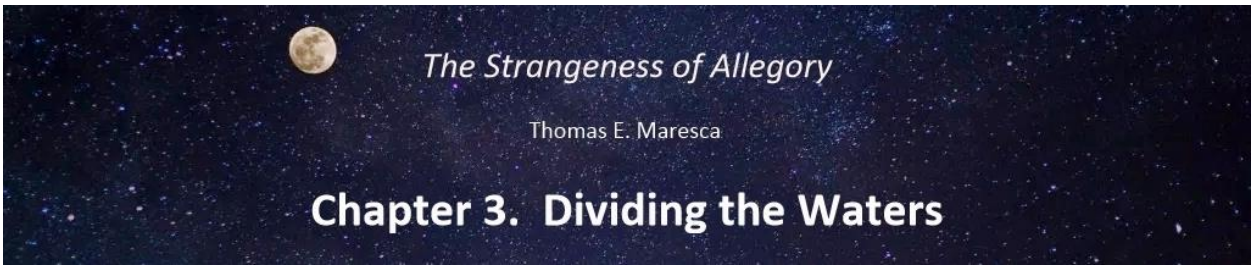

This chapter turns on the interplay of vision and language, and how a few allegorists or putative allegorists have dealt with that complex interchange. Most of the authors I deal with here will be those you probably expect, but I hope at least one will surprise you.

That said, here is a battery of quotations to concentrate your attention where it needs to be.

> Nel ciel che piu de la sua luce prende
> fu' io, e vidi cose che ridire
> ne sa ne puo chi di la su discende;
> perche appressando se al suo disire,
> nostro intelletto si profonda tanto,
> che dietro la memoria non puo ire.
>
> I have been in the Heaven that most receives of His light, and have seen things which whoso descends from up there has neither the knowledge nor the power to relate, because, as it draws near to its desire, our intellect enters so deep that memory cannot go back upon the track.
> *Paradiso* I.4-9
>
> Oh quanto e corto il dire a come fioco
> al mio concetto! e questo, a quel ch'i' vidi,
> e tanto, che non basta a dicer "poco."
>
> O how scant is speech, and how feeble to my conception! and this, to what I saw, is such that it is not enough to call it little.
> *Paradiso* XXXIII.121-23
>
> A l'alta fantasia qui manco possa...
>
> Here power failed the lofty phantasy....
> *Paradiso* XXXIII.142
>
> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows – such a one was caught up to the third heaven. I know such a man – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God

> knows – that he was caught up into paradise and heard secret words which it is not lawful for a man to utter.
>
> 2 Corinthians 12.2-4

The differences between Paul and Dante are instructive. Paul finds only three heavens (unless his three correspond to Dante's Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso), while Dante, with perhaps finer vision, discriminates nine within Paradiso. Paul characteristically concerns himself with law and with speech: even in paradise, words are what reach him and law binds him. He scarcely mentions vision. His revelation begins and ends as words, "secret words" which are not "lawful...to utter." Even more striking – especially as compared to the longing for complete memory and accurate expression that Dante's lines convey – the apostle appears to play a vulgar game of "I've got a secret," false-modestly not naming himself as the man caught up to paradise, and definitely not sharing any of his revelation, yet in the whole of his epistle to the Corinthians basing his claim to regard on that event and blaming the Corinthians for forcing him to boast of his evangelic credentials.

Dante equally characteristically worries about words too, but as a poet he conceives them primarily as expressions of the vision itself, the splendor he saw and transmuted first imaginatively into shining conceit and high fantasy and finally verbally into the fading coals of inadequate language. Paul's revelation is an oxymoron: exclusively verbal – he "heard" it – yet paradoxically unspeakable (unspoken) words. Dante's revelation contrarily precedes or transcends language. The pilgrim *saw* what he saw, and the poet's impossible task is to translate the instantaneousness, the simultaneity, of vision into the sequentiality and temporality of words. Dante's poem throbs with the sadness of his inability to retain fresh in memory or express adequately in language the glory of what he saw in an instant of apprehension. Dante labors with his news, straining to release the conception locked in his mind: he calls upon Apollo to act as midwife for him, to help him give birth to the true form of his vision:

> Entre nel petto mio, e spira tue
> si come quando Marsia traesti
> de la vagina de le membra sue.
> O divina virtu, se mi ti presti
> tanto che l'ombra del beato regno
> segnata nel mio capo io manifesti....
>
> Enter into my breast and breathe there as when you drew Marsyas from the sheath of his limbs. O divine power, if you do so lend yourself to me that I may show forth the image of the blessed realm which is imprinted in my mind...
>
> *Paradiso* I.19-24

The imagery is powerful and violent, extraordinarily so: at once sexual, genetic, and religious, pagan, Platonic, and Christian, it reconceives the flayed Marsyas as a hermaphrodite, equipped with both *vagina* and *membra*, giving birth to himself. It depicts him too as the bloody newborn, his own hide simultaneously the womb that hid him and the birth canal that under doctor Apollo's knife delivered him. Powerful motions pull against each other: Apollo enters the

breast only to draw Marsyas (the poet) out of himself. The language of religious possession, of the rapture of the sybils, rubs against (at least for an Italian-speaking, Latin-reading audience) the language of the Bible: "et inspiravit in faciem ejus spiraculum vitae..." (And he breathed into his face the breath of life) and the memory of the "paradise of pleasure" God had prepared for his creature. (Genesis 2.7-8)

Dante prays to be taken by that same violent power so that he can make "manifest" even "the shadow" of what is "imprinted" (*segnata*) in his head. Singleton's choice of "imprinted" to translate Dante's *segnata* is hardly innocent, but neither is Dante's word: "signed" in the sense of encoded? – because of creation in God's image? – or "signed" in the sense a painter signs a canvas or a sculptor signs a torso? – or written? – because its fundamental form is verbal? – or symbolized, as by the Ps the pilgrim wore on his brow in *Purgatorio* to emblematize sins? – or marked, as with the mark (*signum*, in Genesis) with which God marked Cain's brow?

This tremendous clotting of possibilities causes a hyper-enrichment of the language: the images almost burst under the pressure of all that they are being made to contain. In some respects, in fact, the passage makes itself over into an allegory of allegory, an enactment of the process of rapture, rupture, and revelation. There is no mention here of taboos on revelation or prohibitions against speaking his knowledge. Dante's only concern about language is its adequacy to his vision and his ability to retain that vision long enough to find words for it. What he saw was beyond language, and of even his own most perfect understanding of that vision his own best language can only ever be a distant shadow and not a true image. Dante is no poet of the Logos: for him, God's language is things and his rhetoric silences. He creates realities, which the best of poets recreate at a distance through the lesser language of words. Ignatius Martyr offers a powerful image for this: the Incarnation, he says, is "a cry out of the silence of God."[1]

The whole movement of Dante's thought, imagery, and language, here and elsewhere in the *Commedia*, is directly contrary to the direction of Paul's revelation. Paul's revelation is private, secret, inward, closed within confines of self and law, locked within a specific, unutterable form of words. Dante's vision and his desire for the language in which he expresses it open outward. They expand. They want to tell, to speak themselves, and what closes them or limits them are not laws or self-ishness, but simple human limitation, the fact that words are – for Dante – always a translation, at best an approximation of vision, which for human beings itself glimpses reality only in a moment of supercharged apprehension. The Incarnation, which is shadowed upon the circles of Dante's climactic vision, functions for Dante as the universal Rosetta stone. In the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word is made flesh: the unspoken image of God becomes creature, thing, image in the same sense that any man or tree or myth is image.

