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Peter Crisp

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# ARTICLE

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## Allegory and symbol – a fundamental opposition?

Peter Crisp, *Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*

### Abstract

For the last 200 years in literary aesthetics a radical opposition has been drawn between allegory and symbol, though no opposition like this was drawn previously. Allegory has generally been regarded as inferior to symbol, supposedly being arbitrary and mechanical where symbol was motivated and imaginative. Although more recently post-structuralists have praised allegory over symbol, they have still believed that it is radically arbitrary. In fact, allegory and symbol are both large-scale expressions of conceptual metaphor and as such are both equally motivated and equally suggestive in meaning. The illusion of a radical opposition between them is to be explained by the ideological self-interest of literary and artistic intellectuals.

Keywords: *allegory; cognitive history; literary history; metaphor; symbol*

### I Introduction

For the last 200 years literary aesthetics has opposed allegory to symbol, generally regarding it as inferior to symbol. Symbol for Goethe, Schelling, Coleridge and their successors involved an absolute unity of form and meaning with a consequent infinite suggestibility of meaning. (Since a symbol's meaning was inseparable from its form, it could not be abstracted from that form as a precise proposition). Allegory by contrast was seen to involve an external and arbitrary relationship between form and meaning. This meaning consequently was easily abstractable and so fixed and definite, without suggestibility. Where symbol was organic and imaginative, allegory was arbitrary and mechanical. Although 20th-century academic works such as Lewis (1936), Fletcher (1964) and Tuve (1966) counteracted the denigration of allegory, they did not dislodge its generally negative reputation. More recently, however, post-structuralists such as Paul de Man have championed allegory against symbol, with the result that *allegory* is no longer a negative term in literary aesthetics. For post-structuralism allegory's supposed arbitrariness, the external relations of its signifier and signified, was its supreme virtue. Though the idea that allegory's meaning was fixed and definite was dropped, it was still seen as the antithesis of the organic motivated unity identified with symbol. So however much de Man and his followers championed allegory against symbol, they still followed Goethe and Coleridge in seeing allegory and symbol as fundamentally opposed and different.

The radical opposition of symbol and allegory which has dominated the last 200 years emerged quite suddenly. Gadamer (1993: 72) observes that in the 18th



century the senses of the lexemes *allegory* and *symbol* and their cognates were virtually indistinguishable, functioning in Winckelmann for example as synonyms. It was in attacking Winckelmann that Goethe differentiated allegory from symbol. This 18th-century non-opposition of allegory and symbol was general across Europe. In France in 1773 Court de Gebelin published *Du génie allégorique et symbolique de l'antiquité*, cited in Benichou (1996: 54), where *allégorique* and *symbolique* are as with Winckelmann virtual synonyms. In England too there was a similar lack of differentiation. Yeats (1961c: 146) observes that the definitions of *allegory* and *symbol* in Johnson's dictionary are virtually indistinguishable. The belief that there are fundamentally different things that one can call allegory and symbol thus only emerged, quite suddenly, at the end of the 18th century.

When faced with the emergence of a new conceptual opposition three possible kinds of account are available. First, the new conceptual opposition can be seen as recognizing an opposition that has always been there in reality. Second, it can be seen as reflecting or even partially constituting the emergence of a new opposition in reality. Third, it can be seen as an illusion. In the present case the first account would hold that literary practice had always employed the two modes of allegory and symbol but that their concepts had never become so explicit as to be lexicalized. The second account would hold that a radical opposition between what we now term symbol and allegory emerged in late 18th-century literary and artistic practice and that the explicit concept of this opposition expressed, or even played a part in, this emergence. The third account would hold that the opposition of allegory to symbol was an illusion, that the kinds of text referred to as allegorical or symbolic were not and never have been fundamentally different in kind. Such an account would itself have to explain the emergence of the illusion of a fundamental opposition between allegory and symbol.

