

Archeology of Allegory

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Introduction

The reputation and role of allegory has fluctuated throughout its long history. It has gone from being a valuable mode of interpretation for poets and philosophers to a manipulation tool for politics and preachers. For the past two centuries, due in part to its insistence on looking backwards and reliance on historical knowledge, allegory was condemned “as aesthetic aberration or the antithesis of art”.¹ However, in the recent past allegory has re-emerged as a viable mode of exploration. This begs the question, what has changed that has allowed allegory to re-emerge? To answer this question a brief look back at the history is required. The goal of this exploration into allegory is to reveal the stimulus for its fluctuation, as well as what makes it still relevant today.

A Definition of Allegory

The simplest and most widely used definition of allegory is “saying one thing and meaning another.”² While this understanding seems to point out a fundamental characteristic of allegory it also allows for anything said to be labeled as allegory. For some artists and scholars this broad definition is fitting. This is because they suggest that all interpretation is allegorical in nature, therefore everything has the potential for allegorical interpretation. However, there are slightly more specific approaches to defining allegory. One of the other ways of understanding it is as an extended metaphor. This idea may be better understood in the following analogy;

¹ Owens, 67

² Fletcher, 1

“Allegory is to thought, what metaphor is to the single word.”³ While a metaphor states that one thing is the same as another thing, allegory in some way adds to this type of relationship. Some consider the extended nature of allegory to be its narrative characteristic. This is one possible distinction between allegory and the various other rhetorical devices. Maggie Bowers, in her book *Magical Realism*, writes that an allegory is “a narrative that has two levels of meaning – the one of the plot, and the other of a covert alternative meaning, in allegorical writing, the plot tends to be subsumed by the importance of the alternative meaning.”⁴ This definition suggests that the literal interpretation of the events of a narrative provides one form of meaning, while an alternate interpretation of those same events provides a different meaning. This alternate meaning is considered to be the hidden meaning. This alternative is often sought after for its ability to reveal knowledge often described as non-empirical or transcendent knowledge. Maybe best described as esoteric.

It is quite possible that its association with hidden meaning is exactly what has compelled societies continued interest in allegory for centuries. The alternative knowledge it seems to naturally tempt its viewers to locate is usually associated with immaterial things like truth, spirituality, universals, absolutes or abstract concepts. Kelly suggests that allegories make “things that are absent seem present.”⁵ This is exactly the way the philosophers and poets of ancient Greece, like Plato, understood allegory. Although allegory is considered a classical western invention, the specific origin is unclear. There is evidence that the ancient world, specifically the Greeks, read allegorically or “read with the expectation that a poem’s surface overlays hidden registers of meaning”⁶. There is evidence that reading allegorically is as old as

³ Kelley, 22

⁴ Bowers, 129

⁵ Kelley, 23

⁶ Copeland, 15

evidence for reading poetry itself. It is important to note that the original allegorical readers did not set out to understand how poems produced their meanings, but rather what meaning could be derived from them.⁷

Origins of Allegory

During ancient times, the meaning that could be derived from allegory concerned philosophers like Plato. It obviously influenced Plato's metaphysics, which is the dualistic view of reality that suggests the existence of both material and immaterial. Plato was cautious of the role of allegory because his metaphysical understanding also "recognized a distance between the sensible world and the real source of truth"⁸, the material and immaterial. He recognized that although meaning existed below the surface it may not be possible to fully understand it. That being said, Plato relied on allegory to communicate what he understood as the transcendental Good. In his understanding empirical reality was a mere shadow of the more real, "unfallen" level of reality, in which the forms dwell, and to which we have no access through our senses. This other level seems to invite allegorical aspirations."⁹ Plato believed that it is the nature of the unseen aspects of reality to require reification in order to be experienced more fully. This is precisely the role that allegory tends to play. It traverses the gap between the things not seen and the senses.

Despite Plato's concern, the Stoics and Neoplatonists of late antiquity recognized a new role for allegory which was as a vehicle for distributing knowledge and ritual, at risk for being lost to history, to the masses. Prior to this time the use of allegory was left strictly for the philosophers and poets. Now allegory was used to pass knowledge of the past on to the public.

