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The Will to Allegory In Postmodernism

Like institutions, allegory never really dies. It may adopt new terminology and defend itself in the current educated idiom, but its form remains—which is an appropriate fate for a Platonizing system.

M. Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory*

So allegory refuses to expire and persistently demands the offices of all declensions of criticism. Long regarded as an almost unmentionable disease in the literary body, allegory began to be treated anew at the threshold of modernism and postmodernism: following the delayed impact of Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, critics as various as Northrop Frye, Angus Fletcher, Paul de Man and Gayatri Spivak have tried to re-evaluate the genre.¹ In order to attempt this resuscitation such critics have made much use of Benjamin's prognoses, and have proposed the neglect of allegory as a symptom of modernism's inheritance from the romantic tradition—the concept of allegory and the romantic notion of the symbol had usually been seen as opposites within a tradition which tended to regard allegory as intrinsically “intolerable...stupid and frivolous.”² But this recent criticism has attempted to re-read modernism by taking account of its remanent but neglected allegorical dimension: Spivak in particular has produced convincing analyses of this sort. More lately, Joel Fineman and Craig Owens have hazarded a further step in the patient's rehabilitation by applying the term across a broad spectrum of literary, artistic and philosophical phenomena in modernism and postmodernism.³ Responding to such activity, I want to examine some of the issues arising from allegory's revival and to comment on some of its less carefully considered symptoms.

The critics see the romantic idea of the symbol and the concept of allegory as standing in a dialectical relation to one another. They describe the aesthetic of the symbol as the means of representing a full

Platonic *Eidos* in which sign and meaning are thought to cohere: the symbol, in this sense, is a privileged trope, expressing essence and truth and eliding the problematic mediation of language from the act of perception. In representing its object the symbol claims to re-present unproblematically the real or the natural in such a way that the means of representation do not intrude upon the act of communication. Against this idealist aesthetic the tendency is to place the specific characteristics of allegorical discourse; it is the nature of allegory to stress discontinuity and to remark the irremediable distance between representation and idea. Whereas the sense of the symbol is always given as wholesome and natural, the sense of allegory is arbitrary and conventional since allegory specifically marks its own distance from an original truth.

Walter Benjamin's discussions of baroque allegory give impulse and weight to this modernist dialectic. His work attempts to establish that when a symbolist aesthetic is appealed to "the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption," but that in allegorical discourse we see only "a petrified primordial landscape" (*Origin*, p. 166) which has been atemporalized and rendered irredeemable. In making this distinction Benjamin is led to posit a list of the qualities that are common to all allegorical discourse. He says that allegory emerges from an introverted contemplation of a melancholic and mournful nature; that it bemoans a loss and tries to redeem that loss by embracing the dead objects of the natural world; that it is opposed to the specific and privileged temporality that underlies a symbolist aesthetic; that it is construed in amorphous, significant fragments; that it relies upon a disjunctive, incremental and atomizing technique; and that it veers toward the bombastic, preferring the spoken over the written word (see *Origin*, p. 138-235). In my own essay I will accept Benjamin's list of allegory's basic characteristics, but will add a further and all-important quality by means of which I hope to emphasize an aspect of allegory which draws it closer to the epistemology of the romantic symbol than Benjamin's dialectical view seems to allow.

Although the views of representation that we find in romanticism and in allegory are quite clearly different, both modes make a similar epistemological commitment to some notion of fixed truth and value: the one appeals to a natural truth, the other to a conventional one. I want to emphasize the aesthetic and political consequences of such an appeal to a fixed truth or set of truths, and so to make a critique of some of the underlying assumptions in the revival of allegory as a privileged form of discourse in postmodern artistic practice and theory.

Benjamin's listing of the strategies of allegory is not specific to the Baroque allegories with which he deals in detail. For him, all historical phases of allegory and its hermeneutics share such strategies as if in reaction to the supposedly transcendental value of the natural promoted by non-allegorical discourse. In allegory these techniques construct no inter-subjective faith in the value of the real, but rather they propose a reliable (though arbitrary) typological authority. Such an authority—all that is ever really essential to allegory—is the fixed stay of allegory's discourse: a fixity of its underlying reference is vital for its accurate functioning. Thus, despite its fundamental opposition to the immediately assimilable truth of the symbol, allegory certainly does not offer or promote any continual deferral of truth. This is simply because a matrical system of reference must always constitute its established and establishing values. In mediaeval allegories, for example, a network of truth—however much devolved through figuration or representation—always has provenance in courtly values and in what was considered a divinely given hierarchization. In modern allegory, of course, a shared referential, metasemantic system such as was available to mediaeval allegorists and their audience is not commonly held by readers, and so one has to be constructed or invented in the act of reading itself. This places the onus on the reader—he must establish a serviceable but *ad hoc* typology for the text. It seems to me that three broad categories of modern allegory can be perceived as a result of this decay of the classic lines of allegorical communication, but deriving from them.