What holds together the concept of a radical opposition between allegory and symbol in all its versions, Romantic, post-structuralist or whatever, is the idea that the relation between meaning and expression in allegory is arbitrary while that in symbol is deeply motivated. As Yeats (1961b: 116) put it, 'A symbol is . . . the only possible expression of some invisible essence . . . while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle'. The historically evolving concept of allegory has since the ancient Greek rhetoricians been closely linked to that of metaphor. Contemporary work on metaphor emphasizes the highly motivated nature of at least much metaphor. There is for example nothing arbitrary about the link between anger and heat in an expression such as 'He was boiling with rage'. It is rooted in the folk belief that we grow hot when we are angry, a belief probably reflecting the fact that our surface skin temperature does indeed rise when we become angry. If allegory is a form of metaphor this would suggest that allegory like symbol is well motivated and that the allegory/symbol opposition is misconceived. Before this possibility can be properly explored however we need to look in more detail at what we mean when we talk of allegory and symbol.

## 2 Terms, concepts and history

Literary terms such as *allegory* and *symbol* frequently lack clearly defined and precise senses, a fact that may reflect either the state of literary studies or the nature of their subject matter or a combination of both. Crisp (2001: 6–8) outlines the history of *allegory*. Two major senses or trends of sense occur in the rhetorical tradition, though they are never sharply demarcated. The first reflects the derivational morphology of ancient Greek *allegoria*, or ‘other speaking’, and simply denotes figurative language in general, meaning something other than what one says. The second is significantly narrower and denotes anything from sentential, as opposed to nominal or predicative, metaphor as defined in Miller (1993: 382–6), through extended metaphor up to an entire narrative poem such as *The Faerie Queene*. Allegory in all its forms was thus understood as part of the general continuum of metaphorical and figurative language. The dramatic opposition between allegory and symbol that emerged at the end of the 18th century was associated with an equally dramatic narrowing of the sense of *allegory*. The widest sense of *allegory* as figurative language in general was lost altogether and the narrower sense was narrowed still further. Only works in which metaphorical extension was pushed to the extreme of eliminating all overt reference to and direct characterization of the metaphorical target domain now qualified as allegories. That is, only extended narratives such as *The Faerie Queene* or *The Pilgrim’s Progress* or, less prototypically, shorter works such as George Herbert’s *The Pilgrimage* or Henry Vaughan’s *Regeneration*, now counted as allegories, sentential and extended metaphors being excluded. The texts referred to by Romantic and post-Romantic aestheticians as allegories were thus sharply separated from all other forms of metaphorical expression.

Crisp (2001)’s picture of the contemporary sense of *allegory* as relatively fixed and definite is somewhat simplified. It is true that in literary contexts the dramatically narrowed sense characterized above is and has been for 200 years overwhelmingly dominant. In other contexts however other senses are still available. Thus, though the widest rhetorical sense of *allegory* as figurative meaning in general does seem to be defunct, senses relating to the rhetorical tradition’s narrower sense are still active. Thus Bromiley (1979: 95), reflecting usage in Biblical studies, gives as his first definition of *allegory* ‘an extended or continued metaphor, this extension expanding from two or more statements to a whole volume, like Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*’. This definition differs from the narrower rhetorical sense only in excluding sentential metaphor. Goatly (1997: 265–6), with a background more in linguistics than literary studies, somewhat idiosyncratically identifies allegory solely with forms of extended metaphor. While giving no explicit verbal definition, his discussion and examples seem to implicitly exclude texts such as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. He cites the following from Golding’s *The Spire* (the ‘model’ referred to is a scale model of a cathedral and the typological conventions Goatly’s own):

The model was like **a man lying on his back**. The nave was **his legs placed together**, the transepts on either side were **his arms outspread**. The choir was **his body**; and the Lady Chapel, where now the services would be held, was **his head**. (1997: 265)

This passage contains both a linguistic focus and frame, that is, both literal language, cited in plain type, and metaphorical language, cited in bold. Moreover the underlined expressions all refer directly and literally to the target domain. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* or *The Faerie Queene* or Vaughan's *Regeneration* by contrast there is no linguistic frame and the references are solely to the source domain.