That is God's license to poets: if they know what they are doing, it frees their images from words by giving them access to Word-as-image:

> Oh abbondante grazia ond' io presunsi
> ficcar lo viso per la luce etterna,

[1] On this fascinating point see Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, "St. Augustine's Rhetoric of Silence: Truth vs. Eloquence and Things vs. Signs," in *Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Studies* (New York and London: 1964), 1-28.

tanto que la veduta vi consunsi!
Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
legato con amore in un volume,
cio che per l'universo si squaderna....
La forma universal di questo nodo
credo ch'i' vidi....

O abounding grace whereby I presumed to fix my look through the Eternal Light so far that all my sight was spent therein. In its depth I saw ingathered, bound by love in one single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe.... The universal form of this knot I believe that I saw....
Paradiso XXXIII.82-87, 91-92

The poetic eye that sees the eternal light and the universal form is the same eye that reads (*legato*: the word puns several ways – bound, legislated, read, but also lightened) its unshaping (*squaderna* – another rich pun: literally, "unsquaring," but also unframing, unbinding; in modern Italian *quaderna* is a rough copy book, a workbook) throughout the book (*volume*) that constitutes the universe as well as the book that makes the poem. That unshaping is the shape by which Dante knows the universe; that unbinding is the way, page by page, we know the poem. We and the poet reach the *nodo* – the knot, the node, the center, the binding – only by way of its unravelling, its peripheries, its loose leaves. We arrive at the inside by traveling the outside, just as we come to see through the words we hear. Through vision, language and image are insoluably wed, even if all that is complicated into image cannot be explicated into word.

Spenser's Language

Throughout the poem, Dante exclaims with eloquence about his ineloquence, about the difficulty of accommodating what he saw to what he says. Spenser too laments the weakness of his language, especially in these degenerate days, and laments that his vision exceeds his pen. Like Dante, he repeatedly states that the vision is autonomous: it wearies his strength, but it also refreshes and sustains him.

The waies, through which my weary steps I guyde,
In this delightfull land of Faery,
Are so exceeding spacious and wyde,
And sprinckled with such sweet variety,
Of all that pleasant is to eare or eye,
That I nigh rauisht with rare thoughts delight,
My tedious trauell doe forget thereby;
And when I gin to feele decay of might,
It strength to me supplies, and chears my dulled spright. (Proem VI.i)[2]

[2] The text of the *Faerie Queene* quoted here and throughout this study is *Spenser's Faerie Queene*, ed. J. C. Smith, 2 volumes, Oxford, 1961.

Spenser's "trauell" is both his travel and his travail, his wandering and his work, his journey/quest and his poem. "[T]hat happy land of Faery" (II.proem i.7) is a *res in se* that necessitates the poet's discovery of a language adequate to it, and that Dantean task – the translation of vision into language – both causes and is the poet's "wandering," his errancy within Faeryland and from it. It hardly needs to be said (but obviously I'm about to say it anyway) that such errancy is the lot or fate or task of each of knight errant of *The Faerie Queene* and of most of the minor characters as well. All wander and quest in a wilderness of mediation, a landscape of be(k)nighted forests of multiplicity that adumbrate in romance form the same rhetorical *selva oscura* in which Dante wandered, hemmed in by unworkable personifications and trite metaphors, inert linguistic skeletons of once-living conceptions, fossils of ideas (*idein*) – things once *seen* whole and vital. The poet and the reader of *The Faerie Queene* both vacillate between extremes of images, of visions, presented as immediately, as plainly, as language is capable of – "A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine" – and visions mediated not only by the language of the poet and of poetry (the conventional iconography of Renaissance high art) but even mediated further by the poet's and the reader's stand-ins in the poem – the priest who explicates Britomart's dream in the church of Isis, for instance, or Colin Clout's explanation to the hapless Calidore of just who those naked ladies were.

In Dante, there is a clear progression of mediations that lead from vision to "high conceit" to language and finally to the reader/hearer of the poem. In Spenser – a poet less bold, or less lucky, than Dante – even the vision is mediated. It is remote in time and place:

> ...none, that breatheth liuing aire, does know,
> Where is that happy land of Faery,
> Which I so much do vaunt, yet no where show,
> But vouch antiquities, which no body can know. (II.proem i)

Spenser, by virtue of a different kind of "high conceit," glimpses his vision through the dark glass of two Elizabeths (queen and wife, unattainable and possessed mistress), just as his poem refracts that vision back, ever more darkly, through the many mirrors of Gloriana and Belphoebe, Una and Amoret.

> ...O Goddesse heauenly bright,
> Mirrour of grace and Maiestie diuine,
> Great Lady of the greatest Isle, whose light
> Like *Phoebus* lamp throughout the world doth shine,
> Shed thy faire beames into my feeble eyne,
> And raise my thoughts too humble and too vile,
> To thinke of that true glorious type of thine,
> The argument of mine afflicted stile. (I.proem iv)

The explicit mention of "that true glorious type" might seem to indicate that *The Faerie Queene*, or at least Spenser's initial conception of it, will respond to purely typological interpretation, that some form of "the allegory of Scripture" and its concomitant allegoresis will unlock for us the meaning of the poem. Our readerly desire – I infer this from the overwhelming weight of the interpretive tradition – is to translate this bewildering plethora of Guyons and

Paridels and Artegals (or is it Arthegals?), the poem's proliferation of trios – Envy, Detraction, and the Blattant (or is it Blatant?) Beast; the Sans Boys, Foi, Loi, and Joi; the Ettos, Defetto, Decetto, and Despetto; Pri, Di, and Tri, the Amond brothers – and disguised heroes and villains, its profusion of nymph fountains, lakes, grottoes, islands, forests, castles of refuge – to identify each and every one of those phenomena with a handful of specific noumena: that is, to carry typology to its extreme, logical conclusion and reduce the poem to the univocations of prosopopeia.

Spenser doesn't let us do that. The language that invokes typology betrays typology. If Elizabeth comes later in time than the "antique rolles" (I.proem ii.4) wherein Spenser finds his story, she belongs *by sequence* to the realm of antitype. More important: if Elizabeth is already a "Goddesse heauenly bright," she belongs *by nature* to the kingdom of antitype. Most important: if Elizabeth *is*, as this proem plainly calls her, the "Mirrour of grace and Maiestie diuine," then she owns by right the whole empire of typology: she, as the first mediation of the godhead,[3] is the patron and source of typology, at once the antetype of all types and type of all antitypes. Elizabeth furnishes Spenser's prototype of mediation, figuratively considered.