The first is of the kind that persuades the reader to construct a typology for the text from vulgar, shared assumptions (the old *paroemiae*) about, for example, 'human nature', or 'common-sense.' This is the tactic of much mid-century British fiction such as Golding's or Rex Warner's, or even Tolkien's. Another, where the reader works from the base of whatever he knows about the conventions and history of any particular kind of utterance, might be labelled *intertextual* allegory, and in many cases could be more simply recuperated into the tropes of allusion that readers are familiar with. (In other words, if one wishes to keep the term 'allegory' healthy for critical labor, it must be distinguished from mere allusion.)⁴ A third sort of modern allegory will impose its sense upon the reader through a strategem of continual *intra-textual enigmatae*; this seems to be a particularly esteemed mode of literary allegory and we come across it in writers such as Borges or Beckett.

The common factor in any of these types of modernist allegory is the imposition upon the reader of some specific directive which will always lie beyond tropological play and beyond immediate semantic refer-

ence, and will reside in some privileged moral sphere such as politics or religion. Yet any propinquity between that sort of allegorical directive and the idealizing, totalizing impulse of the symbol is generally given by modern commentators as a sort of secret and neglected growth of allegory upon the pre-assumptions that modernism has inherited from romanticism. Quite apart from still clinging to a genetic model of artistic production through history, such a view runs the not inconsiderable risk of ignoring the recourse to truth which I take to be a common factor in both aesthetic modes. I will propose that both eventually exhibit a similar nostalgia for a plenitude and security of reference, for 'truth' as a stay against the individual's alienation from himself and from the world; if anything, allegory could be seen as the more pernicious of the two in its reliance upon the reader's ability to uncover what is usually an elitist or esoteric meaning. Both certainly constitute exprobatations against language in that their shared desire is for a primordial return to the innocent state preceding the individual's entry into language and culture. Thus, the two can be distinguished only modally—allegory with its attachment to melancholy and mourning is a continual and bombastic complaint of loss, while the idealism of the symbol's practitioners leads them to a leap away from the whole problematic of language's material presence and into the supposedly transcendent security of the symbol.

The commensal nature of the two aesthetics as they react against language's (proper) inability to directly transfer truth from author to reader is perhaps nowhere more evident for the modernist tradition than in the work of Ezra Pound. As proponent of Imagism and also as producer of the most ambitious modern epic poem, Pound attempts to meld the two aesthetic modes we are dealing with; and the vehement didacticism of his literary production provides clear evidence as to the pretensions to authority (over both language and reader) inherent to both aesthetics.

The early part of Pound's career, with Imagism, was concerned with what amounts to a return to the supposed unity of sign and meaning that was crucial to romanticism; Imagism would privilege the poet's mastery over a language regarded as capable of full and unambiguous contact with the truth of perception. It is a poetics that is antagonized by the mediatory and secondary function of language—a function it wishes to suppress in order to present the object of its discourse purged of all encumbrance. Here, quite clearly, we recognize an extreme dissatisfaction with language. The poet wishes to say that "the natural object is always the adequate symbol"⁵: the absurd goal of such an aesthetic as that statement summarizes is nothing less than the elision of language itself from the act of perception. Thus, as one critic has

pointed out, Imagism "stands in an authoritarian relationship to its readers"⁶ because it demands that the reader concur with the truth of the natural that is assumed to reside beyond or outside of language's interference.

This symbolic aspect of Pound's work is later mixed into the techniques of one of allegory's most privileged vehicles, the epic poem, to form the *Cantos*.⁷ The teleological urge of the *Cantos* is toward the revelation of Pound's special truth, toward the theophany of some neo-Platonic 'forma.' But this obsessive⁸ quest for the truth of the natural world is executed in a discourse that bears all the epiphenomenal marks of allegory. First of all, the *Cantos* emerge like all allegory from an ambience of polemic—from the context of Pound's vehemently restorative politics in the war and inter-war years. The work also shares the allegorical tendency to the melancholic in its embracing of "dead objects...in order to redeem them": it builds on the foundation of "highly significant fragments" (*Origin*, p. 178) and is informed by a deep nostalgia for a lost past. The disjunctive and incremental organization of the work, and its paratactic techniques, veer often toward the bombastic and pompous rhetoric that Benjamin sees in allegorical discourse, and which he further identifies with a preference for "intoxicating spoken language" over the written word (*Origin*, p. 201). Of all the poets in our tradition perhaps none has been so embarrassed by the written word as Pound, for whom writing always stands as an obstacle between the plenary 'I' of the author and the vast natural thesaurus of truth and wisdom. Pound's championing of what he obviously saw as the curiological capacity of the Chinese ideogram emblemizes his sense that alphabetical writing (only ever a twice removed representation of the signified) is inherently incapable of the direct and efficacious communication he desires.⁹ For him, the spoken word is always more capable; it is this conviction that leads to his obnoxious speeches for Radio Rome in World War II, and marks these as the extreme limit in his drive toward instant and insistent illumination or delivery of the truth. For Pound, of course, "certain truths exist," and "Truth is not untrue'd by reason of our failing to *fix it on paper*."¹⁰ He sees the spoken word as a somewhat more suitable vehicle for truth's conveyance.