⁷ Copeland, 15

⁸ Copeland, 57

⁹ Copeland, 57

The stoics saw allegory as a way of rescuing their cultural heritage from irrelevance and especially from gradual extinction. They embraced “Plato’s Metaphysics of fallenness, but then shifted their emphasis from the distance that separates us and the highest truths to the notion that the world here and now is somehow connected to a higher order.”¹⁰ A conceptual shift occurs during this time. Prior to this time in history, allegory was primarily concerned with interpretation. Now, not only was allegory a way of interpreting meaning, it was also a way of instilling meaning into images and text. The shift occurs between approaching allegory from a philosophical viewpoint which emphasizes “under-meanings” to a rhetorical viewpoint which refers to “other-speaking.”¹¹ Allegory goes from being a method of searching to a method of creating.

The desire for interpreting and instilling meaning in images and text would become even more significant during the early Christian era. It was during this time that Christian scripture was taking on its more allegorical role. However, the hidden meaning for Christians was not concerned with Plato’s forms, but rather with the spiritual understanding of the Christian story as well as every other aspect of the cosmos. The early Christian scholar Origen plays a crucial role in the transition of allegory “from a pagan practice of interpreting difficult passages in Homer and Hesiod to a foundational piece of an emerging Christian biblical hermeneutics.”¹² The statement, “as above, so below” is crucial for the early Christian view of allegory. This was the result of the incarnation of Christ, which was understood as all tangible things being blessed with the divine. In other words the meaning of a symbol was now understood as a connection to the divine. Saint John of Damascus suggested that “the Word of God, in providing for our every

¹⁰ Copeland, 57

¹¹ Copeland, 37

¹² Copeland, 39

need, always presents to us what is intangible by clothing it with form, does it not accomplish this by making an image using what is common to nature and so brings within our reach that for which we long but are unable to see?"¹³ For early Christian thinkers, allegory provided tangible clothing for the spiritual messages given to man from God.

Like the Stoics, the Early Christian's believed that allegory communicated two meanings that are intrinsically tied together in a one to one relationship. They understood allegory as a tool used to reveal concepts associated with truth, beauty and goodness. This notion would begin to change during the Renaissance. Even though the Renaissance is sometimes understood as a high point for allegory, it was during this time that Allegory began its fall toward the antithesis of art. During this time the cultural paradigm began to flip from one that identified with Thomas Aquinas to one that identified with the ideas of Cicero. It was a new humanist view that asserted a human centered universe rather than a God centered universe. This would lead to an emphasis on individual knowledge along with individual interpretation of reality rather than a Church ordained view. As a result of the new emphasis on the individual, allegory begins to be understood as unreliable. Because interpretation was unreliable, poets began to attempt to control their readers. They did this by using "personifications systematically as a reader's guide to the story or allegory."¹⁴ This changes allegory because traditionally it required an interpretation because of its mysterious nature. Reader's guides were taking out the mystery and this ultimately impacts allegory for the next 400 years.

The Beginning of the Decline of Allegory

¹³ John, 20

¹⁴ Copeland, 175

One can't help but think that the unreliability of allegory was also the result of Descartes' Discourse on Method. In this Descartes suggests the subjectivity of the human senses. All of the progress of humanism, science and the arts formed a perfect storm that would begin a movement of restrictions and guidelines for text and images. These restrictions attempted to corral the subjective interpretation of allegory. No better example of such restrictions concerning allegory can be found than that derived from the reformation theologians like Martin Luther. Along with philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, Luther pushed for a "literal sense of scripture alone."¹⁵ Luther stated that "an interpreter must as much as possible avoid allegory, so that he may not wander in idle dreams... allegory is a sort of beautiful harlot, who proves herself especially seductive to idle men... allegories are empty speculations, and as it were the scum of Holy Scripture."¹⁶ It might be said that Luther shared his distaste of allegory with the enlightenment as a whole, which thought it involved "absurd distortions of meaning"¹⁷ that opposed common sense. This suggests that the alternate meaning that allegory traditionally represented was being disregarded and a new emphasis was being placed on the literal interpretation alone.

The move away from allegory and its hidden meanings continued during the period in history known as the enlightenment. Although it may be an oversimplification to attribute allegories major decline to the age of enlightenment, as the "age of empiricist epistemologies, it is an era in which a preference for observable phenomena works against allegory."¹⁸ The enlightenment produced artistic movements like Neoclassicism and Realism. Both of which represented a time in history that located truth value in empirical evidence rather than revelation.