All the ambiguity and ambivalence of both of Spenser's Elizabeths bear on this figure and create the 'affliction' of his "stile." "Stile," of course, means style. But it also means *stilus*, stylus, pen, the instrument by which he creates that style, and it means as well, therefore, in the hoariest of linkings, stylus/pen as penis. It is "afflicted" in all the myriad ways Renaissance sonneteers and lovers suffered in both their natural and artificial pens, and yet more "afflicted" as the attribute of a masculine/patriarchal poet in thrall to two *belles dames sans merci* whom even he, as subject and lover, views ambivalently – "O dearest dred" (I.proem.*ult*.) – and who yet more ambivalently constitute both the sources of his inspiration and the audience of what they inspire. Elizabeth, the bright mirror of God's majesty, sheds her light "Like *Phoebus* lampe" into the poet's eyes. That light raises his humble thoughts to "that true glorious type of thine" who or which is "the argument" of his "stile" or poem, which this same goddess and mirror, now addressed as the poet's "dearest dred," is asked to hear (read "read").

All this too is at least ambiguous. The "type" in question may be Wisdom or Gloriana or perhaps even, given the placement of the verses, Una. Moreover, we may justly wonder how a vision or image or figure or type metamorphoses itself into an argument by way of an "afflicted stile." That too is a mediation from image to word, from vision to language, through the narrow and obviously painful strait of an "afflicted stile." Affliction is more than passing kin to deflection, to the twisting and turning and tortuousness that result not only from the lover's deprivation but also from the poet's – or language's – inadequacies. All these bendings and turnings wrench what ought to be straight lines of transmission into circles: what begins in Elizabeth ends in Elizabeth. When Spenser reverts to the mirror image again at the end of the poem (as we have it) in the proem to Book VI, he once again uses Elizabeth as figure of mediation, this time of the inwardness of courtesy.

> But vertues seat is deepe within the mynd,

[3] See Wisdom 7.26 – "For she [Wisdom, the Shekinah] is the brightness of eternal light, and the unspotted mirror of God's majesty, and the image of his goodness" – and my discussion of this whole topic in *Three English Epics*.

And not in outward shows, but inward thoughts defynd.
But where shall I in all Antiquity
So faire a patterne finde, where may be seene
The goodly praise of Princely curtesie,
As in your selfe, O soueraine Lady Queene,
In whose pure minde, as in a mirrour sheene,
It showes, and with her brightnesse doth inflame
The eyes of all, which thereon fixed beene;
But meriteth indeede an higher name:
Yet so from low to high vplifted is your name.
Then pardon me, most dreaded Soueraine,
That from your selfe I doe this vertue bring,
And to your selfe doe it return againe:
So from the Ocean all riuers spring,
And tribute backe repay as to their King.
Right so from you all goodly vertues well
Into the rest, which round about you ring,
Faire Lords and Ladies, which about you dwell,
And doe adorne your Court, where courtesies excell.
(VI.proem v.8 - *ult*.)

Most of the props of the first proem are back in place: the dreaded, adored lady, the mirror, the bright light shining into the eyes of beholders, the here-explicit bending of what flows out from Elizabeth into a circle that turns back to Elizabeth. Here too are the strange ambiguities: the unexplained means by which a "patterne" in Elizabeth's mind is beheld by all; the oddly feminine nature of the mirror – or is it Courtesy? – who with "her" brightness "doth inflame/ The eyes of all;" the oddly ambivalent (to modern ears at least) nature of that last activity; the curious line which follows that (what "meriteth indeede an higher name"? higher name than what? and why?); and the yet curiouser final line of that stanza, whose ambiguity ought surely to have troubled many readers.

Elizabeth's name is celebrated by high and low alike: good. Elizabeth's fortune and estate moved from low to high: fine. Not so good: Elizabeth's reputation was once (implication: deservedly) low and now is lifted (by whom or what unclear) high. Beyond that: what strange courtesy is it that makes the poet apologize to his "most dreaded Soueraine" for using her as an exemplar of Courtesy? Logic would indicate that the apology (and more) would be due if he had not. I will pass over in almost silence the fact that Spenser's proemical praise of the courtesy of Elizabeth's court is directly contradicted by the poet's own comments in the final two stanzas of Book VI, where one of the unforeseen afflictions of his style has been to arouse "a mighty Peres displesure" (VI.xii.41), which in turn leads the poet to an ambiguous resolution to mend his style by lessening his matter:

Therfore do you my rimes keep better measure,
And seeke to please, that now is counted wisemans threasure.
(VI.xii.ult.)

The multiple puns on "measure" and above all the etymological ambivalence of "threasure" (treasure, thesaurus) indicate clearly how far outside the ideal realm of mind and antitype the poet and his larger audience are. Image and idea may exist in perfect clarity in the pure mirror of an idealized Elizabeth's mind, but in the all too physical *Faerie Queene* the words that embody those noumena are subject to everything that constrains the "matter" of Britain.

For all that, Spenser nowhere suggests that what he "says" is in any way untrue to what he "sees." He asks for help in remembering and expressing from the Muses and various gods and goddesses. He apologizes to Elizabeth for his boldness, or for any possible improprieties, but he nowhere implies that his dragons and dames, knights and palmers, are adaptations – much less distortions – for the reader's sake of things too complex or too rarefied for human understanding or human language.

Milton's Language

Neither does Milton demand the "language of accommodation" – but for very different reasons. Heretical though it be to say this to a critical establishment devoted to the twin fallacies of Milton's profundity and orthodoxy, Milton writes neither sound theology (his heaven is the one that, in *Man and Superman*, Bernard Shaw's Satan rightly deplores as boring) nor allegory of any kind. The imagery of *Paradise Lost* resembles neither the imagery of *The Faerie Queene* nor that of *Commedia*. Its conceptual base lies neither in the theology of the Beatific Vision, as Dante's does, nor in a neoplatonized theology of Incarnation, as Spenser's does, nor even, though it sometimes appears to, in the theology of the Logos. Rather, the field in which Milton's imagery is rooted and the beds from which it draws its sustenance are typology and the Scriptural allegory that derives from it/it derives from.

For all their theological underpinnings, Dante and Spenser practice the allegory of the poets – secular allegory. For all his putative Protestant contempt for Biblical allegoresis, Milton employs the allegory of the theologians, which is no true allegory at all in the understanding of the grammarians, since it depends upon relations of like to like. *Paradise Lost* builds its wonderful complexities out of a few simple relations of type and antitype: Adam, the first man, is a type of Christ. Christ is the "one greater man" and not the second person of the Trinity (if there in fact is any Trinity in *Paradise Lost*[4]). Jesus, therefore, in the most strictly accurate theological use of the term, is the chronological antitype of Adam (and not his prototype or antetype at all), while Satan is, in a non-hermeneutical but properly adversarial sense, the antitype of both. Eve is the antitype of Sin, as well as a type of Mary, and so on.