Within the trappings of the allegorical mode, then, Pound inscribes a politically and morally guided truth, to be revealed through a language which can restore a sacred plenitude through a special moment of revelation. Such truth is always a metaphoric imposition across the metonymic axis of language; or, in other words, since the truth is *paradigmatic*, it lends its power to the allegorical desire for a certain static monumentality. This it does by halting the *syntagmatic* flow of

language.¹¹ Far from cutting across all categories and styles of discourse by blurring this metaphoric/metonymic structure (as has been suggested¹²), allegory shares with the romantic symbol a tendency to *impose* the paradigmatic pole onto the syntagmatic—precisely in order to function as a discourse of truth and mastery. However delayed this metaphoric “timing the thunder”¹³ might be, the functioning of allegory ultimately depends upon the encratic nature of metaphor to take hold. This is related to what Spivak calls allegory’s inclination toward “iconic stasis,”¹⁴ in which we perceive its simplistic preference for imposing monumentality, or for a fixed representation of the special *occasio* in the flow of time. Here, no less than a symbolist aesthetic, allegory functions as the purveyor of certain ideas that are proposed as somehow true because derivative of the author’s controlling presence.

As with other allegorical discourse, there always exists within the apparently metonymic and incremental body of Pound’s work some sort of typology ready and available for inscription: the paternalistic and paradigmatic truth can be uttered to halt the flow of writing itself. Thus, on a very simple level, Pound authorizes himself to halt the run of his poem with bland statements of truth:¹⁵

And I have told you of how things were under Duke Leopold in Siena
And of the true basis of credit, that is the abundance of nature with the
whole folk behind it.

Furthermore, he can even congratulate himself on being able to rescue and communicate this knowledge from the abyssmal structures of human history:

To have gathered from the air a live tradition or from a fine old eye
the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.

What we see in Pound is precisely the mixing of the metaphoric impulse with all the characteristic traits of the allegorical aesthetic, and such a procedure results in the fundamentally vatic and veridical tactics of an authoritarian discourse. Such writing continually desires (and pretends) to tighten the systems of symbolic exchange under which we currently live: it relies upon the transmission of a purely personal typology, the guarantees of which are the historical matter of the *Cantos*. And, like any other allegorist, Pound attempts to manipulate what is seen as a failed language into a discourse which will promote revelation and vindicate a dogma.

In the test case of the *Cantos* it is easy to recognize how extremely heightened the authoritarian impulse of the allegorist can become.

And a methodical mixture of the two dialectically opposed aesthetics in Pound's work suggests their mutual reliance in any actual practice—a reliance which is in both cases predicated upon a fundamental matrix of *veracity as reference*. The identity that I am proposing here, however delicate it may be in any given discourse, is perceptible through the recognition that both sides of this dialectic comport some common moral decisions, including the assumption of negative attitudes toward language (whether an eternal and implicit complaint about its insufficiency, or a sleight-of-hand strategy which will abuse language by refusing to acknowledge its material role between subject and signified—or both). The two modes are epistemologically related by their exploitation of conventional authorial dictatorship.

Given, then, that the notion of discourse as a transmission of knowledge and truth informs both allegorical and symbolist practices, we might expect regularly to discover traits of both, even in work which is usually designated as either one or the other: the dialectical balance can be disturbed. This is the lesson to be learned from much of Gayatri Spivak's work on such modernist texts as *The Rainbow* or Simon's *Le Corps Conducteur*; or, inversely, from Michael Murrin's book, *The Veil of Allegory*, which suggests that it was actually the Romantics who revived allegory for English poetry after the classicist intervention of Johnson and Sidney. And a hint for Murrin's notions might have come from so eminent a source as Huizinga, who complains of the incipient romanticism of some late mediaeval allegories.¹⁶

So in the era of postmodernism we can expect—and find—the same confusion. When Craig Owens, in "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," attempts to canonize the sculptor Robert Smithson as a seminally important allegorist in contemporary art practice, the claims he makes can only ignore the romanticist strain of Smithson's work reflected by the following passage; Smithson, describing the reconnaissance of his most important sculpture, *The Spiral Jetty*, imposed upon the Great Salt Lake in 1970, says:

