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Introduction

The definition of allegory is found in understanding its history. The subject of allegory is vast, comprising many different practices of writing, interpreting, and representing. It is bound up with developments not only in literature and art, but also in mythology, religion, rhetoric, and intellectual culture over the centuries. Thus any theoretical statement about allegory that seeks to capture its essence can only be as good as the historical understanding on which it is founded.

This volume seeks to provide that historical perspective. It traces the development of allegory in the European tradition from antiquity to the modern era, emphasizing its progress through literary culture. The essays assembled here traverse the fields that inform allegorical thought and practice in literature and in textual interpretation. Within the broad scope of the European tradition we incorporate the emergence of allegory in ancient Greece and Rome, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We begin with Greek antiquity, showing how the earliest systems of allegory arose in poetry in relation to philosophy, mystery religions, and hermeneutics or interpretation. By proceeding chronologically, this volume accounts for how allegory came to be understood, by late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, as both a theological problem and a literary device, or how sacred and secular conceptions of allegory could be seen to co-exist in the same text. Once the Greek and Roman, Jewish, and early Christian histories have been laid out and the various threads of the allegorical tradition have been considered separately, the volume turns to literary, intellectual, and cultural manifestations of allegory through the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. The essays in the last section address literary and theoretical approaches to allegory in the modern era, from reactions to allegory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through reevaluations of its power in the thought of the twentieth century and beyond.

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Definitions, background, and overview

Post-classical criticism has applied the term "allegory" to denote a range of practices and habits of thought. The term itself has Greek origins: *allos* (other) and *agoreuein* (to speak in public), produce the sense of "other-speaking." In its most common usage it refers to two related procedures, a manner of composing and a method of interpreting. To compose allegorically is usually understood as writing with a double meaning: what appears on the surface and another meaning to which the apparent sense points. Allegorical interpretation (allegoresis) is understood as explaining a work, or a figure in myth, or any created entity, as if there were another sense to which it referred, that is, presuming the work or figure to be encoded with meaning intended by the author or a higher spiritual authority. Literary allegory has been treated by turns as a genre, a mode, a technique, or a rhetorical device or trope, related to metaphor and sometimes defined as "extended (or continued) metaphor."[1] As every critic who has attempted a definition is forced to acknowledge, the nature of allegorical writing is elusive, its surface by turns mimetic and anti-mimetic, its procedures intricate and at times seemingly inconsistent, and its meaning or "other" sense – how it is encoded, or what it refers to extrinsically – often indeterminate. But much of the difficulty associated with allegorical writing, how to define it, how to explicate it, and even how to identify it as such, derives from its intimate relationship with its historical complement, allegorical interpretation.

Allegorical interpretation is in fact the older of these two procedures, or at least the first to leave observable traces of itself as a systematic practice. The Greek noun *allêgoria* did not come into use until the Roman period. At the end of the first century CE, Plutarch is still calling it a new term. But the mode of thinking to which the term was attached has deep classical roots. The central concepts of ancient allegorical reading are represented in a cluster of terms: "symbol" (*symbolon*), *hyponoia* ("under-meaning"), and "enigma" (*aenigma*).[2] In one of the earliest extensive testimonies to allegorical interpretation, the work of the Derveni commentator (fourth century BCE), the key term is "enigma": this commentary presents a cosmological and religious explanation of an Orphic poem, often by bringing etymological pressure to bear on individual names and terms, and finds

1 Defining allegory as "extended metaphor" occurs in antiquity: see Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 8.6.44. Among well-known modern uses of it, see Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery: Renaissance Poetic and Twentieth-Century Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), pp. 105–6.

2 Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 23.

mystical truths and cultic significance embedded in the poetic language and the figures of myth. At its most fundamental, such allegorizing is a search for esoteric truths, for meaning that is concealed but ultimately interpretable. The later term *allêgoria* was thus nearly synonymous with *symbolon*, the encoded expression of a mystical or philosophical truth, a manifestation of transcendental meaning that is at once immediate and remote. This is the model of allegorical thought that Plato found problematic because not all readers of poetry would be intellectually equipped to discover its immanent truths (although Plato himself was famously to construct some of the most enduring philosophical allegories, notably the Allegory of the Cave and the Myth of Er in the *Republic*). This remained the model pursued by Stoic philosophers in their theology, physics, and metaphysics, and which they in turn bequeathed to Greek commentators on Homer during the Hellenistic period. It also informed a strong tradition of later Latin mythographical commentary which focused its attention on Virgil: the commentator Fulgentius (fifth or sixth century) elevated Virgil's poetry to philosophical status by extracting latent cosmographical truths from the poetic narrative, and the massive commentary on the *Aeneid* by the grammarian Servius (fourth century) often engages allegorical perspectives.[3]