The marvelous exfoliation of parts and actions in *Paradise Lost* arises from these classical symmetries: everything in the poem grows from typical relations of sameness and difference – but difference employed in the service of sameness. Milton's vision in the poem ends with a world wherein God will be "All in All" because, in effect, there never has been anything in Milton's imagination except God, who creates over and over again, more and less successfully, in his own image. God is Milton's great monotype, from whom flows a series of greater and lesser facsimile editions, until at last, and in a sense far different from Dante's, all that lies

[4] My colleague Joseph Pequigney has persuaded me of Milton's radical unorthodoxy on this and several other points. There is, of course, a hefty bibliography on this subject: the quickest way for those unacquainted with the arguments to survey the terrain would be via *The Milton Encyclopedia*.

scattered through the universe will be collated and bound up in one volume, and God shall once again be, as he was at the beginning, "All in All."

This constitutes at once the greatness of the poem – its moving unity of vision and singleness of voice – and its greatest weakness, because of the inadequacy of Milton's vision of God. Milton's God, obscured in clouds of light, is the lawgiver, the taskmaster, he who must be obeyed. He is hidden – this is very significant – from the sight of all save his Son. None of the angels – and there is no one else in Milton's Heaven – sees God. Milton's heaven fails for precisely that reason: because no one sees God. The sight of God is eternal happiness: without the beatific vision, there is no joy in Heaven, no love, no salvation. Seeing God, if not being God, is what Christianity is all about, and by those standards *Paradise Lost* is a profoundly unchristian poem.

The radical inadequacy of Milton's conception of the divinity derives from the very same roots as his imagery, from the relationships of like to like that underlie typology. Dante and Spenser both recognize and accept the total otherness of God, its almost unimaginability. That idea never occurs to Milton: only Raphael incongruously worries at all that things in heaven may not be comprehensible in earthly terms.

> ...how shall I relate
> To human sense th' invisible exploits
> Of warring spirits...
> ...how last unfold
> The secrets of another World, perhaps
> Not lawful to reveal? yet for thy good
> This is dispens't, and what surmounts the reach
> Of human sense, I shall delineate so,
> By lik'ning spiritual to corporeal forms,
> As may express them best, though what if Earth
> Be but the shadow of Heav'n, and things therein
> Each to other like, more than on Earth is thought? (V.563-76)

This is an intensely troubling passage, one that threatens the deconstruction of the entire poem. The "sociable" Raphael has been sent explicitly to "unfold/ The secrets of another World,"
and the God who sent him added to his mission no caveats about secret lore or about the difficulties of translation:

> Go therefore, half this day as friend with friend
> Converse with Adam.... (V.229-30)

Only 300 lines earlier than Raphael's scruple, in the very same book, Milton proceeded to show us heaven and to put those words in the mouth of God, serenely untroubled by any doubts about his linguistic ability to "relate/ To human sense th' invisible exploits/ Of...Spirits." Now, Raphael broadly implies that that was a trick, that human sense – and if Adam's unfallen human sense, how much more so our sadly deteriorated version of it? – isn't capable of perceiving directly or understanding clearly most of what we have been reading about thus far in the

poem. Having raised that disturbing doubt, Raphael goes on to compound it with his half-alleviation: "what if" earth is an adumbration of heaven, or an analogue of it? What if indeed? What then should we understand that we have been reading? What then ought we to make of Milton's unqualified declarative sentences?[5] Even more to the point, what are we to make here of Raphael's pre-echo of the Pauline secrecy and its implied divine censorship? The language of accommodation that Raphael introduces into the poem appears much more to be the language of discommoding, a call for mediation that denies the legitimacy of either direct speech or the mediation it invokes.

The poet, with an imagination apparently both less and more limited than Raphael's, has already taken us to hell and to heaven without a single word about accommodating spiritual matters to our – much less his own – fleshly imagination. Milton not only asserts the reality of his vision – Dante and Spenser do as much – but also the reality of his language:

> With other notes than to th' Orphean Lyre
> I sung of *Chaos* and *Eternal Night*,
> Taught by the heav'nly Muse to venture down
> The dark descent, and up to reascend,
> Though hard and rare... (III.17-21)
> So much the rather thou Celestial Light
> Shine inward...
> ...that I may see and tell
> Of things invisible to mortal sight. (III.51-55)
>
> ...argument
> Not less but more Heroic than the wrath
> Of stern Achilles...
> If answerable style I can obtain
> Of my Celestial Patroness, who deigns
> Her nightly visitation unimplor'd,
> And dictates to me slumb'ring, or inspires
> Easy my unpremeditated Verse.... (VII.13-24)

---

[5] For example, in this very same book:

> So spake th' Eternal Father…
> … nor delay'd the winged Saint
> After his charge receiv'd; but from among
> Thousand Celestial Ardors, wher he stood
> Veil'd with his gorgeous wings, up springing light
> Flew through the midst of Heav'n; th' angelic Choirs
> On each hand parting, to his speed gave way
> Through all th'Empyreal road; till at the Gate
> Of Heav'n arriv'd, the gate self-open'd wide
> On golden hinges turning, as by work
> Divine the sovran Architect had fram'd. (V.246-55)

> ...higher Argument
> Remains, sufficient of itself to raise
> That name, unless an age too late, or cold
> Climate, or Years damp my intended wing
> Deprest; and much they may, if all be mine,
> Not Hers who brings it nightly to my Ear. (VII.42-47)

Not for Milton the "argument" of an "afflicted stile." His "argument" is 'dictated' to him; it is 'brought' to his ear as language, in language: verse as much unpremediated as "unpremeditated." That is to say, *Paradise Lost* makes the claim for the literal truth of its statements that warrants the application to it of the methods of Scriptural allegoresis. It denies any difference – Raphael's uneasiness notwithstanding – between the way it expresses itself and the ultimate truth of what it expresses. With the same "resonant assurance" with which Joyce's Father Purdon (in "Grace") assumes that human analogies bind god and informs his audience of Dublin businessmen that they can set right their accounts with him, Milton assumes that he hears and repeats God's words' *verbatim*, which, I think, is more than Raphael presumes to.

It is a nice irony that one of Satan's greatest deficiencies in *Paradise Lost* is his failure to appreciate the otherness of God, to grasp how very unlike himself God in fact is. Like master, like man: Milton is a poet of correspondences, not discontinuities, and he learned his trade from the great orthodox master of finding correspondences and papering over discontinuities, St. Paul himself.

Pauline Language

Among so many huge generalizations, one more cannot hurt: St. Paul fundamentally invents or adapts[6] the mode of allegoresis that will become dominant in the interpretation of Scripture throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Even more important, at the very moment of so doing, Paul explicitly identifies the subject of his activity as allegory and uses that very word to name it, even though what he is in fact engaged in is an exercise in typological reading – which word or words he does not use. Here is the Pauline passage from which so much of the allegory of the theologians flows:[7]

> For it is written that Abraham had two sons, the one by a slave-girl and the other by a free woman. And the son of the slave-girl was born according to the flesh, but the son of the free woman in virtue of the promise. This is said by way of allegory. For these are the two covenants: one indeed from Mount Sinai, bringing forth children unto bondage,

[6] "Adapts" because some form of allegoresis – of after-the-fact, "mystical" interpretation of Scripture – already existed among the many sects of Judaism, and a corresponding phenomenon was fairly widespread among sophisticated pagans interested in discovering the truths contained in "naïve" myths of "primitive" poets. See in this connection Philip Rollinson's very useful *Classical Theories of Allegory and Christian Culture*, with an appendix of primary Greek sources by Patricia Matsen (Pittsburgh and London: Duquesne University Press and Harvester Press, 1981).

