The Vitality of Allegory

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MY PRIMARY aim in this book has been to offer a new conception of a very old literary and rhetorical concept. In so doing, I hope that I have encouraged my readers to rethink allegory from the perspective of their own reading experience. During the course of the many discussions that I have had with friends, family, and colleagues about the nature of my research, one thing has struck me repeatedly—once they know what I am trying to do, almost everyone can come up with a good example, often one with which I am completely unfamiliar, that fits well within at least one of my main categories of allegory—strong, weak, dependent, independent, interdependent, thematic, or ironic. This heartens me, as it indicates that the terms and concepts that I have introduced here might have relevance beyond the set of texts that I have used to illustrate them.

As opposed to producing the definitive treatise on allegory, my intention has been to provide a framework and a vocabulary to use when a reader encounters a narrative text that seems purposively figural or a text that has allegorical elements that need to be explained. I hope, therefore, that what I have presented has some practical value as readers confront allegorical texts. In addition to its heuristic value, I hope that readers of this book will find themselves better equipped to answer some of those difficult conceptual questions—some of which have dogged allegory forever—that I posed in my introductory chapter. I will use this concluding chapter as a venue for reflecting back on what I’ve done in the preceding pages and tackling these questions head-on.
Can a text still be an allegory if the author did not have a particular phenomenon or purpose in mind when he or she composed the work?

Some theorists of allegory would answer yes, definitively. Those, for example, who believe that readers ultimately determine whether a narrative is allegorical or not would not concern themselves much with this issue of authorial intention. But even E. D. Hirsch, a critic who built the early part of his career around the issue of authorial intention, would answer this question affirmatively. In a 1994 essay from *New Literary History*, Hirsch argues that writers, in many cases, want their work to “apply across time,” and so that work “typically intends to convey meaning beyond its immediate occasion into a future context which is very different from that of its production” (“Transthistorical” 552). Thus, Hirsch can make the case that “original intentions are not, as a matter of empirical fact, limited to original meanings” because authors often “intend their writings to have meanings that go unforeseeably beyond their original, literal contents” (555, emphasis in original). If Hirsch is correct, then a writer can intend for his or her work to be an allegory of something, but that something does not need to be predetermined.

From my rhetorical perspective, I would argue that Hirsch might be right about this, but the end result would more than likely tend toward weak rather than strong allegory. Indeed, the kind of allegorical intentions that Hirsch imagines here would almost certainly produce the kind of figural indeterminacy that evokes allegory without a commitment to some specific phenomenon or purpose. A reader would likely pick up on the author’s allegorical intentions, but the allegorical effect would be dampened by the lack of specificity. The feedback loop of interpretation would provide resistance to a strong allegorical reading. As Hirsch postulates, though, the possibility certainly exists that an author would have a strong intention to write a work that would be read as a weak allegory, as I tried to show was the case with Kafka.

In a hypothetical situation in which the author had no allegorical intentions at all but some reader or readers of that text interpret the work allegorically, we would find ourselves in a similar situation. We might demonstrate

1. Hirsch’s line of thinking here comes out of a later turn in his work where he attempts to grapple with the issue of the effect of the passage of time on textual meaning. In addition to the essay on transthistorical intentions cited here, readers might be interested in his “Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted.” In “Meaning as Concept and Extension: Some Problems,” James Battersby and James Phelan take issue with Hirsch’s revisions to his earlier claims about meaning and significance, arguing that the direction Hirsch takes in his later work—including this essay on allegory—muddles the helpful distinction he made earlier between these two concepts.
that the narrative can support a weak allegorical interpretation, but strong allegory would, again, be very unlikely. If an author did not intend for his or her readers to arrive at such an interpretation, then the textual elements would almost assuredly not fit together as coherently as they do in a work such as *Animal Farm* or “The Lottery.”

Does a reader have to know the phenomenon that is to be transformed prior to reading the narrative in order to “get” allegory?

No.

In many respects, the process of allegorical interpretation takes us back to the apparent paradox of the hermeneutical circle. That paradox, as Friedrich Ast describes it, arises from the presumption that “the particular can be understood only through the whole, and conversely, the whole, only through the particular” and that “the perception or concept precedes cognition of the particular, even though perception and concept seem to develop only through these” (45). Ast formulates the problem of the hermeneutical circle (or the problem of understanding more generally) as an interpersonal one, as something that describes the relationship between two beings—an author and a reader—separated by time. This formulation places him in the company of other theorists who, according to David Couzens Hoy, conceive of understanding as “a process of psychological reconstruction. The object of understanding is the original meaning of a text handed down to the present from a past that is no longer immediately accessible. Reconstruction—which can take place only when there is a bridge between past and present, between text and interpreter—is psychological when this bridge consists of a relation between two persons: the author and the reader” (11).