Chemically speaking, our blood is analogous in composition to the primordial seas. Following the spiral steps we return to our origins, back to some pulpy protoplasm, a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean. On the slopes of Rozel Point I closed my eyes, and the sun burned crimson through the lids. I opened them and the Great Salt Lake was bleeding scarlet streaks. My sight was saturated by the color or red algae circulating in the heart of the lake, pumping into ruby currents, no they were veins and arteries sucking up the obscure sediments. My eyes became combustion chambers churning orbs of blood blazing by the light of the sun. All was enveloped in a flaming chromosphere.... Perception was heaving, the stomach turning, I was on a geological fault that groaned within me. Between heat lightning and heat exhaustion the spiral curled into vaporization. I had the red heavens while the

sun vomited its corpuscular radiations. Rays of glare hit my eyes with the frequency of a Geiger counter. Surely, the storm clouds massing would turn into a rain of blood.¹⁷

Owens' article accurately describes those aspects of Smithson's work which can be called allegorical; yet if the above sentiments (on Smithson's actual sculptures) are to be accommodated within the model descriptions of allegory that Owens and I have been using, it can only be at the expense of the much-vaunted dialectic between allegory and the symbol. In an almost overdetermined nostalgia for the primordial, for what might lie beyond language and culture and prior to both, Smithson walks the common ground of the two aesthetics. He is suggesting in this passage that the primary processes of the earth, of the *matrical* body, can be rejoined (or even identified with) through the movement of perception. In Freudian terms, this is a longing for the safe state of indifferentiation between the subject and the maternal body which is familiar to us as the core of romantic thought. Such a longing is underscored in Smithson's actual productions by an obsessive concern for burnished, curvilinear surfaces, as well as for lustrous stones and shiny reflective surfaces such as crystal and glass. In other words, the materials of his work are all metonymic displacements of the mother's body; these are then allegorically and metaphorically subsumed under the monumental character of the sculptures themselves. It is not surprising, then, to read of Smithson's fascination with the Natural History Museum (itself a huge metaphor for the mother's body):¹⁸ Smithson intends not only the romantic pursuit of the matrical, unary sensation that is imagined to exist as a beginning apart from the realms of language and culture, but also the conversion of that sensation to a sort of typological security and reference, a teleological authority for artistic practice. His work demonstrates that an urge for symbolic certainty accompanies the allegorical response to the natural; the allegorical and the symbolist thus become confused in Smithson, and I take this to be because of the basic epistemological propinquity of the two modes.¹⁹

As much as any romantic, Smithson formalizes a dissatisfaction, a complaint against the processes of irreversible decay in the subject and in the natural world. His earliest pieces are intended as monuments against entropy—the first fruits of an *obsession* with this modern conception of natural deliquescence.²⁰ Like the mediaeval allegorist, Smithson stands before the abyss of subjectivity and thence proposes the effacement of any fleeting symbolic moment in favor of a monumental extension of abstract human meaning across time. He celebrates a sort of eternal transience, and will allow his monuments to be altered or even destroyed by the action of nature. Indeed, their tran-

science can be established only within that destructive context, and their eternity thus becomes a matter of language and culture. It is there, in the historical world, that a record of those monuments and their transience can be housed. Smithson's writings, photographs, films and blueprints take their place in the world of men as records of an heroic struggle against transience, and as traces of the allegorical will.

Here we can recognize an important aspect of the allegorical impulse. It is only by imposing upon nature, and at the same time submitting to what Smithson sees as its dialectic, that the allegorist can recognize the possibility of his own remanence within culture, or can attempt to inscribe a fixed position for himself within history. The paradox of this stance is easily explained: on the one hand it proposes the effacement of any meaning that is external to the subject, and on the other hand it continues to promote *some* meaning—but meaning which can remain, and remain *his*. What is being carried out is precisely the allegorist's will, and this is something which Benjamin recognizes too. He notes that allegory arises from a melancholic state of mind exerting the power of its intelligence and will upon objects in order to appropriate them and so stave off the threat of the subjective abyss (*Origin*, p. 157). Allegory thence becomes the gesture of an obsessive player who knows that the game is already lost, but who continues to play. Thus, Smithson's impositions upon the matrical body are consumed by its ineluctable force, yet they continually strive to retain a vindicated importance within human culture: they are, quite simply, recorded as efforts of will. The old melancholic motifs of allegory, *homo bulla...quis evadet?*, are thereby implicitly ironized. A simple insistence on the human capacity to make a mark emerges; after all, allegory "wants only to endure, and clings with all its senses to eternity" (*Origin*, p. 181).

