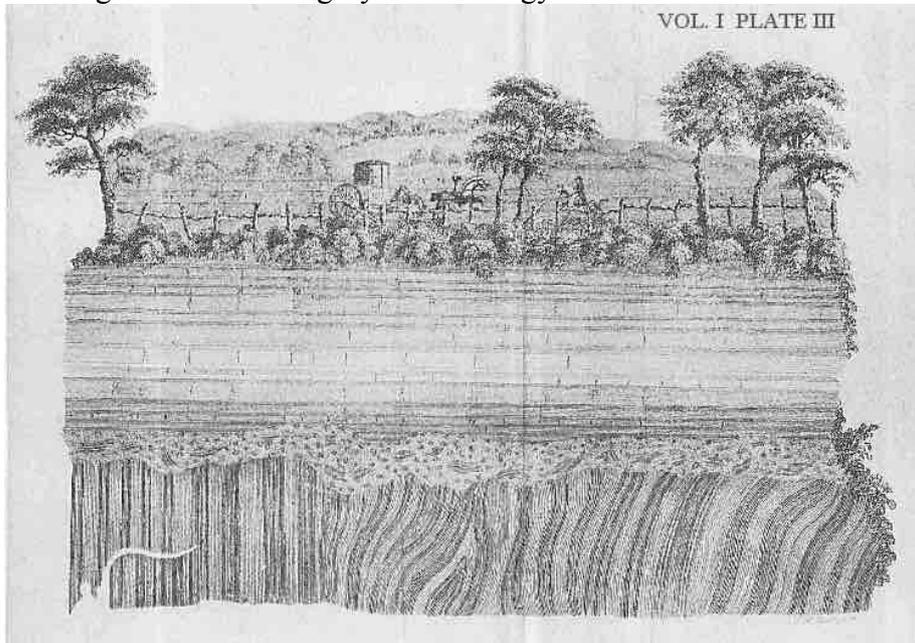


Reading Jameson's *Allegory and Ideology*



As a result, Jameson's insistence that ideology "subsumes everything else in culture and the superstructures, assuming the position religion once held for the first historians and cultural theoreticians of the West" becomes clearer every day.

The revolutionary implications of this notion have been remarked on by many. For the historian Perry Anderson, Jameson's work marks the "complete consummation" of the Western Marxist tradition. Likewise, for literary scholar Terry Eagleton, reading Jameson is more than simply thought provoking: it is an aesthetic pleasure in itself ("I take a book of his from the shelf as often in place of poetry or fiction as of literary theory").

In the book, Jameson proposes a contemporary return to something like the allegorical reading practice of the Middle Ages (well-summarized in Henri de Lubac's still relevant books on the subject, collectively titled *Medieval Exegesis*). The diverse readings collected in the work—chiefly of canonical texts such as *Hamlet*, *The Faerie Queene*, the *Divine Comedy*, and *Faust*—open up and explore multiple sites of meaning through engaging the four traditional levels of allegory: the Anagogical, the Moral, the Allegorical (or Mystical, or Typological), and the Literal.

The fourfold scheme that Jameson prefers, itself traceable as far back as the third-century Christian theologian Origen, proposes successive layers of meaning that open out to progressively larger and wider fields of reference. In the theological example Jameson offers, a literal narrative event such as the Hebrew exodus from Egypt corresponds in Christological allegorical understanding to the resurrection of Jesus. Above that, at a moral level, the suffering and exile in Egypt and the subsequent escape represent the soul's enmeshment in corporeal sinfulness and its eventual salvation, and then overtopping the whole structure, what Jameson calls the anagogical level references the fate of the whole human race, the wholesale spiritual awakening or confessional revolution that forms the teleology of human history.

Jameson undertakes productive readings of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, the *Divina Commedia* of Dante and the second part of Goethe's *Faust*, as well as juxtaposing the long-established psychological readings of *Hamlet* with its psychoanalytic treatment by Jacques Lacan, and even ventures out on to the thin ice of an allegorical interpretation of a musical work, Mahler's Sixth Symphony. These readings are replete with tentative but strikingly suggestive observations as to how they mean what they (often only apparently) say.

One of the ways in which *Allegory and Ideology* is particularly attentive to the historical movements of the allegorical capacity is precisely in those transitional phases when one form of representation begins to lose its semantic potency under the diluent impact of newer cultural modes. The Romantic moment in the evolution of bourgeois modernity very likely hastened the demise of traditional allegory by overwhelming it with mere symbolism.

There is more to allegory than that, as was incipiently perceived in classic times by Stoic commentators on Homer, who gradually established that beneath the narrative elements of the heroic tales and the particular human qualities they signify, there is a deeper vein of truth, wisdom, universal meaning, that generates the epic work.