Jewish and early Christian thinkers would build their edifices of exegesis and scriptural allegory on the ancient foundation of esoteric reading. Theirs too was a hermeneutic aimed at the transcendent truths which are concealed in language. In rabbinic exegesis as well as in the thought of such early Christian figures as Paul and Origen, the indeterminacy of the scriptural text is held in tension with the guaranteed and complete truth of the inner *logos*. The vast metaphysical elaborations of Greek Neoplatonism were also to emerge, in late antiquity, out of this early system of allegorical hermeneutics. Neoplatonist commentators turned their attention to the transcendent meanings that they saw hidden in poetic and philosophical myth, for example, Porphyry's commentary on the Cave of the Nymphs episode in the *Odyssey* and Proclus' commentary on Plato's Myth of Er. Neoplatonist allegorism cast a powerful influence forward on medieval and humanist reading habits. Certain strains in the early Islamic allegorical tradition also reflect Platonic thought about the different parts of the soul and the layering of the cosmos. The Platonist influence was mediated to the Western Middle Ages through the writings of a few Neoplatonists who wrote in Latin,

3 These traditions are collected and surveyed in Jan Ziolkowski and Michael C. J. Putnam, eds. and trans., *The Virgilian Tradition: The First Fifteen Hundred Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). See also Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

notably Macrobius, and by the all-important Latin commentary-translation of Plato's *Timaeus* by Calcidius (fourth century CE). This hermeneutical influence also extended into the Latin Middle Ages through the Christian Neoplatonist known as the Pseudo-Dionysius, whose mystical writings in Greek were translated into Latin by John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century. Of course the recovery of classical Greek by Humanist scholars, starting in the fifteenth century, ushered in a new era of enthusiasm for Neoplatonist allegory.

In Roman times, the Greek term *allêgoria* came to substitute for the term *hyponoia*, that is, "other-speaking" for "under-meaning." In this usage, the term denoted the fruit of interpretive quests, a meaning that would be enshrined in Neoplatonist commentaries on Plato and Homer, along with the term *symbolon*. But the conceptual shift from "meaning" (*hyponoia*) to "speaking" (*allêgoria*) also paved the way for the reception of the Greek term in Latin, where its emphasis on the text as "speaking" rather than merely "meaning" allowed the Latin term *allegoria* to gravitate into the orbit of the rhetoricians. The Latin rhetoricians treated it as a trope akin either to metaphor or to irony. Thus it was that allegory, which had begun in philosophy, moved into poetics. *Allegoria* came to denote a form of writing as well as a form of reading. As a compositional technique, it became a property of rhetoric. In the rhetorical handbooks (such as Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*) it acquired a rather narrow sense as an ornamental device involving a double meaning (saying one thing and meaning another; *Institutio oratoria* 8.6.44).

This layering of terminology, where the Latin term took on a different valence from the same word in Greek, is one of the reasons why the history of allegory in the post-classical West is extremely tricky. "Allegory" became a rhetorical term relatively late in its history. Because the word was the same from Greek to Latin, the force of the earlier meaning could certainly accompany the term in its new linguistic environment; but in that new environment it had another contextual value, as a simple rhetorical trope. This was a source of some ambiguity for many centuries in both sacred and secular writing. When Christian theologians in the Latin West adopted the terminology of earlier Greek Christian writers, the Greek word *allêgoria* found its obvious counterpart in Latin *allegoria*, but the transference across linguistic contexts created confusion about whether the word "allegory" referred to a verbal trope or something more profound. The word *allegoria* as we find it used by the Latin church fathers would typically refer to a spiritual sense of Scripture, either the whole of the spiritual meaning that is latent in the literal sense, or one division of a tripartite spiritual sense. In the early fifth century, John Cassian gave a formal stamp to

the notion of a multi-valent spiritual sense, in his outline of the four-fold system of scriptural interpretation: he spoke of a literal or historical sense, and of three spiritual senses, tropology (which concerns the soul), allegory (which concerns the revelation of mysteries prefigured in history), and anagogy (which concerns the divine secrets of heaven). But in the same era as Cassian, Augustine could treat theological allegory, or the spiritual sense of Scripture, as another dimension of the rhetorical trope, as a special aspect of the trope found in the spiritual realities of Scripture rather than in its words (*De trinitate* 15.9.15). It appears that for Augustine, the rhetorical trope was the standard from which a specialized scriptural form had to be distinguished.