¹⁵ Copeland, 178

¹⁶ Copeland, 177

¹⁷ Copeland, 178

¹⁸ Kelley, 3

For the enlightenment the truth was the clothing. There is nothing under the surface. This period in history is one in which the idea that “seeing is believing” gradually becomes the normative motto. As a result of the decay of allegories' hidden significance, authors begin to try and reinsert meaning back into the allegorical forms. This resulted in allegories being stuffed with political and social messages. Once the original “significance has faded in the age of realism; and the text cannot prove the validity of allegorical interpretation” images become more literal or one might say illustrative.¹⁹ Illustration may be the antithesis of traditional allegory in that it is most effective when it reveals all. Illustration is basically taking the allegorical shell and stuffing it with subjective messages. This is in contrast to the original notion of allegory in which what existed inside the shell was a mystery and could only be understood through an allegorical reading of the outer shell.

There were several artistic movements created as a reaction against the enlightenment values. They can all be generally understood as Romantic, although the specific motivational factors varied slightly. The three most significant were Romanticism, Symbolism, and Pre-Raphaelitism. All of these movements can be summed up with their desire to regain spiritual significance and individuality in some form or another. For this reason many of the artists were looking to the past for artistic forms that allowed for a level of significance that allegory no longer seemed to suggest. The “Romantics felt the inadequacy of Christianity, but wanted to express a sense of the divine world for which allegory was thought inadequate.”²⁰ For this reason the romantics adopted the symbol as their preferred artistic device. For the Romantics the symbol “emphasized the value of human presence and of transcendental values, downgrading

¹⁹ Tambling, 91

²⁰ Tambling, 82

allegory for its mechanical qualities.”²¹ During this time the symbol became more than just a sign pointing to something else, which is the way allegory was perceived, “it both signifies and participates in the which it represents.”²² “The symbol is a metaphysical something in sensuous representation. A transcendental idea compressed into the focus of the visible. The contrast between life upon Earth and the Beyond is annulled by the symbol. Now allegory is understood as something that only interprets abstract meaning in simple reality. It is not emotionally felt, as is the symbol, but thought out, i.e., constructed.”²³ The various Romantic movements downgraded the integrity of allegory in order to prop up the idea of a symbol. Allegory became an outdated and insignificant artistic form because its ability to reveal hidden meanings was lost and ultimately taken over by the symbol.

Reconsidering Allegory

Modernism adopted the Romantic claims against allegory. “The critical suppression of allegory is one legacy of romantic art theory that was inherited uncritically by modernism.”²⁴ For this reason, modern artists avoided allegory altogether. However, the value of allegory would be reconsidered after the First World War. Artists and philosophers were no longer able to justify or even think that concepts like truth and beauty were possible. Even the underlying metaphysical connections to symbols were mistrusted. Their new found skepticism led them to reconsider the Romantic understanding of the symbol. The reason for their reconsideration was that symbolism consecrated “certain values as natural, permanent, and having an essential, unchanging existence... hence its importance within any form of ideology.”²⁵ The concepts of

²¹ Tambling, 128

²² Tambling, 80

²³ Berefelt, 203

²⁴ Owens, 76

²⁵ Tambling, 116

symbolism were now associated with the motivating concepts of Fascist idealism. One philosopher in particular was determined to reconsider the argument against allegory and for symbolism made by the Romantics. His name was Walter Benjamin. As a result of the War, Benjamin believed that “history [was] not marked by beauty, nor by spontaneous growth and movement towards progress... it is marked from the beginning by decay.”²⁶ For Benjamin “allegory corresponded to a perception of the world in ruins, and is therefore the art of the fragment, and the opposite of the symbol, which presupposes the value of nature preserving unchanging, complete, identities and values.”²⁷ Unlike the symbol, allegory pointed at its inability to secure meaning. The inability for interpreters to completely grasp the truths of allegory is exactly what makes allegory special. Its mysterious nature is its value. For the same reasons Plato was cautious of allegory, Benjamin saw its value. Whereas Plato was worried about the fact that allegory could be interpreted in a variety of ways, Benjamin saw this feature as its inherent honesty. Allegory pointed to the fact that it could never guarantee truth. History proved Plato right for his concern with allegories malleability, but Benjamin was redeeming it by showing how its allusiveness allowed for a more complex interpretation of reality. One that could hold multiple views and hence hold on to truth without proclaiming one certain and specific truth.