If allegory, as Jameson acknowledges, means in different ways to different ages, we have nonetheless learned from materialist aesthetic theory that the past survives in artistic form itself, which, as Adorno put it, represents the sedimentation of what was once explicit content.

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Jameson has long pursued a preference for writing as though he were thinking aloud, carrying the reader through a set of thought processes that might turn out to be conclusive in original, game-changing ways, and yet at the same time manage to avoid recourse to the kind of coy colloquialism in which too much Anglophone speculative theory is couched.

Allegory, Jameson insists very early, is not to be confused with simple metaphor and its techniques of displacement. One of the literary and dramatic strategies that disappears with early modernism is personification, already in crisis as early as Spenser's epic poem, where the discursive techniques are stretched to their uttermost by a social context in which the national collective is being opened up to an emergent, and bracingly belligerent, maritime imperialism.

Notwithstanding these fleeting antagonisms, which are in any case as provocative of insight in their way as the dense theoretical cadenzas, this is another hugely important and interesting work. It is so not least because Fredric Jameson, like the most rewarding theoreticians of the generations since he made his debut, in a world that had barely heard of the structuralism that he has gone on repeatedly to reconfigure, has an instinctual grasp of the limitless fluidity of intellectual development. Something like this, as he has brilliantly shown, is learned from the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*, and his appropriation by Marx, but much of it derives from the obstinate contingency of critical currents, together with their ever-shifting terms of engagement.

Eschewing the arid secularities of philosophy, Walter Benjamin once recommended the alternative of the rich figurality of an older theology; in that spirit we here return to the antiquated Ptolemaic systems of ancient allegory and its multiple levels (a proposal first sketched out in *The Political Unconscious*); it is tested against the epic complexities of the overtly allegorical works of Dante, Spenser and the Goethe of *Faust II*, as well as symphonic form in music, and the structure of the novel, postmodern as well as Third-World: about which a notorious essay on *National Allegory* is here reprinted with a theoretical commentary; and an allegorical history of emotion is meanwhile rehearsed from its contemporary, geopolitical context.

The inevitable and welcome conflict of interpretations - a discursive, ideological struggle - therefore needs to be supplemented by an account of this simultaneous processing of multiple meanings, rather than an abandonment to liberal pluralisms and tolerant (or intolerant) relativisms.

In setting out his theory of allegory Jameson first rejects the two-level simile common in Greek and Roman epic—such as the Homeric deific figures of Δεῖμος (dread) and Φόβος (fear)—in which a comparison is made between heroic action and a secondary process through the function of *amplificatio*. The problem resides in the secondary figure—meant to perform a revelatory function—becoming reversible with the primary figure, resulting in the two-fold system descending into static symbolism (this problem of the symbol is one to which Jameson returns in his examination of Romantic ideology).

Allegorical narratives subject to the operations of the fourfold structure proliferate meaning not only by virtue of multiple interpretations—Dante's division into literal, typological, moral, and anagogical in his letter to Can Grande—but also by the movement between these levels, where residual tension or paradox produces an impetus to a further discovery of meaning. When this process of proliferation becomes unwieldy or exceeds the control of the text, as Jameson argues is the case in postmodern literature, then a process of *allegoresis* prevails.^[3] Allegory is thus discontinuous, and when it succeeds it shows the rift between the psychological and the social (or the unconscious and the political). Movement between these levels performs the crisis of ideological representation—like the movement of tectonic plates to reveal the structure beneath the earth's surface—and which on closer viewing is the crisis of representation itself.

Allegory holds together the individual and the social in a precarious unity, but by revealing the rifts between them it provides the means by which to critique the production and function of ideology.[4] What if we were to turn this mode of analysis to Jameson's own text? Would its rhetoric, intertextuality, historical awareness, and argumentation reveal a process of allegorising, or even allegoresis?

As though to demonstrate the proliferating energy of allegory, Jameson declares two contrary claims: firstly, the "secret that allegory is itself allegorical," that is, that it generates interpretation of narrative and then, inevitably, interpretation of its own mechanisms; and secondly, that it is "a surgical instrument and a diagnostic tool" prompting theologians of all stripes to "read reality itself as an inescapable swarm of allegories with all the exegetical obsession of any garden-variety paranoiac" (1).

Allegory has two sworn enemies: the "unity of living symbol," which nullifies its generative energy, and realism, which grounds itself in the materiality of existence rather than abstractness (2). The deep religious roots of allegory tell one important story, but another is contained in the literary origins of allegorical forms, namely Stoic commentaries on Homer's *Iliad* that proliferated in the Alexandrian era and that established a tripartite allegorical structure.