Thus we see that there was some ambiguity of terms: how can a verbal trope, which is rather restricted in its value, share a term (and a category) with a profound form of hidden spiritual meaning? How can "allegory" be a fact or event in Scripture that is imbued with sacred mystery beyond itself, as well as an ornamental device of language? Across the Middle Ages, from Bede in the eighth century to Aquinas in the thirteenth, there were attempts to solve this dilemma. But where medieval Christian thinkers apprehended this difficulty, they did not express it as a semantic problem (Greek term versus Latin term, an overlapping of two cultural meanings at the site of one word). Rather, medieval thinkers tended to see it as a distinction between sacred meaning and human language, or sometimes between sacred and secular texts. For example, in the twelfth century, Bernardus Silvestris would try to resolve this by distinguishing between the allegory that is proper to Scripture, in which a historical truth points to a spiritual truth, and the "integument" or fictional covering that is appropriate for secular philosophy, which may use myths or fables that have no meaning in themselves but which refer to a latent philosophical truth. But medieval vernacular authors, notably Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun (authors of the *Roman de la Rose*), and spectacularly Dante, found that they could play with accepted distinctions between allegory as verbal trope and allegory as theological or cosmological truth, in order to lay claim to much greater authority than traditionally accorded secular poetry.

A crucial outgrowth of the newer literary dimension of allegory was the transference of the reading process into the compositional process, a passage from reading narratives allegorically to writing narrative allegories. Jane K. Brown defines allegory as "a mode of representation which renders the supernatural visible."[4] This definition is valuable because it can

4 Jane K. Brown, *The Persistence of Allegory: Drama and Neoclassicism from Shakespeare to Wagner* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2007), p. 5.

describe both the interpretive process, which moves from what is already visible to transcendent referents, and the compositional process, which seeks to express imagistically what is otherwise abstract or invisible. The device of personification is bound up with both of these processes of rendering the abstract visible. In allegorical interpretation of myth, mythical deities or other figures were understood to represent cosmological forces or abstract values. This is an underlying assumption of the influential theory of allegorical interpretation that we find in Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (*c.* 400 CE), in which the *fabula* or "fabulous narration" (a mythical narrative or a dream narrative) is understood to contain a philosophical truth.[5] Personification is also an ancient device of poetry; in the rhetorical handbooks of antiquity it was treated under the term *prosopopoeia*, in which an imaginary character speaks.[6] In various forms, personification was always a central component of allegorical procedures. Thus it is not surprising that it became the most prominent form of allegorical composition from late antiquity through the late Renaissance. Personification played a large role in the development of mythological poetry in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: for example, in the Latin philosophical allegories of the twelfth century, such as the *Cosmographia* of Bernardus Silvestris and the *De planctu Naturae* (Plaint of Nature) by Alan of Lille, where philosophical and scientific ideas are personified as speakers and actors in a dramatic narrative; the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*; Chaucer's dream visions, which contain a few mythological personifications; the moral and mythological figures of Spenser's *Fairie Queene*; and masques such as Milton's *Comus*.

The archetype of personification allegory is the *Psychomachia* (early fifth century CE) by the Christian Latin poet Prudentius. This influential narrative can be read most simply as an allegory of virtues and vices, depicting a battle (*machê*) in cosmic, eternal terms for the human soul (*psychê*). Its main, quasi-epic action is the great struggle between personified virtues and vices (Faith and Idolatry, Chastity and Lust, Patience and Anger, and other pairs) in which the virtues prevail. In its concluding lines the poem glosses its own meaning: the narrative has represented the moral vicissitudes of the human soul on the difficult path towards salvation. The *Psychomachia* illustrates how personification allegory inverts allegorical interpretation. Here we encounter a transcendent truth directly through a set of abstractions

5 Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).

