths. The feeling is that allegory lends itself to polemical purposes and therefore turns inevitably into an exercise of subliterary fancies. Although the term allegory derives innocuously enough from the codifications of classical grammarians, its use as a concept develops diversely through the adaptations of philosophers, theologians, and literary men, impelled by conflicting interests and the exigencies of a particular occasion. Allegory comes to be thought a makeshift principle—at most, a very minor literary form—incidental to the issues which engendered it. Critics scorn it as a pedestrian notion somehow attached to a few masterworks by which it got in through the back door of literature.

If it were asked why allegory is so conscientiously mistrusted while speculations about symbolism abound as never before, one might say that in a scientific age allegory suggests something obvious and old-fashioned, like Sunday-school religion, but symbolism suggests something esoteric and up-to-date, like higher mathematics. It is a glib answer but not too far from the sources of the modern prejudice. Allegory is of course uncongenial to readers who find in it only an occasion for loquacious moralizing. But no one has yet shown that allegory is inherently of that crude type or why symbolism, for which critics always claim large potencies denied to allegory, is a superior literary practice. The Romantics were the first to exploit theoretical distinctions between allegory and symbolism as part of the larger campaign they fought to disentangle themselves from all rationalistic predeterminations. Encrusted on these distinctions are the accumulated biases

of definition-making and the sanguine belief that allegory as a reputable literary form cannot have survived the industrial revolution.

Other reasons for the attitude against it grow out of the assumption that allegory is an artificial formula, the product of disjunction between the workings of reason and the workings of the imagination. Traditionally this view owes something to the classical rhetoricians, who saw allegory mainly as a device in persuasive argument. Even more is owed to the medieval analogical tradition, which regarded allegory as a trope containing a doctrinal truth. And so, while the other tropes—metaphor, irony, metonymy, synecdoche—even when quite strained, are customarily accepted as poetically gratifying, allegory, a more extensive figure that lends itself to narrative, comes to be known for its hortatory and prosaic qualities. Dante's prescription for allegory in the Can Grande letter reaches beyond these delimitations. He discusses allegory as a form of narrative fiction, saying that the style must be transumptive—that is, characterized by a poetic and rhetorical use of language—and that the method of narration must be digressive and episodic. This statement and the *Commedia* itself are precedents for considering allegory an organic literary type in which tropes function purposefully within the larger fictional scheme. In Dante's example and most later allegories, we recognize a distinct anagogical purpose, which the form and tropes fulfill.

In allegorical fiction certain recurrent devices serve to dilate or condense meanings exactly as tropes do in poetry. But so much depends on their circumspect employment that a lapse of skill can threaten the imaginative balance and turn the work into a sermon or a word game. For the critic such lapses only betray the inherent flaws in allegory. And this contention is presumably strengthened by his finding a more implicit use of correspondences in what he calls symbolic fiction.[1] So the question of technical skill, which should cover the writer's management of all fictional materials, is reduced to a question of his intention: the greater explicitness or transparency of intention show-

ing allegory's inferiority to symbolism as literary procedure.

But nowadays symbolism is a more bedeviled, certainly a more diffuse, term than allegory. Semanticists, for example, continually warn us that the realm of symbolism includes nothing less than all verbal utterance. If one follows this view, in the way its proponents do who take literary symbolism to be the incessant use of figures of speech, then the meaning of a work becomes comprehensible only when the text has been broken down into a concordance of symbols. At best, this would be exchanging the work for a concordance. The term allegory fits the fictional procedure more accurately. From an allegorical view we can follow certain traditional storytelling devices which focus attention on the developing fictional scheme rather than the fortuitous arrestments of the language itself. There is little difference between the current semantic view which skims symbols from fiction and the nineteenth-century notion that allegory, a debased kind of symbolism, moves implacably along on two fixed lines of meaning and uses the narrative only as a convenient conductor for the moral lesson. The insistence on a disjunction between the "inside" and the "outside" succeeds only in isolating a rather barefaced kind of personification allegory. A good allegory, like a good poem, does not exhibit devices or hammer away at intentions. It beguiles the reader with a continuous interplay between subject and sense in the storytelling, and the narrative, the story itself, means everything.

Opinion about allegory in literary histories is fairly unanimous: most agree that it is dead but disagree about the date of its demise. Some say it withered away during the nineteenth century in Hawthorne's fictional hothouses and Tennyson's poetic isles and palaces. Others insist it died during the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century: already moribund in the morality plays, it shook spasmodically in *The Faerie Queene,* and gave up the ghost in Jonson's highly contrived masques. Another opinion has it that allegory was dying when Dante wrote his *Commedia,* and that it was precisely this poem which immolated both the literary form and the concept of allegory in

one final flame. The validity of these opinions depends on each critic's assumption regarding the nature of allegory. It is no paradox to say that all are wrong and yet each tells us something important about allegory.