By aligning ourselves with this latter perception of Benjamin's, we can explicitly link the allegorist with a sort of will to power. In his suspicion of the fleeting, temporal nature of the symbolic and in his disdain for any kind of transcendence, the allegorist attempts to project his own set of durable values onto discourse. In place of the old *memento mori* he installs a *memento vivere*, illustrating Nietzsche's notion of an imposing "forgetting" of the past. The allegorist's historical consciousness is of the type that tries to take command of the past: the past "is critically examined, the knife put to its roots," in order that the allegorist free himself from the constraints of temporal transience. In this sense the allegorist is akin to Nietzsche's "Critical" historian, bringing "the past to the bar of judgment" where he can "interrogate it remorselessly and finally condemn it."²¹ This "Critical" spirit works in

the allegorist through an excessive forgetting of the past and a powerful will to survive in the future. Nietzsche predicted the result of such excess and such powerful will when he suggested that the critical "process is always dangerous" and can result in the overvaluation of the inanities of the present, "a deification of the present triviality by default, by having shown that *nothing* in the past is noble."²²

We will return to this historical procedure in allegory; for the moment, it is important to see that the postmodernist's exhibition of such a will to power resides in his attempt to control both his objects and his readers. Even while he admits (like Smithson) his own submission to nature, he proposes his superiority in the realm of culture by flaunting the ability to deprive the natural of signifying freedom. Of course, 'the natural' is, in any case, only ever a representation, but post-modern allegory's tactic is to kill off, or forget that representation in order to replace it with another—and one over which proprietorial rights can be confidently asserted. As Benjamin has said,

if the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of the melancholic, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but *eternally secure*, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is *unconditionally in his power*. That is to say, it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own...(*Origin*, p. 183/4—my emphases).

The implications of this movement of the allegorical mode seem to me quite disturbing and they are not part of any recent discussion of allegory. Craig Owens, for example, does no more than partially grasp the significance. Owens wishes to differentiate between allegory and hermeneutics, on the grounds that postmodernist allegory does not wish to "restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured." Although this seems correct enough, Owens then goes on to claim that such allegory manipulates its objects in order "to empty them of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning,"²³ and he refuses to recognize that it thereby imposes its own rival significance in a most peremptory fashion. Even if allegory claims to intend simply the erasure of an origin, it cannot ever escape its own willful gesture which is rooted in a wistful sort of dissatisfaction. In the postmodern art that Owens talks about there is always an attempted emulation of the father—of his "authoritative claim to meaning"—executed through this desire to eradicate meaning and thus to return to the kind of primordial attachment to the mother that we saw in Smithson's work. As with any such family romance, the son ends up following the father's footsteps in the symbolic world and making his own tracks there in the intention of making his own indelible.

So allegory can counter, by appropriation, the previous content of the symbolic structures in which it belongs; it thereby marks its own desire for authority, offering itself as always 'more true' than that which it replaces. However, as I noted above, postmodern allegory cannot enjoin a detailed typology that is universally shared in our day. What happens instead is that the allegorist arrogates to himself a power that immediately exposes neither its own tenets, nor the actual 'truth' of its bans. The allegorist's work is placed, then, in order to interpellate the reader, who knows that some power is at work but with a veil before it, and that the discovery of its tenets demands his compliance. This onerous role given to the reader in postmodernism is crucial because it is necessary to the allegorist's power that it be furnished with an audience willing to realize the devastation of the old regime—without necessarily understanding the nature of the new replacement. Thus, truth and the exercise of power retain their mystique in contemporary allegory, and the traditional author/reader hierarchy undergoes a peculiarly new reinforcement.

Authorial power here almost cynically taunts the reader, who does not always know what it is he must understand but nevertheless feels obliged to place a political/allegorical reading upon the author's supposed sweeping away of previous meanings. But it would be a very naive reader who did not realize that the allegorist's effacing gesture is not only repressive but vainly illusory: not only does it propose itself as a performative utterance (in the sense that it can be understood only in the context of pre-given codes) but it also fails to recognize that the allegorical text always and necessarily comports a memory, or in other words that it must always suggest the presence (if not the content) of the work it pretends to devastate. Thus when the photographer Sherry Levine re-presents a photograph by Weston, the latter's name and presence are inescapable, even if the authoritative meaning of his work is subjected to an imposition. Thus, in Nietzsche's terms, "as we are merely the resultant of previous generations, we are also the resultant of their errors, passions and crimes; it is impossible to shake off this chain."²⁴

The methodology of postmodern allegory thus consists ultimately in a purblind and vain gesture of will, inscribing itself in a dialectic with previous modes but still operating on the same level of ideological control. It lives on an epistemology of inflated²⁵ truth which is to be communicated in a sense of its own (wistful and hallucinated) power. If the mechanics of this are easily discernible in recent art and its criticism, that might be precisely because allegorical discourse in the literary tradition has for long been made to feel more self-conscious about its productions because of a denigratory critical atmosphere. It

remains feasible, however, to consider much postmodernist fiction, from Beckett and Borges through Barthelme and Barth, as similarly allegorical. These writers can be said to return to the principles of allegory that I am describing here.