6 On this topic, see James Paxson, *Poetics of Personification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

which have been given concrete form at the narrative level, but which operate as universal, not particular values. What the characters represent is clear from their names, but the usefulness of the moral lesson depends on translating it out of its universal terms and back into a human, temporal perspective.[7] But the poem also adopts the terms of the figural allegorization that was applied to Scripture, in which the events in one historical frame prefigure and are fulfilled by the events in a future time or outside of human temporality. In his prologue, Prudentius recounts the events in the life of the patriarch Abraham, which he tells us serve as a paradigm (*figura*) for the eternal truths of salvation after the incarnation of Christ. In different degrees, personification allegory also structures two of the most influential didactic texts of late antiquity. *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology* by Martianus Capella (fifth or sixth century) is an encyclopedic survey of knowledge given dramatic form as a celestial marriage of intellect (Mercury) and learning (Philology); here each of the Seven Liberal Arts (grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, music) is personified as a female figure who comes before the celestial assembly to deliver an account of her art. Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (524 CE) was a wellspring not only for a long tradition of literary imitators but also, in turn, of philosophical allegorists; in this work Lady Philosophy appears to the distraught Boethius, and through a series of careful, dialectical arguments persuades him of the superiority of a philosophical perspective on worldly suffering.

The ideological orders of post-classical allegory – until the period after the Counter-Reformation – are religious or mystical on the one hand, and philosophical or ethical on the other hand. This is the case not only for western European allegory, but also for Islamic allegory, in which mystical and philosophical superstructures dominate. Under the category of ethical we can place the erotic allegories of the Middle Ages (the *Roman de la Rose* and its secular tradition) because these refer to the immanent "law" of love, which constrains and coerces, but also refines the sensibilities of the lover who obeys its rule. In the medieval and early modern European tradition, personification narrative came to be an important element of literary allegory, often in the classic form of personified abstractions, but also in the form of mythological figures, as in Agrippa d'Aubigné's apocalyptic religious poem *Les Tragiques* (1616 CE), as well as historical figures who dynamically embody a moral condition, as in parts of Dante's *Commedia*. Some of the most complex narratives, among them the *Commedia*, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and Spenser's *Fairie Queene*, combine and test these forms to reveal the

7 See Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 18.

interconnection among several ideological orders: moral, political or historical, and theological. For example, in the *Fairie Queene* the events of recent English political history are mapped onto the economies of salvation (the triumph of Protestantism) and of private virtue, and all of these orders are figured through the intricacies of characterization in a romance narrative. Angus Fletcher famously argued that a cosmic world view of a guaranteed reality, a single hierarchical order, was necessary for the meaningful workings of literary allegory.[8] In this way, allegory as literary production sustained its intimate connection with the oldest form of allegorism, ascent to the ideal through its visible manifestations.

It should be noted that personification in a strict sense, that is, abstractions that are materially instantiated, was not necessary to the mechanics of allegory, even though it could have an important function in allegorical imagery. One of its most secure places was in allegorical drama, as in the religious morality plays of the later Middle Ages, or the *autos sacramentales* (sacramental acts in dramatic form) of the Counter-Reformation period in Spain, of which Calderón's plays are prominent examples, and in the political and philosophical allegories of court entertainments that persisted into the eighteenth century. But in terms of the consequences for the later history of allegory, perhaps the most important genre to define itself through allegorical personification was the German Baroque *Trauerspiel* or "mourning play," which came to be despised by Romantic critics and which was given a profound theoretical rehabilitation by Walter Benjamin in the 1920s. While the mourning play adopts the mechanics of allegory, its outlook already suggests a loss of faith in the capacity of the allegorical image to lead to an apprehension of eschatological reality.

The notion of an external, hierarchical order which could imbue allegory with an assured, transcendent meaning, began to break down with the failure of the Counter-Reformation and the rise of new philosophical and scientific empiricisms. Under these newer ideological conditions, literary and visual allegory persisted, but its scope as a form of spiritual empowerment was diminished. Apart from the question of a single religious outlook and the anti-sacramental character of Protestantism, even the certainties of a Neoplatonic philosophical order were unfixed.[9] Neoclassical aesthetics did not reject allegory, but imposed on it a much stricter formal limitation of a clear, symmetrical, and fixed correspondence between

8 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), chapter 2.