Although Ast uses terminology that gives the interpretive process a more metaphysical feeling than I would prefer to do, Ast’s resolution of the apparent paradox comes close to the view of reading that I am promoting here. “In the explication of a work or of a particular part,” Ast asserts,
A rhetorical approach to narrative—and to allegory specifically—is largely consonant with this view of understanding insofar as it presumes that an author intends to convey something to a reader; there is an important communicative function to the literary act. The question is: how does the reader reach an understanding of the author’s intended meaning?

The idea of “narrative as rhetoric” rests on the premise that readers make judgments about texts—and revise those judgments—as the narrative unfolds temporally. In *Narrative as Rhetoric* James Phelan puts forward a view of narrative that “focuses on the text as an invitation to an experience that is dynamic in at least two ways. First, the experience is crucially influenced by the movement of the narrative through time. Second, the experience is multilayered, one that engages a reader’s intellect, emotions, judgments, and ethics simultaneously” (90). Phelan employs the term “progression” to capture the dynamic nature of a reader’s experience with narrative. “Progression,” he explains, “refers to the way in which a narrative establishes its own logic of forward movement . . . and it refers to the way that movement carries with it invitations to different kinds of responses in the reader . . .” (90). In allegorical texts, the forward movement of the narrative will generally serve to invite some very specific responses from the reader; collectively these responses will result in a recognition on the part of the reader that the author has figural and transformative intentions.

“Click,” the story by John Barth that I discussed in the previous chapter, provides an excellent example of the progressive nature of the allegorical experience. In this story, Barth’s narrator walks the reader through the dynamic process that Phelan has identified. As the discourse moves forward through time, characters and events become thickened with thematic importance. A reader’s initial inklings of allegorical potential are corroborated by the positive feedback of textual phenomena and the interjections of Barth’s narrator. The dénouement of this narrative depends less on a plot revelation or resolution than it does on the final unfolding of the story’s allegorical significance.

When we move out of the realm of strong or weak allegories, then the question of whether a reader has to know the phenomenon or rhetorical purpose that is to be transformed becomes largely meaningless because, as we consider dependent, independent, interdependent, thematic, or ironic
allegory, we should no longer think of the narrative as a unified transformation. The text is no longer an allegory of something; instead, it includes allegory or the idea of allegory as a textual element or a theme.

**Does allegory depend on “elite” readers?**

I offer a qualified “yes.” But by “elite” readers I simply mean good readers, those who are attentive, generally well informed, and willing to play according to conventional literary rules. (And this is the same answer that rhetorical theorists would give for any literary genre.) In Before Reading Peter J. Rabinowitz claims that “Every literary theoretician these days needs a governing metaphor about texts” (37); for his, Rabinowitz takes the idea of the unassembled swing set, and this metaphor can help explain what the kind of reader I refer to here as “elite” needs to be able to do. The swing set, Rabinowitz explains, is a concrete thing that, when completed, offers opportunities (more or less restricted depending on the particular swing set involved) for free play, but you have to assemble it first. It comes with rudimentary directions, but you have to know what directions are, as well as how to perform basic tasks. It comes with its own materials, but you must have certain tools of your own at hand. Most important, the instructions are virtually meaningless unless you know, beforehand, what sort of object you are aiming at. If you have never seen a swing set before, your chances of riding on the trapeze without cracking open your head are slight. (38)

As I argued in the chapter devoted to strong allegory, authors of allegorical works generally intend them for a sophisticated audience, an audience that does have the tools and the prior experience required to assemble the metaphorical swing set. This “authorial audience” stands in contrast to, and in some ways above, the “narrative audience,” a far more credulous and less astute group of readers.

In the realm of allegory in narrative or allegories of narrative (as opposed to allegories as narrative), the need for something like an ideal reader is just as pronounced. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, for example, almost demands a reader with some knowledge of Kafka, or at least a willingness to learn something about Kafka. Without this, an individual reader cannot hope to participate in Coetzee’s authorial audience. This audience-related shortcoming does not change the author’s intention, nor does it vitiate the alle-
gorical aspect of the narrative, but it does change the experience of reading that narrative for a reader or a group of readers.

I hope that this book has raised more questions about allegory than I could possibly answer in this short conclusion; indeed, if we do ever reach the point where all of the questions have been answered, then we might truly be able to say that allegory has died. I doubt that that will be the case, however, because, as with many other literary genres or devices, authors will certainly continue to find new ways of manipulating allegory and incorporating it into their narratives. As I have shown, the term “allegory” can effectively describe a class of works that achieves an author’s rhetorical purpose through the transformation of some phenomenon into a figural narrative. As long as we readers are willing to recognize the myriad ways that this transformation can happen, and as long as we recognize that this transformation can happen in a number of different contexts, then I believe that we will see critical work on this concept that matches the creativity with which authors continue to employ it.