One thing they tell us, or at least generally imply, is that a distaste for the *idea* of allegory goes back a long way in the history of Western thought. This distaste is expressed in the *Republic* (which nevertheless contains the allegory of the cave) in Plato's remark about the long-standing quarrel between philosophy and poetry. It becomes obscured as the quarrel recurs and spreads, but the basic attitude persists. It is opposed to a way of thinking about the nature of reality as being something other than—that is, essentially against—what the senses or the reason affirms as evidence. But this prejudice is itself confounded by the fact that allegory has often been used and abused by the very philosophers, including Plato, who question its mystical, religious, or superstitious sanctions, and by the theologians who inveigh against the impieties of both philosophers and poets. Many Renaissance poets found in allegory the means of achieving structural design in epics; others impugned it as an esthetic heresy. Hawthorne and Melville sensed in it a viable fictional method instructive to their purposes. Coleridge, Poe, and James proscribed it as a device that destroys the integrity of a fiction. Critics who outlaw it today are themselves ardent letter hunters and sifters of intentions in Joyce and Faulkner, indicating that the same rattling of brains goes on that made the history of allegory so disturbing in the past.

There are clearly two central prejudices against allegory. One is a prejudice against the concept of allegory as a philosophical or rhetorical weapon, and the other a prejudice against allegory as a form of literature. In discussing the subject, most critics compound these prejudices, often without knowing that they are doing so. There are sufficient reasons why it is not always possible to distinguish the two. The employment of allegory by many literary and nonliterary writers has given it a well-marked functional character. At certain points in cultural development

allegory is an indispensable instrument of thought and belief. Essentially part of the impulse Aristotle calls metaphysical ("All men by nature desire to know"), allegory reveals a fundamental way of thinking about man and the universe. Emerging from myth and ritual, the concept is first engaged in the earliest battle of the books fought over Hesiod and Homer. It constantly reappears thereafter on the borders between religion or philosophy and art, serving to frame significant questions about the nature of illusion and reality. Although often confounded with the theoretical occasions of its use, allegory is more than an accident in the history of ideas. It is a common, often the most dramatic, means of articulating and diffusing ideas.

This wide utility becomes a disadvantage when one tries to appraise allegory as a literary type. The difficulty applies to all literary types, but to allegory and other symbolic types especially. Except for a fragmentary poetics derived from Aristotle and classical rhetoric, there was no full-scale esthetic concerned specifically with literary works until the eighteenth century. This is why literary problems are treated many centuries after exemplary works have been frozen in classical postures, and long after vital imaginative issues have been overlaid by all the biases which prevented a critical formulation earlier. These biases coalesce in a single bias: the habit of basing generalizations about literature on claims of moral or social priority. In following a set of beliefs which conceptualize and evaluate problems of conduct and feeling, the bias takes literature to be a proving ground for particular causes that have been treated either soundly or unsoundly in a particular work. Artistic "givens" are thus confused with ethical systems, and the hypothetical structures of art with principles of philosophical demonstration.

The idea that a work of art is an independent organic structure was voiced as long ago as the Sophists and Aristotle. But since the idea was usually drawn from examples in nature and such imitative processes as carpentering and flute-playing, the question of how a literary art proceeds is never thoroughly con-

fronted in criticism. Even in the Renaissance, when discussions of language and poetics preoccupied educated men, criticism was little more than a game of principles winnowed from Aristotle, the Roman rhetoricians, and the later Neoplatonists. The claim was repeatedly made that the methods of poetry are distinct from those of history and theology. And this claim gathered prestige when urged by poets as important as Dante and Spenser. Yet behind their statements lurks the sense of the poets' constraint, as though repeating the classical formula would help to allay suspicions of literary heresy.

The notion that literature is an offshoot of moral philosophy is never completely shaken off. Even in our own time, theories about the autonomy of art are still greeted as heterodox and as a means of making art seem more important than it is. Critics and artists have therefore been forced to extremes: from those Romantics who held that art is the transcendent expression of the artist's ego to recent estheticians who chillingly demonstrate that like mathematics, art, the objective creation of a master craftsman, owes nothing to any discursive form of thought and has a nondiscursive logic of its own. Then the moral or sociological critic intervenes to remind us of the "social import" of art, and we are given the preachment that art is essentially one of several cultural disciplines with special obligations to perform "for the common good." That artists follow compulsions of a mixed and often indefinable sort, and that a concern with problems of form rather than moral ideas leads them back to the works of their predecessors are matters that are ignored but directly influence the structural developments and ethical determinations in a literary work.[2]

What is allegory? In so complex a matter a definition or a series of definitions will not even hint at its manifold uses and adaptations. One must take a broader view of the subject than most critics do—broader, and at the same time more attentive to the formal properties of many different allegorical works. But before such an approach is laid out, we shall have to agree upon what is meant by the allegorical quality in a particular