[7] See Rollinson, *Classical Theories*, pp. 30-32, for a very important discussion of this passage. Rollinson significantly argues for Paul's language and practice as a fusion of Hellenic allegory and Hebraic typology.

> which is Agar. For Sinai is a mountain in Arabia, which corresponds to the present Jerusalem, and is in slavery with her children. But that Jerusalem which is above is free, which is our mother. For it is written, "Rejoice thou barren that dost not bear; break forth and cry, thou that dost not travail; for many are the children of the desolate, more than of her that has a husband." Now we, brethren, are the children of the promise, as Isaac was.... Therefore, brethren, we are not children of a slave-girl, but of the free woman – in virtue of the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free. (Galatians 4.21-31)

This is an extraordinary text in many respects. It is one of the earliest uses of the word allegory (*allegoria* in the Vulgate, *allegoroumena* in the Greek) and the only use of the word in Scripture. The passage overtly engages in extracting from a historical narrative of the Old Testament a spiritual meaning adapted to the purposes of the New, which mode of reading it identifies as allegory and implicitly posits as a "normal" mode of reading Scripture.

Even more fascinating, Paul arrives at his desired reading of the Genesis narrative by an elaborate hermeneutics, indeed by a kind of deconstruction of the overt content of the Ishmael and Isaac story. After all, the Jews (and the judaizing Christians against whom Paul argues in Galatians) saw themselves as the children of Abraham, as the inheritors of the covenant God made first with him and renewed with Moses. By a kind of verbal sleight of hand, playing on the etymology of the name Hagar (a method of reaching meaning long respected in Talmudic lore and with a long future before it in all sorts of Medieval exegeses), Paul establishes his contemporary Jewish community as the antitypes of Ishmael, born to the bondage of the Mosaic law, while the Christian community appropriates their birthright, becoming the heirs of Isaac, the children of Abraham's faith, and the inheritors not of the law but of the promise.[8]

Context is crucial to understanding how St. Paul establishes his interpretation of Genesis. The Epistle to the Galatians turns on a fundamental opposition between the freedom of Christian faith and the bondage of Mosaic law. Paul quickly establishes Abraham, the father of the faithful, as the pivotal figure of his theological drama, and he makes the solution to all his puzzles turn on the question of who is the true heir of Abraham. The promise made to Abraham as a reward for his faith precedes and supercedes the covenant made with Moses, Paul argues, just as the justification which flows from faith in Christ has superceded justification by the works of the law. Bound versus free, law versus faith, Moses versus Christ: those are the oppositions that animate and inform Paul's exposition of the antinomy of Ishmael and Isaac. He accomplishes his actual exegesis of the text by virtue of what Dryden would have called a few "turns," some almost metaphysical (in the sense we use those words to describe a Donne poem) twists of already established strands of thought that realign the types and antitypes latent in the figures Paul is citing: those who bind themselves by law reject the freedom of faith; the faithful are the true heirs of the promise made to Abraham; ergo Christians are the inheritors of Isaac and the Jews are cast out into the wilderness. The children of Abraham are not who you thought they were but other folk entirely. The law deals not justice but bondage. Those who were outcasts are now elect, and the chosen now cast out.

---

[8] Milton makes much, in *Paradise Lost*, of both the word and the idea of the promise, etymologically and symbolically; "promise" lies at the heart of the poem's last two books. Cf. my *Three English Epics*, Milton chapter.

From such beginnings and such precedents grows the eventually enormous tree of Christian Scriptural allegoresis. The advice of St. Augustine about difficult Scriptural passages confirms the thrust of St. Paul's demonstration. The pious reader is not to be put off or scandalized by anything in the Bible. All such things are "figurative, and their secrets are to be removed as kernels from the husk as nourishment for charity."[9] That Paul's paradigmatic treatment of Hagar and Ishmael amounts almost to a deconstruction of the Old Testament text is no more accidental than the fact that the Old Testament episode, under analysis, yields the meaning Paul wishes to find in it. Like deconstruction in its manipulation of a closed, binary system of oppositions and like Freudian dream analysis in its interpretation of overt data to reveal their latent contents, Pauline and Augustinian Scriptural allegoresis reads to a predetermined end: its basic codes are in place before it approaches any specific text.

The pattern that St. Paul establishes – exposition of the text by means of correspondences between people and events of the Old Testament and people and events of the New – becomes both in its own right the dominant mode of discovering the "mystical" or "allegorical" meaning of Scripture and the base for all the other possible meanings. Of the notorious Medieval "fourfold method" of Biblical allegoresis, only the first – the literal – level of the text is entirely free from the claims of this kind of typology. Even more important, from the point of view of literature and/or criticism, typology and the modes of allegoresis derived from it (Scriptural "allegory,"[10] tropology, and anagogy) for many hundreds of years provided the terms of art for speaking about the ways texts mean. They constituted the technical vocabulary available to serious criticism for analyzing and discussing the workings of poetry and complex artistry. That doesn't mean that poets were in fact limited to doing what could be expressed by the language of a typologically-based hermeneutical theory – the poet's reach is usually, and happily, well beyond the critic's grasp – but it does mean that whatever poets might accomplish in verse, they were pretty much confined to and contained within the limits and language of typology when they had to talk about it in prose.[11]

Dante's Letter

Nowhere is this critical limitation more evident than in Dante's letter to Cangrande della Scala. Whether or not Dante actually wrote the letter (earlier critics, nearer Dante's own lifetime, were on the whole much readier to accept it as genuine than are our contemporaries) isn't

---

[9] Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York, 1958), pp. 89-90.

[10] I strongly prefer, for clarity both of definition and of argument, to reserve the word "allegory" for consciously constructed literary works and to use the word "allegoresis" for the process of explaining the purported "mystical" or "symbolic" significance of texts, especially when such explanation is performed *post hoc*, as in the cases of, for instance, Homer, Virgil, and the Bible.