The range of allegorical texts in postmodern fiction is wide, though some are more nearly 'traditional' allegories than might be expected. Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme, for example, often come close to producing what might be called 'allegories of content,' or texts in which there is a strong *substantive* urge toward allegory. I'm thinking of, for example, stories like Barthelme's "On Angels" in which we are told that "The death of God left the angels in a strange position" and that "It is a curiosity of writing about angels that, very often, one turns out to be writing about men."²⁶ But in Barthelme's work we usually find the substantive drive converted to a more *procedural* sense of allegory. Like Coover's re-appropriations of old folk stories, Barthelme's allegories consist in the superimposition of Barthelme's own voice over a variety of previous discourses, causing the older forms to lose their significance. An example of this emptying of previous registers is the story "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel." There, couched ironically in the discourse of analyst and analysand, the project of claiming power over the past in order to solidify the worth of the present is made quite explicit:²⁷

A:We have to do here with my own irony. Because of course Kierkegaard was 'fair' to Schlegel. In making a statement to the contrary I am attempting to...I might have several purposes—simply being provocative, for example. But mostly I am trying to annihilate Kierkegaard in order to deal with his disapproval.

Q: Of Schlegel?

A: Of me.

Barthelme's desire to annihilate the past, his "Critical" consciousness, finds its agents in the melancholic artists who gather in "City Life." The postmodern allegorist is figured in the painter who "gets up, brushes his teeth, and stands before the empty canvas," reads the newspaper and makes a mark on the canvas, coming back later in the day to eradicate his first mark. Even the painter's own 'history' is subject to erasure as he is overcome by "a terrible feeling of being *de trop*."²⁸

The postmodern allegorist's procedures are expanded and exemplified in the work of John Barth—and perhaps nowhere more clearly than in his first novel, *The Floating Opera*, and in his mammoth work, *Letters*. These two books are almost catalogues of the techniques of allegory that Benjamin noted. The brooding and bored melancholia of Todd Andrews attaches itself to the particulars of contemporary exist-

ence and "causes life to flow out of" them. Andrews' "Tragic View of History" in the first book is evidently a version of Nietzsche's "critical view" in that it has the propensity to devalue everything; in *Letters*, that process of devaluation becomes a dogma when Andrews alters his proposition that "nothing has intrinsic value" to "Nothing *has* intrinsic value."²⁹

All of Barth's books are built in the incremental fashion of the allegorist, drawing on "highly significant fragments" and being filled with disjunctures and digressions. *Letters*—fittingly enough, the culmination of Barth's allegorical mode³⁰—is huge and bombastic: indeed, one of the epistlers writes to The Author that "you yourself are not, of contemporary authors, the most sparing."³¹ The rambling, almost amorphous nature of *Letters* reflects also the allegorist's preference for the spoken word: a letter is a sort of half-way point between the written and the spoken word. All these allegorical traits do not reach substantively toward an allegorical solution, but the work is allegorical in its procedures.

This is most apparent in Barth's attitude toward history. The discourse of history is specifically re-written in *Letters*. The actual history of the United States in particular is subjected to Barth's impositions. His characters insert themselves and their own histories into actual historical situations and suggest hitherto unsuspected complications and complexities in the run of history: A. B. Cook, for example, documents the role of his protean ancestors in the North American colonial wars of the nineteenth century.

While such characters are Barth's agents in the reclamation of history, The Author himself rewrites the historical events of the time of writing (not to mention the time of his typing-up his writing, and the time of the reader's reading). The Author in this work is a character like any other and so his history, including the story of his previous publications, is also interrogated and condemned. What finally emerges from this Barthian re-appropriation of history is the author's own inflated truth. It is the author who remains at the end of the book, like Todd Andrews in *The Floating Opera*, the sole possessor of the 'truth' of his allegory. Both books close with the author in the act of writing, making his "gesture of eternity"³² and guaranteeing his survival in letters, despite the ignoble and absurd natural world that surrounds him.

Letters itself is the supreme allegorical gesture behind which The Author stands unimpeachable. The sheer size of this volume (whose only story is the story of its own production) acts as a guarantee of The Author's existence and of his remanence in culture. In other words, the Barthiad remains, an embodiment of the author's will to survive (and

The Floating Opera, of course, is all about Todd Andrews' actually forming a will to survive). *Letters*, then, stands as a monument to the whole negative fantasy of what we call postmodernism. Its reader is subjected to the author's power which, the author stresses, is essential to the proper functioning of his work: the author breaches the gap between representation and idea, flaunting his author-ity.