9 On the inner conflicts of Protestant allegory, see Thomas H. Luxon, *Literal Figures: Puritan Allegory and the Reformation Crisis in Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

a figure and the abstraction it represents. Neoclassical criticism isolated personification as the principal mark of allegory. Indeed it was Neoclassical criticism that bestowed the name "allegory" on personification fiction. Such critical prescriptions constrained the parameters within which allegory was seen to function. In Neoclassical literary cultures allegory still played an important role, but its terms were more limited. For example, political, religious, and topical satires, such as Jonathan Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, deployed personifications to great and comic effect, barely disguising the objects of the satire (and allegory has long been a refuge of political satirists, as many modern examples attest). Enlightenment philosophers (for example, John Locke) tended to take a dim view of rhetorical ornamentation in general, and relegated allegory to a rather debased position among rhetorical ornaments.

Under these diminished conditions, what was left for allegory? Goethe could dismiss it for its instrumentality, that its function is simply to yield up meaning: "The allegorical differs from the symbolic in that what the latter designates indirectly, the former designates directly."[10] But in fact the drama of allegory was not over, and there were further acts to be played out. The first of these was within Romanticism itself. Coleridge, like Goethe, distinguished allegory from symbol in terms of the difference between a mechanical "translation" and an organic "translucence." But in one of the great historical paradoxes, what Romantic aesthetic theory embraced in the concept of the "symbol" was nothing less than Neoplatonic allegorical thought: in other words, in extruding what they conceived as mere "allegory" from the precincts of their aesthetics, they were doing nothing less than recuperating the oldest model of allegorical immanence under the aegis of what they called "symbol," a term which they resuscitated from the Greek Neoplatonic tracts they read. The symbol was now the site in which the highest imaginative realities were embodied. Nineteenth-century American literary and intellectual culture also made a significant contribution to the latter-day history of allegory. The American Transcendentalists were beneficiaries of European Romantic thought and aesthetics, and were also avid readers of Neoplatonist philosophical writings. From these influences Ralph Waldo Emerson generated a model of the individual mind partaking of a universal divine intelligence, and of the poet as inspired individual who can interpret human reality in allegorical relation to the realm of the spirit. This also offered a new purchase for a theological dimension of allegory which had persisted (although often challenged) through the Protestant Reformation.

10 Quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 199.

The fortunes of the allegorical took another turn with the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin found in the *Trauerspiel* or mourning play of the German Baroque a critical turning point in the early modern world. According to Benjamin, these allegorical dramas, with their unfathomably strange imagery, provide no interpretive passage between the material sign and a theological ideal. The possibilities of meaningful representation are called into question: the signs are dead weight (like corpses of the dead), dissolving the link that enables a hermeneutical movement between figures and their meaning, between human life and abstract truth. On Benjamin's view, Renaissance allegory maintained the fiction that an assured meaning was accessible through and immanent in visible signs, but it was the Baroque *Trauerspiel* that presaged modernity by exposing the chasm separating human life from a transcendent ideal.[11] Here allegory entails alienation from meaning, and is suggestive of the very condition of history and human temporality.

For later theorists, Benjamin's reading offered a powerful vindication of allegory for modernity. Twentieth-century critical thought has embraced allegory in ways that are indebted to Benjamin's revisionist reading. Poststructuralist theory, and Paul de Man's work in particular, has turned to allegory as the paradigmatic instance of rhetoric and rhetorical language, of the sign whose meaning cannot be fixed but is continually deferred, both calling for and resisting interpretation. As a sign of a deferred or absent meaning, allegory has also been incorporated into psychoanalytic thought about desire and sublimation.[12] In the charged theoretical debates of the later twentieth century, allegory has once again occupied a critical position, this time as the trope of tropes, by its very name ("other-speaking") announcing itself as the definitive mark of the contingency of language and its referential claims. And conversely, as de Man famously argued, all reading, all critical practice, is allegoresis, that is, allegorical interpretation. Such revisionist understandings of the otherness of allegory within critical theory have had their counterparts in contemporary literary, artistic, and performance cultures, in linguistic or visual or narrative forms that focus attention on their own enigmatic and impenetrable surface, or that make conspicuous and disingenuous claims to represent a traumatic truth that can never be apprehended in its terrible wholeness.

Like no other property of poetics, allegory has a long, complex, and traceable history. Like metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche, allegory is a

11 Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, pp. 12–14.

12 See, for example, Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 111.