[11] This was, of course, not a static condition, but it was, it is fair to say, a general condition. New ideas about poetry and about the ways poetry creates its meanings were in fact being proposed at many times and places in the Middle Ages: Alain of Lille and Geoffrey of Vinsauf, for example, are just two innovative poets and critics that Dante could have known. Peter Dronke discusses the significance of these poetical/critical alternatives for Dante's poetry in his *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and, more generally, in *Fabula* (Leiden, 174) and *The Medieval Poet and His World* (Rome, 1984).

really important, though the odds are very great that the letter is in fact his.[12] The real significance of the epistle to Cangrande lies in the way it talks about poetic complexity and how quickly, by its silences and omissions, it concedes the inadequacy of its conventional terminology to Dante's poem.[13] Here is the text of the relevant portion of the letter:

> For the elucidation, therefore, of what we have to say, it must be understood that the meaning of this work is not of one kind only; rather the work may be described as 'polysemous', that is, having several meanings; for the first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the next is that which is conveyed by what the letter signifies; the former of which is called literal, while the latter is called allegorical, or mystical. And for the better illustration of this method of exposition we may apply it to the following verses: 'When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion.' For if we consider the letter alone, the thing signified to us is the going out of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption through Christ is signified; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they may one and all in a general sense be termed allegorical, inasmuch as they are different (*diversi*) from the literal or historical; for the word 'allegory' is so called from the Greek *alleon*, which in Latin is *alienum* (strange) or *diversum* (different).
>
> This being understood, it is clear that the subject, with regard to which the alternative meanings are brought into play, must be twofold. And therefore the subject of this work must be considered in the first place from the point of view of the literal meaning, and next from that of the allegorical interpretation. The subject, then, of the whole work, taken in the literal sense only, is the state of souls after death, pure and simple. For on and about that the argument of the whole work turns. If, however, the work be regarded from the allegorical point of view, the subject is man according as by

---

[12] Peter Dronke, a critic from whose works I have greatly profited, is among the most persuasive rejecters of the Cangrande letter's attribution to Dante. In his *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, Dronke argues on the basis of the letter's contents (5-8) and its prose rhythms (103-111) that the expository portion of the Cangrande epistle does not contain Dante's voice or Dante's ideas. To a large extent, I agree: I think that portion of the epistle represents Dante's efforts to convey to a non-specialist reader – i.e., a reader who is not a poet, not a critic, not a schoolman – something of the complexity and significance of his *Commedia* in terms that would be familiar and comprehensible to such a reader. Does it need to be said that as a poet Dante was not, properly speaking, among the *avant-garde*: he *was* the *avant-garde*, and had to deal with all the problems of speaking to an audience whose comprehension lagged his endeavor that any "modern" artist confronts.

[13] "Nonetheless I still think it just conceivable that on this one occasion Dante should have resolved to bring to his own underworld journey an explanatory method similar to that which Bernardus Silvestris and others had thought appropriate to the otherworld journey of Aeneas, or which the Fathers had imposed on many parts of the Bible. It was a method that may well have been so deeply assimilated by most commentators of the time that, inasmuch as they perceived the *Commedia* as a text with striking analogies to the *Aeneid* and the Bible, they automatically began to organize the new text in the anciently familiar pattern. At least it can be seen that the author of the Cangrande exposition, though tempted in this direction, did not persist with it: after a general statement, and an example drawn from the Bible, he did not go on to apply the method even to the handful of lines from *Paradiso* that he chose to elucidate" (Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, ix).

> his merits or demerits in the exercise of his free will he is deserving of reward or punishment by justice.[14]

The writer of that exposition of the *Commedia* is either a very imprecise reader, or suffers from dreadful difficulties of critical articulation, or is a very perceptive reader playing quintessentially allegorical games with anyone looking for an easy way into Dante's poem. The whole of the letter to Cangrande provides even less in the way of specific information about the poem it purports to explain than Spenser's letter to Raleigh offers about his poem. Only in the narrowest doctrinal sense, to the narrowest doctrine-hunting reader, can *Commedia*'s subject be described as "the state of souls after death." That formulation evaporates the pilgrim out of the poem, disregards its narrative completely, and mutates an epic into an essay or a *summa* (as, in fact, all too many readers have shown themselves ready and willing to take it). What is offered immediately after as the allegorical or mystical meaning of the poem turns out in fact to be identical to what has just been presented as the literal level of the work, and certainly forms what any fair-minded reader would understand as properly belonging to that primary, narrative level of the poem. In current parlance, what the letter to Cangrande identifies as the allegorical meaning of *Commedia* really belongs to its diegetic level of discourse.

In fact, the expositor has a lot of problems with *Commedia* and with his example of fourfold allegorical reading. For one thing – one very important thing – the literal level of *Commedia* already includes – explicitly and in itself – the content of all three of the "allegorical" levels he articulates for his passage from Psalms: redemption through Christ, conversion from sin to grace, and attainment of heaven. Those three contents form the necessary point of any piece of Scriptural allegory, as the Latin doggerel about the four levels plainly states:

> Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
> Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.[15]

The fact is, the narrative of *Commedia* precludes the possibility of usefully applying the techniques of Scriptural allegory to the poem, for the simple and quite obvious reason that what constitutes the heart of Scriptural exegesis – its point, its doctrine, what it sees as the hidden, "allegorical" content of the Biblical narrative, the "kernel" that must be extracted from the husk of the literal statements – that "inside" forms the "outside" of Dante's poem and constitutes its narrative, its integument, its husk, its manifest content. *Commedia* begins where Scriptural allegory leaves off. (Milton's narrative, on the contrary, begins exactly where Scriptural typology and "allegory" begin.)

This is "strange" and "different" indeed, though perhaps not as the Cangrande expositor intended those words. Dante is troping Scriptural allegory, radically juggling its levels, and the apparent ham-handedness of the Cangrande expositor serves quite nicely to call attention to that fact. Rather than being a retreat from the poet's claims for the truth of his vision, the

---

[14] *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae: The Letters of Dante*, ed. & trans. Paget Toynbee, second edition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966), 199-200.

[15] See Henri de Lubac, *Exegese medievale*, Premiere Partie (Paris, 1959), p. 23 ff.

Cangrande letter's very conventional explanation of the way allegory works in fact points out how Dante's allegory does *not* work, how vastly different a *littera* this poem offers and, implicitly, how very different its *allegoria* must consequently be.

For that reason, the example the expositor cites deserves as long and careful a second look as did Paul's handling of Ishmael and Isaac. The quotation is from Psalm 113, a song of praise of God that ends, provocatively enough for readers of *Commedia*, with:

> Heaven is the heaven of the Lord, but the earth he has given to the Children of men. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor anyone that goes down to the grave. But we bless the Lord, both now and forever. (16-18)

A strict observance of the decorum of allusion would work at this point just as subversively as any Derridean notion of "trace" to start us on a reading of the Cangrande letter – and by implication of the *Commedia* – that goes very much against the grain of traditional interpretation. More important, however, and more immediately pertinent to my present purposes, the verses the expositor quotes serve as a very concise synopsis of the major event of the book of Exodus, the progress of the Jews under the leadership of Moses from slavery in Egypt to their establishment in the promised land. The readings of that text that the expositor offers establish it as typical: redemption through Christ is signified by his type, Moses, redeemer of the Israelites; the passage from slavery to freedom typifies both the conversion of the soul from sin to grace and the passage of the soul from "bondage of the corruption of this world" to the "liberty of everlasting glory."