Some might argue that the abstract personification in works such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* does involve direct target domain reference, but this is not so. Suppose you are at a performance of *Everyman* and whisper to your companion 'That's death on the right of the stage'. You cannot be referring literally to the abstract entity death since it is logically impossible for an abstract entity to be spatially located. What you are most likely referring to is the character in the dramatic story world who is mapped onto death, though you might also be referring to the actor playing that character. Abstract personifications involve what Fauconnier (1994: 1–10, 73–81) terms pragmatic connectors, devices allowing one to refer not to an expression's primary referent but to some entity associated with that referent. In the case of abstract personification the pragmatic connector is metaphorical, the primary referent an abstract entity and the entity actually referred to a person in the allegory's fictional, story world (for further discussion, see Crisp, 2001: 16–17). The language of allegorical texts in the narrowest sense thus relates directly only to the source domain. For Goaty by contrast allegory, construed as a form of extended metaphor, contains language relating to both source and target domain. Even what he refers to as quasi-allegory, a yet more extended form of extended metaphor, to judge from the example cited from Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, contains language relating directly to the target domain, though more obscurely so than in what he terms allegory (Goaty, 1997: 267–8).

There is thus more than one current sense of *allegory*, a narrower one based in the literary tradition of the last 200 years and a range of wider ones more directly related to the rhetorical tradition. None of these senses are 'correct' or 'incorrect'. They are simply different. One may however ask which is more useful for particular analytical purposes. The rhetorical senses valuably emphasize that allegory is part of the continuum of conceptual metaphor's varied expressions. It is however also useful to be able to deal specifically with the set of texts exclusively denoted by the narrow literary sense. Since this narrowest sense emerged in the context of the opposition of allegory to symbol, with which this article is concerned, it is this sense that is used here.

If *allegory* is at present far from having a simple fixed sense, this is even truer of *symbol*. The non-phonetic abstract signs of algebra and logic, concrete

representational signs with relatively fixed meanings such as the cross, the lotus flower or the hammer and sickle, which may be realized as painting or statuary or referred to linguistically, elements of naturalistic story worlds such as the fog in the first chapter of *Bleak House*, passages in poems by Rimbaud or Mallarmé that are probably but not certainly to be construed as long extended metaphors whose target domains are unclear, national flags and many other diverse things can all be referred to as symbols. *Symbol* is currently a radically polysemous and often vague lexeme. Even in specifically literary contexts its meaning often shifts and slides. *Symbol*'s more labile semantic nature in comparison with *allegory* is probably due to its being used much more frequently and in more contexts. This greater frequency of use is probably due in turn to the positive associations that *symbol* as opposed to *allegory* has acquired over the last 200 years. In looking at the relations between allegory and symbol one cannot deal with symbol in all the senses of the term. Far too diverse a range of phenomena are involved to be dealt with in a unified fashion. The purely abstract sense of algebra and logic, to which the sense used by C.S. Peirce in his tripartition of index, icon and symbol is closely related (Peirce, 1955: 104–15), will for example be ignored. The senses that are relevant will emerge in the subsequent discussion.

Unlike *allegoria*, which denoted a form of language use, the ancient Greek *symbolon* denoted physical objects such as marks, tokens or tickets. These were conventional signs in which language had at most only a part to play. *Symbolon* however soon came to be used in a sense indistinguishable from *allegoria*. According to Gadamer (1993: 73) the first example of this is to be found in the Stoic Chrysippus, that is, in the 3rd century BCE. *Symbol* in the rhetorical tradition thus came to acquire the general sense or senses we have already seen for *allegory*, from which it was no longer sharply distinguished. Just as *symbol* was extended from the non-linguistic to the linguistic sphere, *allegory* was likewise extended from the linguistic to the non-linguistic, for paintings as well as poems came to be described as allegories. According to Gadamer (1993: 74) it is not clear exactly when this happened, though the Renaissance emblem tradition may have been the cause. By the 18th century anyway the lexeme *allegory* and its cognates were used even more of paintings than of scriptures or poems. *Symbol* and *allegory* were indeed at this time virtually indistinguishable.