Jameson claims this form of allegory gave expression to both psychology and physics, but fell short in its omission of the process of representation, the allegorizing energies of allegory, and thus had the effect of forestalling the interpretive essence of allegory itself. Other models, such as the two-level "point-to-point" allegories of Plato (the cave allegory in *Republic* 514a-520a), or Albert Camus's *La Peste* (epidemic as allegory of Nazi occupation), also fail in their foreclosures, prone to flattening into symbolism or static pedagogic tools when read as fables (9-11).

The four levels set out by Dante are: 1. the literal or historical, the matter at hand (e.g., the Israelite flight from Egypt under Moses); 2. the allegorical or mystical, the secret or hidden meaning (e.g., the salvific life of Christ); 3. the moral or subjective (e.g., the salvation of the soul); and 4. the anagogical (e.g., the fate of humanity in the Last Judgment).[7] This example closely follows the logic of typology but retains a capacity for further interpretation, as Jameson notes:

the historical (literal) fact of the descent of the Hebrews into Egypt and their subsequent liberation will stand as a figure for the death and resurrection of Christ, an interpretation that by no means excludes other meanings and other kinds of allegorical interpretations of the same event. (26)

This system proved to be an extremely versatile method by which to codify systems of knowledge in the late antique context. The *Psychomachia* of Prudentius (c.400 CE) consists of a verse narration of the battle between virtues and vices, and the Christian victory over paganism, and is credited with laying the foundations for later medieval allegories such as *Le Romaunt de la rose*, *Everyman*, and *Piers Plowman*. [8] Macrobius's early fifth-century text, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, revisits Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, the surviving part of the sixth book of his *De re publica*: Cicero's text develops the Ptolemaic schema of the nine celestial spheres, from which Macrobius generates a Neoplatonic reading that collates his wide knowledge of classical philosophy.

Jameson evaluates the fourfold allegorical structure as not simply two kinds of dualisms added together, "but rather a distinction between two kinds of negations, each of which generates a different opposition of its own" (44). This fundamental tension in the fourfold structure provides "gaps" between the various levels, the effect of which is not to diminish the allusive power of allegory but to provide a generative source of libidinal investment in those gaps: "genuine allegory does not seek the 'meaning' of a work, but rather functions to reveal its structure of multiple meanings, and thereby to modify the very meaning of the word meaning" (35).

The duality between individual subjectivity and the collective forces of history and economics is where ideology does its work, bringing these dimensions together and staging their controversies. Jameson credits Louis Althusser for "healing the rift" between the explanatory codes of subjectivity and collectivity in his notion of ideology as the mechanism by which individuals position themselves within a collective social structure.

Allegory provides a means by which to investigate history, on one hand, and the processes of representation, on the other. By virtue of this relation it induces the problem of narrative, and of literature more generally, as a discourse in which the relation between the subject and the collective is articulated. Drawing on Althusser's opposition of *doxa* and *episteme*, Jameson sees science writing out or erasing the subject, just as Freud, in "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," sees authorship as wish fulfilment disguised with universalisms like the "human condition" that also write out the subject from discourse.

Allegory delivers its message through the concealment of group identification, which would otherwise alienate those external to that group. Ideology thus replaces religion as the discourse that suffuses everything: "the secret of class or group identification must be concealed [...] it is allegory that often achieves this concealment most effectively, for allegory delivers its message by way of concealing it" (17).

This genealogy develops Jameson's earlier thinking in *The Political Unconscious*, particularly his critique of Northrop Frye's instalment of allegory at the centre of literary studies. Frye adapts the fourfold model of allegory into an anti-interpretive mode of reading in which hermeneutics develops from literary texts rather than being imposed by an external system, and where "[a]ll commentary is allegorical interpretation."

Jameson shows how Frye adapts the fourfold schema as four phases of literary meaning: the literal level has the reader alert to the order of language; the formal level provides a phenomenological awareness of literary content as image (where a narrative might convey a symbolic structure or "world"); the mythical or archetypal level locates the text within larger structures of literature and civilisation; and the anagogical level presents archetypes (cities, gardens, and so on) through which is expressed the symbolic consciousness of the collective. Yet Frye's system differs from the classic fourfold structure in one essential way. Rather than anagogy representing human destiny, as in traditional fourfold models of allegory, Frye takes this a step further by framing the array of archetypes as elements in a human body conceived at a cosmic scale:

Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way. This is not reality, but it is the conceivable or imaginative limit of desire, which is infinite, eternal, and hence apocalyptic. By apocalyptic I mean primarily the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body which, if not human, is closer to being human than to being inanimate.