The submissive compliance of the reader in this schema is obviously crucial. The reader of *The Floating Opera* is warned that this text is a "floating opera . . . fraught with curiosities, melodrama, spectacle, instruction and entertainment, but it floats willy-nilly on the tide of my vagrant prose," and will "require the best efforts of your attention and imagination."³³ Similarly, the envoi from the Author in *Letters* warns:³⁴

Mind your step: floors just waxed. Do read the guide markers as you go along. Here's one now.

If the term 'postmodern' has any sense, other than as a mere label to mark a certain stage in a genetic model of the history of the arts, it may be as an index to the reconsolidation of the traditional author/audience hierarchy. We would probably have to concede that 'modernism' could never have achieved the goals it always implicitly set itself—Mallarmé's elocutionary disappearance of the author, or Flaubert's perfect work on the subject of nothing at all. Perhaps the era of postmodernism can best be conceived as a simple reaction to those modernist aims. Postmodernism is the era of inflated truth, when The Author *reappears*, speaking allegory about/to himself.

This is something that was always implicit in Benjamin's analysis of allegory and constituted a problem that even his firm desire to champion allegorical discourse could not overcome. Benjamin finally fails to answer the criticisms that I have been making, even though his work intimates and provokes them. Perhaps the political and aesthetic consequences of what I have been proposing so far can be summarised in reference to two particularly significant passages in Benjamin's work. Talking of mediaeval allegorical engravings, and praising another writer's comparison of such emblems with coinage, Benjamin proposes that in allegory where "nature bears the imprint of history," it exhibits what he calls a "numismatic quality" (*Origin*, p. 173). Thus, numismatically, nature becomes a symbol, but monumentalized within a fixed and legally valorized system of exchange. It takes the authority for its symbolic role from the power (*numen*) that it names (*nomen*) on its face. So we can say that in allegory a power is being

Allegory, then, resembles romanticism in that it attempts to counter and cover over the realization and effects of an historical fall from an original plenitude. It is here that the import for all allegorists of the melancholic state of mind has its root; thus, too, their peculiar brand of desperate historical floundering which is formalized in obsessive or vengeful acts of mastery.³⁶ Through the recognition of this recurring mark of the subject's moral division, the allegorist is led to the construction of what is only ever an *intermediary moral body* as a sort of bridge between subject and signified. This body is the locus of the exercise of power, and it consists in arbitrary truths and illusionistic certainties: it is, in short, the abstract subject construed by all ideology.

The recent rise of the term allegory in criticism has not taken into account this reactionary ideological maneuver—and this, too, for ideological purposes. Such criticism has deployed the dialectization of symbol and allegory to promote a merely modal attention to allegory and to divert any epistemological attention. In its desire to deconstruct the power of the symbolist aesthetic at all costs, this work encounters and feeds from the same moral fount as feeds allegory itself. It should, consequently, not be forgotten that “allegory seems regularly to surface in critical or polemical atmospheres”³⁷: what has come to be known in our time as ‘late capitalism’ certainly provides such an atmosphere, and one where political reaction can often go by the name of dialectics. But this is an atmosphere which is critical too, in the sense of crucial, and is not one where the simple gainsaying of dominant ideologies will be of use. Indeed, as Barthes has pointed out, the phrase ‘dominant ideologies’ is something of a tautology since ideology is all of a body: all ideology is by definition imposing and dominant—there are no dominated ideologies. It is time, then, that we heard the devil's laugh, telling us that political and/or aesthetic struggle within the dialectics of a given system “cannot be reduced to the struggle between two rival ideologies: what's in question is the subversion of all ideologies.”³⁸

NOTES

1. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, (London, 1977). This book will be referred to in the text as *Origin* followed by page references; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J., 1957); Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, 1979), and “Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. C. S. Singleton (Baltimore, 1969); Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1964); Gayatri Spivak, “Allégorie et histoire de la poésie,” *Poétique* no. 8, 1971, and “Thoughts on the Principle of Allegory,” *Genre* no. 4, Oct. 1972.
2. J. L. Borges, *Other Inquisitions*, (N.Y., 1964), p. 155.

3. Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," *October*, no. 12; Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," Part I, *October*, no. 12, and Part II, *October*, no. 13. Hal Foster has written a particularly interesting commentary on the postmodernist theory of the *October* group in "Re: Post," *Parachute*, no. 26, p. 11-15.
4. So when Owens, for example, in Part II of his "The Allegorical Impulse" (p. 79), talks of Manet's transposing "the firing squads from the *Execution of Maximilian* to the Paris barricades" (in his 1871 *Civil War* drawing) as a "supremely allegorical gesture," we might more readily describe this as merely an intertextual manipulation of an allusive kind.
5. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London, 1964), p. 5.
6. Robert Simpson, "Pound's Wordsworth," *ELH*, vol. 45, 4:662.
7. This view of the epic is implicit to Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, and is prefigured in *Origin*, p. 165.
8. I use this word to align myself with Angus Fletcher's thesis that the allegorical impulse has psychoanalytic analogues in the Freudian theory of obsession and compulsion: *Allegory*, p. 279-303. Fletcher's use of these "analogues" is fairly crude and one awaits a more thorough psychoanalytical investigation of allegory; the present paper is not it, though it does attempt to suggest a few possible starting points.
9. To say that alphabetical writing can represent its signified only at two removes is clearly the lesson implicit in Saussurean linguistics: the letter is a representation of an acoustic image which itself refers only to a mental image, not to any realizable referent.
10. Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York, n.d.), p. 295. My emphasis.
11. Jakobson sees language as consisting in two major axes, the paradigmatic (axis of selection) and syntagmatic (axis of combination). The former is identified with metaphor, and the latter with metonymy.
12. See Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," p. 59. Compare Benjamin's notion that "the synthesis of all the arts" is what allegory requires (*Origin*, p. 181.).
13. Ezra Pound, *Cantos* (N.Y. 1970), p. 613.
14. Gayatri Spivak, "Thoughts on the Principle of Allegory," p. 330/1.
15. Pound, *Cantos*, p. 257, and p. 522.
16. See the two articles, already cited, by Spivak; M. Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago, 1969); and chapters 22 and 23 of Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London, 1924).
17. *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (N.Y., 1979), p. 13.
18. Smithson, *Writings*, p. 143. This fascination of Smithson's is implicitly inscribed against his father: "I think he took me to the Metropolitan thinking that that was the Museum of Natural History—I could be wrong but I think I remember his saying: oh, well, we can go to an interesting museum now. For me it was much more interesting. Then from that point on I just got more and more interested in natural history."
19. This propinquity is (ironically, and allegorically) emblemized in Smithson's tragic death, which occurred as he reconnoitred the site of his final sculpture, the *Amarillo Ramp*; his aeroplane crashed, killing him, the pilot and a photographer. It is obviously tempting to put together the canonization of Smithson as exemplary allegorist and his death in a fall from Icarean, Romantic heights, to form a parable of allegory's relation to Romanticism.
20. See his article "Entropy and the New Monuments," *Writings*, p. 9-20. See, too, note 9 above.
21. Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, (Indianapolis, 1979), p. 21.
22. Hayden White, *Metahistory*, (Baltimore, 1973), p. 350.
23. Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," Part I, p. 69.
24. Nietzsche, *Use and Abuse*, p. 21.
25. Here I am alluding to Hans Kellner, "The Inflatable Trope as Narrative Theory: Structure or Allegory?" *Diacritics*, vol. 11, p. 14-28. This remarkable article underlines (quite incidentally to its own aims) my relating of symbol and allegory as part of a certain epistemological schema.
26. Donald Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* (New York, 1981), p. 135-7.
27. *Sixty Stories*, p. 166.
28. *Sixty Stories*, p. 157. This story includes a reference to Goethe's notion that theory is grey and life is green. The same passage from Goethe is alluded to in Nietzsche's *Use and Abuse*. I suspect that this is hardly accidental.
29. John Barth, *Letters*, (New York, 1979), p. 96.
30. *Letters* marks the end of a stage in Barth's work in that all the characters from previous books are gathered here and Todd Andrews meets his maker (?). Barth's latest novel, *Sabbatical*, seems to operate on similar allegorical principles however.
31. *Letters*, p. 4.

32. John Barth, *The Floating Opera*, (New York, 1967), p. 51.
33. *Floating Opera*, p. 6/7.
34. *Letters*, p. 772.
35. Compare Jean Louis Schefer's essay, "Mélancolie," *Espèce de chose mélancolie* (Paris, 1979), pp. 9-15, which cites this same passage from Benjamin as part of Schefer's continued exploration of "une figure dévouée à sa repartition morale" in western culture.
36. With regard to the allegorical urge for mastery, Benjamin has supplied us with the basic material for a figural justification: he traces the melancholic roots of baroque allegory through the figure of the sovereign, the melancholy ruler—"the prince is the paradigm of the melancholy man" (*Origin*, p. 142). In composing this essay I have quite undeliberately come across several subversions of this figure, that is to say, several anti-allegorical allegories. My favorites have been Matisse's *La Tristesse du Roi*, Oscar Wilde's little story, "The Happy Prince," and Lord Rochester's "Ode to Nothing."
37. Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," p. 48.
38. Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte* (Paris, 1973), p. 54. My own translation. My implicitly satanic designation of Barthes is intended as an ironic comment on Michael Grant's article about Barthes, "The Mystique of Hell," *PN Review* 17:31-33, which argues that "Barthes has submitted his thought to a Satanic eschatology of man's destruction" and that "what for the Christian is hell, for Barthes is Utopia."