So stated, that text also then synopsizes the narrative of the *Commedia*: the progress of the pilgrim Dante from his wanderings in the wilderness of this world, through the house of bondage and on to the eternal realm. It synopsizes as well the allegorical understanding of the epic descent to hell,[16] a topic of more than passing interest to Dante. Finally, its three implicit stations –house of bondage, wilderness, promised land – epitomize the essential epic journey as well, the movement of a hero from a home no longer his (whether it be the Troy of the victor or the Troy of the vanquished, Egypt or the dark wood of this world), downward through suffering, through the learning or remembering of another identity, and upward to the hero's true home. All these diverse foci – *Surge ai mortali per diversi foci/ la lucerna del mondo* (*Paradiso* I.37-38) Dante tells us[17] – concentrate the reader's apprehension on *Commedia* as a text comprehensive of and subsuming other texts and their "mystical" contents. Each point the expositor makes in this part of the letter has an obvious, almost trivial, misapplication to *Commedia* and an underlying core of implication directing the reader's attention to *Commedia* as a text building its narrative out of other texts' allegories.

> Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
> legato con amore in un volume,
> cio che per l'universo si squaderna....

[16] See my own *Epic to Novel*, *Three English Epics*, and the introduction to the Schreiber/Maresca translation of Bernardus Silvestris.

[17] "The lantern of the world approaches mortals/ by varied paths." The line is quoted in the letter to Cangrande as the beginning of the second part – the executive part – of *Paradiso*.

> In its depth I saw ingathered, bound by love in one single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe.... (*Paradiso* XXXIII.85-87)

The poet reproduces in his poem what the pilgrim found in his journey – and like the pilgrim's metaphors, the poet's figures are simultaneously fictions and literal truths, statements about the world at the same time that they are statements about the poem. *Commedia* inscribes the book of nature within the book of God, and both within the book of art – or vice versa. It is the inside and the outside of everything, the universal medium and mediation, and that is the profoundest signification of its title: *com-media*.

The integument of the *Commedia* – *Commedia*'s own "outside" – is fabulated from the "insides," the allegorical contents of not just any books but from the most encyclopedic of them all: Dante builds his narrative out of what was understood to be the "inner" meaning of the *Aeneid* and the Bible. Flayed Marsyas is the surface of *Commedia*: Dante's poem tropes epic narrative in the same way that his content tropes the fourfold method. What was inward, inside the Bible and the *Aeneid*, furnishes the outside of *Commedia*. That by itself plays havoc with the notion of simply applying Augustine's husk-and-kernel metaphorics to Dante's (or, I would argue, any allegory's) narrative level. It effectually throws binary code systems, any interpretive system based on simple equivalences or transferrals, right out the window.

When Dante the Pilgrim sees the river of living sparks transform itself into the radiance of the rose, we are not reading an allegory of salvation: we reading a narrative of it. That is univocation, and as such it is not interpretable. The river and the gems – which are real: Dante sees them where there can be no lies – are also, Beatrice tells us, *di lor vero umbriferi prefazi* (XXX.78): in the realm of the light that casts no shadow, they are shadow-bearing prefaces of their own truth. That is multivocation, and it is almost – perhaps unqualifiedly is – uninterpretable. The interconnections of language and meaning, image and significance, container and content in such passages are tight to the point of inextricability, complex to the point of unparaphrasability, so close and so multiple that even the basic – again binary – distinction between the two components may be dead wrong. Like medieval theologians talking about God, we are reduced to negatives, to saying what our phenomenon is not: whatever the relation of figure and meaning in *Paradiso* – and it is clearly complex – it is also self-evidently not typological.

We may legitimately wonder, then, where the allegory lies in Dante's poem. The question is a good one, and not easy to answer. Whether we take the Cangrande expositor as shrewd and knowing or convention-ridden and ignorant, what his illustrations imply rules out "inside" as the direction in which to seek our allegory. Augustine's kernel-and-husk pattern may work for Scriptural exegesis, but it doesn't fit Dante at all well.

Conrad's Language

Another, a somewhat later allegorist, re-confirms that repudiation of "insides" for us, explicitly denying the utility of "the kernel" in a work in which Dante as pilgrim and Dante as poet both figure importantly.

> The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (*Heart of Darkness*, 68)[18]

Not all allegorists are so outspoken as Dante and Spenser in their elucidatory epistles. Modern writers, at least, are usually reluctant to offer straightforwardly and in their own voice directions for deciphering their works. They do not seem averse, however, to incorporating such information into the works themselves, so that clues about how to read the work in hand and warnings about misconstruing it become part of the work itself (as is of course the case in Dante's and Spenser's poems too). In fact, this traditional and I think reasonably ancient procedure on the part of allegorical writers gives rise to the delicious irony that some books that in fact belong to the ancient class of allegories, and are merely doing its old-fashioned work once more, have been hailed as masterworks of modernity by virtue of their intense self-consciousness, their awareness of the limitations of literature, their anti-illusionary breaking of the frame of fiction, and their bold violation of simple diegesis. The whirligig of time does indeed bring in its revenges.

In all these respects – and of course many others – Conrad is a modernist of impeccable credentials: *deraciné*, alienated, creator of alienated heroes, subtle player behind the veils of layer after layer of fiction, inventor of narrators, themselves opaque, of equally baffling tales. It goes hard against the modernist grain to see Conrad's Marlow as an allegorist's device for giving his audience reading lessons, but that is one of the essentials of his being. Marlow's job, like Virgil's in *Inferno*, is to make sure that we see what we are supposed to and that we think about what we see.

This emphatically does not mean that Marlow, in *Heart of Darkness* or *Lord Jim*, is Reason just as Dante's Virgil is Reason – for the simple reason that Dante's Virgil isn't Reason either. Characters in allegories aren't Reason or Passion or Virtue or Evil or anything else with a capital letter: those are personifications. Characters in allegories, like the famous definition of poetry, do not mean but be, and they do not be any one single thing for long, no more than any of us do. Personification is a linear construct: allegory is non-linear, a complex system, a flow in the almost mathematical sense of "shape plus change, motion plus form."[19] The consistency of

---

[18] There are many *Hearts of Darkness* in print: the one I used here and throughout is the old Signet Classic *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer*, with an introduction by Albert J. Guerard, The New American Library, 1963.

[19] The quotation is from James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: 1987), 195. More of Gleick's remarks on the work of Albert Libchaber, an experimental physicist, are directly pertinent to the workings of allegory:

> [H]e (Libchaber) had a feeling for the abstract, ill-defined, ghostly thing called flow. Flow was shape plus change, motion plus form. A physicist, conceiving systems of differential equations would call their mathematical movement a flow. Flow was a Platonic idea, assuming that change in systems reflected some reality independent of the particular instant. Libchaber embraced Plato's sense that hidden forms filled the universe….

personification is a completely artificial construct: allegorical characters embody and enact all the variety and inconsistency of crude reality, with all of reality's inherent resistance to abstraction, whether of the literary or the mathematical variety. Personification is all shape, all form: change is impossible for a personification without either its ceasing to be a personification or without its (in literature virtually unprecedented) mutation into a personification of something else than it had been. Most personification characters are in some narrow, very specific way "part of us": every allegorical character is in some exalting or distressing way "one of us," as Marlow says of the hero of another allegory. If the point of personification narratives is most often to teach you something you should know, the point of allegories, most often, is to have you meet someone you should know, and it is usually yourself.