Postmodern thinkers like Paul DeMan would pick up where Benjamin left off by asserting the value of allegory as a device that pointed to the gap between signifier and signified. Postmodernism as a cultural paradigm can be summed up as a loss of the ability to secure objective meaning. Generally it suggests that meaning is constructed rather than discovered. “The gulf that now opens up between word and object, language and the world, produces a split

²⁶ Tambling, 117

²⁷ Tambling

between statement and meaning; they do not refer to each other, even if it seems that they do.”²⁸

Now that objective meaning is an impossibility, allegory’s ability to suggest alternate meanings was no longer threatening, but was thought as a manifestation of subjectivity, a statement of sincerity and authenticity. Even if allegory suggested alternate meanings, at the same time it suggested that it could not guarantee the interpretation of that alternate meaning. De Man suggested that allegory “asserts a knowledge of its own inauthenticity.”²⁹ During this time the significance of allegory was not in its hidden meanings or spiritual significance, but rather for its ability to discredit such claims. Allegory was seen as a deconstruction device.

Although still today, allegory is understood as a deconstruction device, it is beginning to be reconsidered by many contemporary allegory scholars. In the vein of Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge, Gordon Tesky looks at allegory as a device for interpreting allegory and history itself, in other words, allegorizing allegory. Tesky suggests that by approaching allegory throughout history allegorically, it reveals an alternate meaning which is the decaying of metaphysics itself. This means that “beneath the visible events of literary history there is a much slower event for which I shall have to justify the term metaphysical decay... this event can only be described as emerging from ancient polytheism, articulating itself to the world as medieval polysemy, and concluding in Enlightenment insubstantiality, where allegory is a species of wit.”³⁰ What he suggests is that the various approaches to allegory throughout history reveal the changing cultural epistemology of each period. Looking at allegory and history as a whole reveals a general loss of allegory’s ability to secure significance, which is ultimately grounded in

²⁸ Tambling, 129

²⁹ Tambling 132

³⁰ Tesky, 398

the ability to secure a metaphysical origin. An allegorical view of the history of allegory reveals a hidden meaning which is that God and Metaphysics is gradually dying.

The decay of metaphysics is a contemporary argument that points to the cause of various reinterpretations of allegory throughout history. However, the question as to why allegory persists in a time of skepticism, still remains. Joel Fineman suggests that the persistence of allegory reveals a longing for knowledge and significance in a world that does not allow for it. He “argues that the allegorical desire begins not from a firm point of origin, but rather from a gap, an emptiness which is signaled by the point that we must start, not from the thing itself.”³¹ Fineman suggests that allegory was never motivated by a secure source or position that recognized a direct relationship between objects and their meaning. Rather, allegory has always been the response to awareness that meaning could not be secured. Fineman understands allegory as a journey toward knowledge rather than a statement of knowledge. This idea of allegory as a mode rather than an end is also suggested by Angus Fletcher. Fletcher stated that allegory “is a mode of writing about what is impossible to know or impossible to articulate: God, Love, Truth, the animal, the not human.”³² Allegory in this sense was never about securing knowledge as much as it was about the human desire for knowledge. Allegory in this sense becomes analogous with the human condition and hence its long history coinciding with human history is understandable.

Conclusion

Allegory has gone through a variety of stages, yet with “each return to its earlier moments and forms, allegory becomes incrementally different, yet strangely familiar.”³³ Despite

³¹ Tambling, 167

³² Copeland, 268

³³ Kelley, 14

the various approaches and understandings one broad conclusion is suggested. That conclusion is that all approaches to allegory throughout history “assume that the value of allegory lies in getting you closer to truth.”³⁴ Whether allegory is seen as revealing hidden truths, spiritual meaning or as a tool for deconstructing meaning, they all assume a particular truth about reality and how to depict it. Allegory is a method for moving toward a truth, not for guaranteeing it. It is relevant today for its use as a means not as an end. It can be understood as a coping mechanism for a decaying metaphysics or a device for re-mystifying a demystified culture. Today “allegory fascinates those who want to explore the complexities and difficulties of speaking about the not-said, or more interesting, the not-yet-said.”³⁵ For this reason allegory may be more relevant than any other time in history.

³⁴ Copeland, 269

³⁵ Copeland, 266

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