The opposition between allegory and symbol emerged right across Europe at the end of the 18th century and in all cases it was the cognates of *symbol* that signified the positive value. Why was this so, if *symbol* and *allegory* had previously been virtually synonymous? The most striking thing about the new sense of *symbol* was that anything could be a symbol: poetry, a particular poem or the whole of poetry, music, visual art, natural objects, man-made objects, human beings and indeed the whole universe itself. Carlyle for instance, in the chapter of *Sartor Resartus* entitled *Symbols*, identifies as symbols such things as flags and other political signs, works of art, artists and other great men, and the universe itself. Any of these things may be a symbol because a symbol, Carlyle says, is 'some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite' in which 'the Infinite is

made to blend itself with the finite' (1902: 189). Anything in which such a blending occurs, from a flag through a poem to the universe, is a symbol. The idea that a symbol could be anything up to and including the entire universe was commonplace. Benichou quotes Madame de Staël:

Il faut, pour concevoir la vraie grandeur de la poésie lyrique . . . considérer l'univers entier comme un symbole des émotions de l'âme. [To conceive of the true grandeur of lyric poetry one must consider the entire universe as a symbol of the soul's emotions]. (1996: 244)

He also quotes Sainte-Beuve, in his earlier poetic incarnation, saying of the great artists:

Ils comprennent les flots, entendent les étoiles,  
Savent les noms des fleurs, et pour eux l'univers  
N'est qu'une seule idée en symboles divers  
[They understand the waves, comprehend the stars, know the names of the flowers, for them the universe is simply a single idea realized through varied symbols]. (1996: 415)

Gadamer quotes Goethe: 'Everything that happens is a symbol, and, in fully representing itself, it points toward everything else' (1993: 77). There was nothing uniquely linguistic about the Romantic symbol.

The original sense of *symbolon* did not denote linguistic entities, while the original sense of *allegoria* by contrast was purely linguistic in denotation. Gadamer (1993: 73–81) argues that it was this that allowed *symbol* to take on a much wider role than *allegory* at the end of the 18th century. *Symbol* was able to carry the quasi-religious concept of the revelation of the Infinite in and through any finite thing because anything, linguistic or non-linguistic, could be a symbol. This is probably the best explanation available. If it is true *symbol* and *allegory*, although largely indistinguishable in meaning in the 18th century, must still have carried a residual contrast between the linguistic and the non-linguistic. Interestingly, the definitions of *symbol* and *allegory* in Johnson's dictionary, quoted by Yeats, do indicate that *allegory* had a linguistic association that *symbol* lacked:

Even Johnson's dictionary sees no great difference [between allegory and symbol] for it calls a symbol 'That which comprehends in its figure a representation of something else'; And an allegory 'A figurative *discourse*, in which something other is intended than is contained in the *words* literally taken'. (1961c: 146; emphasis added)

What Gadamer's explanation emphasizes is the quasi-religious nature of the Romantic concept of symbol. When symbol was opposed to allegory it was a



mystical doctrine that was at issue. Symbol's organic unity of form and meaning expressed the immanence of the Infinite in the finite. The consequent infinite suggestibility of its meaning was the expression of the Infinite itself. Allegory was arbitrary and lacking in suggestibility because its finite sign had no relation to the Infinite.

### 3 A difficult opposition

During the period in which the radical opposition of allegory and symbol was emerging *symbol*, *allegory* and their cognates sometimes assumed senses the opposite of their eventual standard senses. Hegel characterized primitive visual art as symbolic, saying that in it the concept had a merely external relationship to the sensory matter of art with the result that symbolic art was crude and grotesque (1993: 82–5). Hegel's concept of the symbolic was thus very like the standard Romantic concept of allegory. Schopenhauer gave the symbolic a similarly negative value. He condemns allegorical painting, saying that in it the concept has a purely external relation to the artwork, and then speaks of an especially worthless form of 'degenerate allegory' he terms 'symbolism'. This consists of absolutely fixed allegories, as when 'the rose is the symbol of secrecy, the laurel the symbol of fame, the palm the symbol of victory' and so on (1969: 237–9). Fabre d'Olivet, quoted in Benichou (1996: 266), spoke in 1813 of 'le génie allégorique, production immédiate de l'inspiration', where 'allégorique' is much closer to the standard Romantic concept of symbol than allegory. It is not unusual for terms to display instabilities and reversals of meaning in a period of semantic change. *Allegory* and *symbol* however seem never to have fully 'settled down' in either the 19th or 20th centuries and this suggests that the conceptual opposition they expressed was difficult to maintain.