It takes no subtlety to see that that, for instance, is the thrust of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow's journey upriver to meet Kurtz becomes a journey into the self, a pilgrimage that culminates, in direct antithesis to Christian's, not in Marlow's laying his burden down but precisely in his taking it up. He bears Kurtz back to the steamboat, carries him out of the Inner Station, out of the Heart of Darkness: he suffers through Kurtz's extremity and looks into his soul – his own soul and Kurtz's. He dons Kurtz as an actor dons a role and bears his name and reputation back to the so-called civilized world, back to the sepulchral city.

The meaning of these events, it seems very clear, is inward, in fact, is interiority itself. At the Heart of Darkness, at the Inner Station, enthroned at the center of a ring of skulls, is Mr. Kurtz, who, Marlow tells us, "had no restraint" and yielded to his own inward heart of darkness. Marlow in turn internalizes Kurtz's abilities and Kurtz's failures, identifies with both, and learns from them the humbling lesson of his own limitations. In the face of the unshakable faith of Kurtz's fiancée, Marlow pays his final debt to the dead Kurtz with a lie – "lies have the flavor of mortality about them," he has already told us – and re-enters the world of the living a sadder and a wiser man.

Plausible and glib as that may sound – and I have not taken any pains to hide its glibness – that common reading of *Heart of Darkness* cannot stand as a total account of Conrad's tale. It cannot stand because it opts for univocation, for the steady state of an essentially static, symbolic reading, in a text which partakes of as much motion and flow as the river that threads

---

> 'There has been since the eighteenth century some kind of dream that science was missing the evolution of shape in space and the evolution of shape in time. If you think of a flow, you can think of a flow in many ways, flow in economics or a flow in history. First it may be laminar, then bifurcating to a more complicated state, perhaps with oscillations. Then it may be chaotic.'
>
> The universality of shapes, the similarities across scales, the recursive power of flows within flows – all sat just beyond reach of the standard differential-calculus approach to equations of change. But that was not easy to see. Scientific problems are expressed in the available scientific language. So far, the twentieth century's best expression of Libchaber's intuition about flow needed the language of poetry. Wallace Stevens, for example, asserted a feeling about the world that stepped ahead of the knowledge available to physicists. He had an uncanny suspicion about flow, how it repeated itself while changing:
>
> The flecked river
> Which kept flowing and never the same way twice, flowing
> Through many places, as if it stood still in one.
>
> …When Libchaber and some other experimenters in the 1970s began looking into the motion of fluids, they did so with something approaching this subversive poetic intent…." (195-96)

In later chapters I will have much more to say about flow and about chaos theory in relation to allegory.

its narrative. It cannot stand because Conrad at the outset has told us that such a reading cannot stand. The joker in the interpretive deck is that the ultimate meaning of *Heart of Darkness* is not and cannot be inward – at very least not "inside" in that analytical sense – if the tale is to have any coherence or consistency at all. We were warned of this explicitly in the passage I quoted above, by the unnamed narrator whose presence frames Marlow as Marlow frames Kurtz. So the meaning of the tale Marlow tells cannot lie in its inward point, in the moral or message that is its kernel. Rather its "meaning" – and that is Conrad's word – is outside, an envelope around the tale, a haze around a glow, a halo around moonshine.

A lovely image, no doubt, but what are we to understand by it? Readers may be forgiven for suspecting that it is *all* moonshine, that Conrad has been intoxicated by his own language. But in fact that language itself contains the clues to just how serious Conrad is. His sentences are a tissue of the traditional terms of allegory, a palimpsest of centuries of speculation about it. Consciously or unconsciously – and it really makes no difference which to the text we have, if we posit, as I do, that every text is the product of the whole mind – Conrad has (to use a favorite word of his) commingled several *loci classici* of allegorical literature. The image of kernel and nut of course belongs by ancient right to allegory, and in employing it here Conrad is willy-nilly echoing St. Augustine. The "envelope" of a tale is none other than the medieval *integumentum*, the skin (Marsyas'?) or outside, the *fictum*, the fiction which conceals a truth. That haze, that mist, that "spectral illumination of moonshine" all seem to derive directly (perhaps an indication of Conrad's recent reading here?) from Hawthorne's Custom House essay that prefaces and frames *The Scarlet Letter*, and all seem to point toward the same ground that Hawthorne used them to illustrate, the fusion in art or in allegory of the actual and the imaginary, the factual and the per- or con-ceptual:[20] the deception of art will, in effect, render us receptive to the truth of nature.

But however much Conrad's language echoes Augustine and long-standing hermeneutic tradition, it is in fact reversing Augustine and urging us not to look inward for the kernel but outward at the husk. Likewise he has relocated the envelope: it is, apparently, not the fiction itself which contains its meaning but the outside of the tale – wherever that might be. Conrad's language in this paragraph makes the tale itself an inside, contained within a mysterious envelope of meaning, which is the outside. We might hope that the unnamed narrator and the other members of Marlow's audience – the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, and the Accountant – could provide such an outside. They are, after all, very much outside Marlow's story. But they are unfortunately very much inside *Heart of Darkness*, which leaves them, with respect to us, in quite a middling position. We, of course, are definitely outside the tale, and if

[20] See *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 149-50. Hawthorne's moonlit room becomes a Conradian borderland, where real and surreal blend, erasing or blurring the threshold that divides them. Conrad reverts to similar language later in *Heart of Darkness* to contrast the unreality of the pilgrims and their behavior with the surreality of what surrounds them: "Beyond the fence the forest stood up spectrally in the moonlight, and through the dim stir, through the faint sounds of that lamentable courtyard, the silence of the land went home to one's very heart – its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life" (93). It's worth noting that the forest is, etymologically, "the outside": What is outside the law, outside civilization, the outside of life itself. In *Heart of Darkness*, the jungle itself becomes an outside, an envelope that contains all the characters and brings out their meaning.

that begins to make you uncomfortable, then you are starting to apprehend what Conrad – and allegory – intend for you.

This "outside," whatever it may be, whoever it may be, seems the first really likely candidate we've had for the office of allegorical "Other," the saying of which we've agreed to accept as the defining characteristic of allegory. But "outside" is, if you'll forgive an almost inescapable pun, a very open-ended concept, one we're going to have to be more rigorous about if it's going to have any real meaning at all. After all, in terms of literature, almost everything can qualify as an outside – audience, history, futurity, fact as opposed to fiction, other books as opposed to this book, other forms as opposed to this form, other styles as opposed to this style, other language as opposed to this language. Even the terms and referents, the simple words of ordinary discourse and quotidian experience, can be an outside for a text that does not otherwise employ them. For example, if literary texts were conventionally written in a special language or dialect, a "Mandarin" speech as opposed to the vernacular tongue, then the spoken language – with all of its referential, psychological, and ideological baggage – would *de facto* serve as an outside for a "Mandarin" text, and would be available to it as an "Other" in some quite significant senses. Whether or not that "Other" would also be allegory's "Other" is an important question.