

From Allegories to Novels

For all of us, allegory is an aesthetic mistake. (I first wrote, "is nothing but an error of aesthetics," but then I noticed that my sentence involved an allegory.) As far as I know, the genre of allegory has been analyzed by Schopenhauer (*Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* I, 50), De Quincey (*Writings* XI, 198), Francisco de Sanctis (*Storia della letteratura italiana* VII), Croce (*Estetica*, 39), and Chesterton (*G. F. Watts*, 83); in this essay I will limit myself to the last two. Croce rejects allegorical art, Chesterton defends it; to my mind, right is on Croce's side, but I would like to know how a form that seems unjustifiable to us now can once have enjoyed such favor.

Croce's words are crystalline; I need only repeat them:

If the symbol is conceived of as inseparable from artistic intuition, then it is synonymous with that intuition itself, which is always of an ideal nature. If the symbol is conceived as separable, if the symbol can be expressed on the one hand, and the thing symbolized can be expressed on the other, we fall back into the intellectualist error; the supposed symbol is the exposition of an abstract concept; it is an allegory; it is science, or an art that apes science. But we must also be fair to allegory and caution that in some cases it is innocuous. Any ethics whatsoever can be extracted from the *Gerusalemme liberata*; and from the *Adone*, by Marino, poet of all that is lascivious, the reflection that disproportionate pleasure ends in pain may be educed. Next to a statue, the sculptor may place a sign saying that the statue is Mercy or Goodness. Such allegories added to a finished work do it no harm. They are expressions extrinsic to other expressions. To the *Gerusalemme* is added a page in prose that expresses another thought by the poet; to the *Adone*, a line or stanza that expresses what the poet wished to be understood; to the statue, the word *mercy* or *goodness*.

On page 222 of *La poesía* (Bari, 1946), the tone is more hostile: "Allegory is not a direct mode of spiritual manifestation, but a kind of writing or cryptography."

Croce admits of no difference between content and form. Content is form and form is content. Allegory strikes him as monstrous because it seeks to encode two contents—the immediate or literal (Dante, guided by Virgil, reaches Beatrice), and the figurative (man finally attains faith, guided by reason)—into a single form. In his view, this way of writing entails laborious enigmas.

Chesterton, in defense of allegory, begins by denying that language fully expresses all reality.

Man knows that there are in the soul tints more bewildering, more numberless and more nameless than the colors of an autumn forest. . . . Yet he seriously believes that these things can every one of them, in all their tones and semitones, in all their blends and unions, be accurately represented by an arbitrary system of grunts and squeals. He believes that an ordinary civilized stockbroker can really produce out of his own inside noises which denote all the mysteries of memory and all the agonies of desire.

Once our language has been declared insufficient, room is left for others; allegory can be one of them, like architecture or music. Allegory is made up of words, but it is not a language of language, a sign of other signs. For example, Beatrice is not a sign of the word *faith*; she is a sign of the valiant virtue and secret illuminations indicated by that word. A sign more precise, richer, and more felicitous, than the monosyllable *faith*.

I do not know with any certainty which of the two eminent parties to this dispute is right; I know that allegorical art seemed enchanting at one time (the labyrinthine *Roman de la Rose*, which lives on in two hundred manuscripts, consists of twenty-four thousand lines) and is now intolerable. And not only intolerable; we also feel it to be stupid and frivolous. Neither Dante, who represented the history of his passion in the *Vita nuova*, nor Boethius, the Roman, writing his *De consolatione* in the tower of Pavia under the shadow of an executioner's sword, would have understood this feeling. How can this discord be explained without recourse to the *petitio principii* that tastes change?

Coleridge observes that all men are born Aristotelians or Platonists.

The Platonists sense intuitively that ideas are realities; the Aristotelians, that they are generalizations; for the former, language is nothing but a system of arbitrary symbols; for the latter, it is the map of the universe. The Platonist knows that the universe is in some way a cosmos, an order; this order, for the Aristotelian, may be an error or fiction resulting from our partial understanding. Across latitudes and epochs, the two immortal antagonists change languages and names: one is Parmenides, Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Francis Bradley; the other, Heraclitus, Aristotle, Locke, Hume, William James. In the arduous schools of the Middle Ages, everyone invokes Aristotle, master of human reason (*Convivio* IV, 2), but the nominalists are Aristotle; the realists, Plato. George Henry Lewes has opined that the only medieval debate of some philosophical value is between nominalism and realism; the opinion is somewhat rash, but it underscores the importance of this tenacious controversy, provoked, at the beginning of the ninth century, by a sentence from Porphyry, translated and commented upon by Boethius; sustained, toward the end of the eleventh, by Anselm and Roscelin; and revived by William of Occam in the fourteenth.

As one would suppose, the intermediate positions and nuances multiplied *ad infinitum* over those many years; yet it can be stated that, for realism, universals (Plato would call them ideas, forms; we would call them abstract concepts) were the essential; for nominalism, individuals. The history of philosophy is not a useless museum of distractions and wordplay; the two hypotheses correspond, in all likelihood, to two ways of intuiting reality. Maurice de Wulf writes: "Ultra-realism garnered the first adherents. The chronicler Heriman (eleventh century) gives the name '*antiqui doctores*' to those who teach dialectics *in re*; Abelard speaks of it as an 'antique doctrine,' and until the end of the twelfth century, the name *moderni* is applied to its adversaries." A hypothesis that is now inconceivable seemed obvious in the ninth century, and lasted in some form into the fourteenth. Nominalism, once the novelty of a few, today encompasses everyone; its victory is so vast and fundamental that its name is useless. No one declares himself a nominalist because no one is anything else. Let us try to understand, nevertheless, that for the men of the Middle Ages the fundamental thing was not men but humanity, not individuals but the species, not the species but the genus, not the genera but God. From such concepts (whose clearest manifestation is perhaps the quadruple system of Erigena) allegorical literature, as I understand it, derived. Allegory is a fable of abstractions, as the novel is a fable of individuals. The abstractions are personified; there

is something of the novel in every allegory. The individuals that novelists present aspire to be generic (Dupin is Reason, Don Segundo Sombra is the Gaucho); there is an element of allegory in novels.

The passage from allegory to novel, from species to individual, from realism to nominalism, required several centuries, but I shall have the temerity to suggest an ideal date: the day in 1382 when Geoffrey Chaucer, who may not have believed himself to be a nominalist, set out to translate into English a line by Boccaccio—“*E con gli occulti ferri i Tradimenti*” (And Betrayal with hidden weapons)—and repeated it as “The smyler with the knyf under the cloke.” The original is in the seventh book of the *Teseide*; the English version, in “The Knightes Tale.”

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