Yeats was probably the most important supporter of the symbol/allegory opposition in English. He describes a German symbolist painter:

The only symbols he cared for were the shapes and motions of the body; ears hidden by the hair, to make one think of a mind busy with inner voices . . . he would not put even a lily, or a rose, or a poppy into a picture to express purity, or love or sleep, because he thought such emblems were allegorical, and had their meaning by a traditional and not a natural right. (1961c: 147)

Yeats disagreed with this painter, thinking the lily, the rose and the poppy had acquired a deep connection with their significances through long association. The issue here is the arbitrariness or motivation of the sign/meaning link. Yeats admits that 'It is hard to say where allegory and symbolism melt into each other' (1961c: 148), and he even briefly forgets the symbol/allegory opposition altogether when he writes admiringly of a young man's 'symbolic pictures and subtle allegoric poetry', where 'allegoric' and 'symbolic' are virtually



synonymous (1993: 78). The concept of the 'anima mundi' that he went on to develop can be seen as an attempt to justify an allegory/symbol opposition to which he was deeply committed while being uneasily aware of its problematic nature. The 'anima mundi' was the collective memory of mankind including the memory of its symbols. Links between sign and meaning that were originally arbitrary, Yeats claimed, became motivated by enduring in this memory (Yeats, 1959). Yet it is difficult to see how an arbitrary relation can become motivated just by enduring.

With Yeats' pupil, and teacher, Pound the symbol/allegory distinction all but founders. He recognizes 'a sort of permanent metaphor' as being "'symbolism" in its profounder sense' (1974: 84) but rather than characterizing this 'profounder sense' goes on to condemn symbolism in what he takes to be its usual, non-profound sense, contrasting it with imagism: 'Imagisme is not symbolism. The symbolists dealt in "association", that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory . . . The symbolist's symbols have a fixed value . . . The imagiste's images have a variable significance' (1974: 84). Pound uses *symbol* here much as Schopenhauer did to denote fixed significances. The Romantic notion of the symbol is inherently vague. It is supposed to reveal something ineffable with which it is strangely consubstantial. To give content to such a notion is difficult. Not surprisingly therefore the concept of symbol has often reverted to the clearly graspable notion of a fixed significance. When it does so, however, the impulse to define another positive, mysteriously suggestive, sign has re-emerged. Pound names this positive sign the image, replacing the allegory/symbol opposition with a symbol/image opposition. This symbol/image opposition continues to be active in literary discourse. Talking at the *Alliance Française* of Hong Kong on 22 January 2002, the Hong Kong poet and short-story writer Leung Ping Kwan condemned symbols and praised images exactly in the manner of Pound.

Academic defenders of allegory in the 20th century such as Fletcher and Tuve rejected the idea of a radical opposition of symbol to allegory. Fletcher (1964) gave his *Allegory* the subtitle *The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Tuve frequently uses forms of *symbol* and its derivatives to characterize allegorical texts. The following is typical: ' . . . we must not suffocate allegory with the tightly drawn net of inflexible equations, but allow meanings to flow into and inhabit the literal so that it is symbolic also' (1966: 353). Paul de Man we have seen retained the Romantic opposition of allegory and symbol while transvaluing its values, making allegory positive and symbol negative. The concept of symbol devalued by de Man is clearly that of the Romantic tradition. As a post-structuralist he sees its claimed organic unity of sign and meaning as disguising the arbitrariness and discontinuity of all signification and being. His relation to allegory is more complicated. He accepts its sharp opposition to symbol but, apart from the supposed arbitrariness of its sign/meaning relation, there is little in his account relating to any standard sense of *allegory*. It seems enough for him to classify a text as allegorical if it undermines, or he judges it to undermine, the organic unity associated with symbol. In de Man (1983) such an undermining is linked to

the acceptance of time as denying unity to human experience. In de Man (1979) it is linked to overcoming the illusion of unity supposedly promoted by metaphor and claims of textual readability. De Man himself recognizes that the sense he gives *allegory* is highly idiosyncratic. He speaks of 'our sense of allegory' and, using scare quotes, of 'what is here being referred to as "allegorical" poetry' (1983: 223). Just how idiosyncratic his definition is is shown by his classifying Wordsworth's *A slumber did my spirit seal* as an allegory (1983: 223–4). In attempting to retain the allegory/symbol opposition he comes close to emptying the concept of allegory of any content at all. This opposition has again and again proved difficult to maintain in any substantial version.