Jameson's emphasis upon a social hermeneutic in which the anagogical level in the traditional fourfold model is transformed into an expression of collective will or ideology.

Allegory and Ideology builds on this earlier analysis, amplifying a critique of Romanticism and its supersession by national literary pedagogies. Allegory's processes of concealment retain the bonds of material production, where symbolism instead tends to transcendence. The Romantic symbol, for example, overwhelms older allegories at the moment of bourgeois modernity (35), producing a crisis where the multiple publics and languages of Romanticism are replaced with the unity of the public (hegemony) and the constitution of a national literature, installed within the modern university system (51-2). This historical development bears consequences for the production of literature in modernity, where the "fall from truth into allegory is the fate of most attempts, from Romanticism to the high modernist period, to produce a Symbol for a secular and relativistic bourgeois age" (54).

Conversely, Hans-Georg Gadamer traces the relative fortunes of allegory and symbol to the decline in rhetoric in the nineteenth century and the spontaneous creativity of genius, where allegory is framed as mechanical and the symbol is inspired. Symbol brings together "sensible appearance and suprasensible meaning [...] the union of two things that belong to each other." [14] Gadamer sees the genealogy of allegory in the project to unite Christianity with classical culture, forming the basis of the art and literature of modern Europe until the break with such dogmatic bonds gave culture sufficient freedom to determine the suspect nature of allegory as an aesthetic framework.

The eclipse of the fourfold system of allegory with the hegemony of the Romantic symbol led to various reappraisals of allegory as a viable interpretive model. Jameson rejects Walter Benjamin's expansive notion of allegory—taking in religion, philosophy, aesthetics, politics, and history—despite Benjamin's fierce critique of the symbol. Instead, Benjamin's notion of allegory as a radical artistic practice and its location in baroque aesthetics is, for Jameson, a theorization of decoration or over-ripeness rather than a viable hermeneutic model. [15] This is despite Benjamin's subtle approach to history, where allegory makes the past present in the Event, transforming a "homogeneous" continuity of time into the moment, the *Jetztzeit*, the time of the now, the *grand soir*, it affirms the existence of the Event in the present, incarnated and resurrected, fulfilled, while retaining the older theological figure. (88)

For Benjamin allegory is a way of seeing, a disposition toward the world that entails a critical function exceeding its aesthetic origins. Jameson also rejects Paul de Man's tropological structure of allegory as too explicitly inhuman, an unfortunate consequence of the linguistic turn of the twentieth century, in which the subject is at the mercy of language's power to undermine intention: "Language then alone can be said to be 'successful,' if not authentic, insofar as it is designed to designate its own inner tropological dynamics and thereby to admit its own communicational or cognitive impossibility" (63).

Jameson concludes his theorization of allegory by turning to its diagnostic function in its capacity to generate

hermeneutic potential in the slippage between its levels, and to turn this potential back onto itself in an allegorical reading of its own capacity for allegory:

It is clear enough that with the disappearance of the sacred text, and in a modern relativism, this reshuffling of the levels will in fact be an inevitable outcome, governed now less by a sense of what is orthodox than by what catches the eye, what focuses attention. (75)

Jameson seems to cede the powers of allegory to the strategies and even the marketability of allegoresis at this point. But this structure also governs the reflexivity of modern literature as a machinery for allegoresis: "Allegoresis begins when this self-specification or 'self-conscious' identification of the medium or media of the text becomes its allegorical level, so that its production becomes its own allegorical meaning" (58). The fourfold structure gives way to these "transversalities" where modern literary production "becomes its own allegorical meaning" (65). But is this strictly a modern condition? Are there not premodern, even ancient, theological texts that demonstrate this generative power of allegoresis?

Wittgenstein's formulation owes a clear debt to Jewish apocalyptic literature and its Christian reception, whether or not he was consciously deploying a secularisation of Jacob's dream and its descendants. What gives this image particular relevance as an echo in Jameson's chapter title is its emphasis on the limits of language: if the reader follows Wittgenstein to this point and understands his aims in the *Tractatus*, one realises the nonsensical nature of all that has gone before and instead embraces the higher reaches of intellection.^[26] Wittgenstein's text immediately places even this assertion into a system of allegoresis by concluding enigmatically: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Is understanding finally unutterable, contingent upon silent assent? Or is the perception of higher understanding a false condition, inducing all intellection into silence? Is the truth of the *Tractatus* then nonsense, by the terms of the argument, and thus by virtue of being nonsense proves Wittgenstein's final assertion true?