#### 4 The motivation of allegory and symbol

The claim of the last 200 years that symbol and allegory are fundamentally opposed in nature has rested on the belief that, while symbol is radically motivated, allegory is radically arbitrary. If this belief is false, the claim falls to the ground. Allegory, in the maximally narrow sense dominant in literary discourse over the last 200 years, is a form of metaphor extended to the point where the linguistic focus/frame contrast is eliminated and the conceptual source domain becomes a, fictional, text world (Crisp, 2001). (The term 'text world' is used here to cover the same kinds of phenomena as in Semino [1997]).

Approaches to metaphor over the last 40 or more years in linguistics, cognitive psychology and philosophy have repeatedly emphasized its conceptual nature (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Black, 1981; Kittay, 1987; Ortony, 1993; Gibbs, 1994). Metaphor is rooted in our using more familiar or experientially basic concepts to understand less familiar, less experientially basic, concepts (Gentner, 1982; Gentner and Gentner, 1982; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Gibbs, 1994). It is thus highly motivated in nature, its motivation residing in the nature of the human mind. Our minds are naturally adapted to dealing directly with everyday forms of embodied experience. When we think metaphorically we project such directly constituted conceptual structures, or source domains, onto less directly constituted structures, or target domains. The relationship between source and target domain is thus highly motivated in two ways. First, the source domain is typically more experientially basic than the target domain. Second, the two domains must share sufficient conceptual structure to allow one to be mapped onto another. Not just any domain can be mapped onto any domain (Gentner, 1983; Lakoff, 1990). The relationship between conceptual domains in metaphor is thus highly motivated and non-arbitrary. If allegory is a form of metaphor then it too is highly motivated and non-arbitrary.

The non-arbitrary nature of allegory, rooted as it is in conceptual metaphor, is well shown by *The Pilgrim's Progress*. This is based on the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. (For a detailed and historically contextualized account of this conceptual metaphor's realization by Bunyan, see Crisp, 2003). Grady

(1999: 79–87) has shown that individual conceptual metaphors such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY are specifications of very general, or primary, metaphors that are directly motivated by correlations in everyday experience. Thus LIFE IS A JOURNEY is rooted in the correlation between following a path to its end and fulfilling a purpose, as when a child crosses a room to get a sweet. It is a specification of the EVENT STRUCTURE metaphor, a set of interlocking primary metaphors. There are many kinds of metaphor and not all are rooted in experiential correlations, a point that Grady (1999) is anxious to emphasize. Many for instance are based on resemblance. Resemblance however is just as motivated as correlation, for what a human being perceives as a resemblance between things depends on the nature both of the things and of the mind that perceives them. It is doubtful whether the relation between a metaphorical source and target domain is ever purely arbitrary. Certainly, this is at the very least very rarely the case. As a form of metaphor allegory is thus highly motivated and its link between sign and meaning anything but arbitrary, for that link is the cognitively motivated link between a metaphorical source and target domain.

The mistaken Romantic belief in the arbitrary nature of the allegorical sign/meaning relation was held to entail that allegory's meanings were mechanically fixed and definite. Once the metaphorical nature of allegory is firmly grasped however this belief too reveals itself as misconceived. Formulae such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY are, as Lakoff (1993: 207) emphasizes, mere mnemonics for complex source to target domain mappings. (In this article only the two-domain model of conceptual metaphor is considered; for the effects of metaphorical blending on allegorical scenes, not themselves blends but possible situations, see Crisp, 2005.) With any such mapping there are certain obvious correspondences, such as that of the beginning of a journey to birth and its end to death, but beyond these there is an indefinite number of further possible correspondences whose activation depends upon pragmatic context. The degree of such activation is a radically pragmatic matter that can probably never be exactly specified. (The relevance theoretical notion of weak implicature is highly relevant here [Sperber and Wilson, 1995].) What applies to metaphor in general applies to allegory in particular. It is as suggestive in meaning as any other form of metaphor. Take for example the second room of the House of Busirane into which Britomart penetrates in *The Faerie Queene*, III, xi. This gorgeously decorated room is presented with great poetic power as eerily empty. There is of course no precise specification of the mappings to be made from this room onto the target domain of what Spenser takes to be the psychologically painful state of adulterous love. One can endlessly explore possible correspondences between the room's gorgeous but eerie emptiness and an emotional state combining passion, isolation and guilt. Spenser gives us a psychological allegory of great suggestive power. One can of course specify that the House of Busirane maps onto the psychological and moral state of adulterous courtly love, but that simply provides the starting point for the construction of an indefinitely extendable set of source/target correspondences. Those who have believed that allegorical

meanings are fixed and definite have mistaken the specification of such starting points for the whole process of realizing a metaphorical mapping.

There is no basis for opposing symbol as something motivated and suggestive to allegory as something arbitrary, unmotivated and semantically fixed. Nevertheless there is little sign of lexical usage reverting to the situation of 200 hundred years ago when *allegory* and *symbol* were virtual synonyms. If we must reject the idea of allegory and symbol as things different in kind, we can still ask what sort of differentiation the *allegory/symbol* antonymy may now usefully express. We saw earlier that *symbol* is more radically polysemous than *allegory*. In differentiating symbol from allegory we cannot therefore have in mind every sort of 'symbol'. (Algebraic symbols for example are clearly irrelevant.) There is however a prominent literary use of *symbol* that very naturally pairs with *allegory* in its narrow literary sense. This sense denotes such things as the fog in *Bleak House*, the dust heap in *Our Mutual Friend*, the ship crossing the Atlantic in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* or the snake in Lawrence's poem *Snake*. These are all elements in text worlds that are also used as metaphorical source domain entities. With allegory in the narrow literary sense a fictional world is created that exists ultimately only for the sake of its function as a metaphorical source domain. With the corresponding sense of *symbol* by contrast there is an antecedently existing story world elements of which also function, occasionally or persistently, as sources for cross-domain mappings.

The eponymous snake of Lawrence's poem emerges 'from a fissure in the earth-wall'. Its return into this fissure is described as follows:

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,  
 And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and  
     entered farther,  
 A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing  
     into that horrid black hole,  
 Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing  
     Himself after,  
 Overcame me now his back was turned.

(1993: 350)

The sexual symbolism is obvious. The snake maps onto the male sexual part, the fissure and hole onto the female, and the snake going into the hole onto sexual union. These are the starting points for a metaphoric mapping quite as suggestive as Britomart in the House of Busirane. The mapping is an image mapping, concrete perceptible things being mapped onto other concrete perceptible things, but clearly carries a great deal of conceptual freight (Lakoff and Turner, 1989: 92). The sense of 'horror' at the snake 'going into the blackness' expresses a profound ambivalence towards sexual union between man and woman, an ambivalence that means that the symbolic meaning could never be precisely specified. In a similar fashion the symbolic meaning of the fog in the first

chapter of *Bleak House* could likewise never be precisely specified. The basis of this meaning is the conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING, itself a specification of the MIND-AS-BODY metaphor (Sweetser, 1990: 23–48). The fog blocking visibility maps onto the ignorance of those trapped in the English legal system. They cannot understand what they are caught up in. Yet this again is only the starting point for a range of possible correspondences that could never be precisely delimited.

There is of course nothing surprising in showing that symbolic meaning is motivated and highly suggestive. What is surprising, in the light of the last 200 years of literary aesthetics, is that this motivated suggestiveness is no different in kind from that of allegory and originates in exactly the same general metaphorical processes. The difference between allegory and symbol in the relevant literary senses is simply that in allegory the text world functions continuously as a metaphorical source domain, while with symbol it does so only occasionally. The result is that symbol tends to be more opportunistic and less structured than allegory. A major consequence of this is that, while allegory usually involves continuous narrative, since this is needed to structure its text world, symbol in contrast tends to involve individual scenes and entities, such as a fog, a dust heap, a ship or a snake, for here the narrative exists antecedently to the occasional symbolic functions of some of its elements. The distinctions between allegory and symbol in the relevant senses are well worth drawing attention to and analysing. They do not however amount to a fundamental opposition in kind.

## 5 Genesis of an illusion

If there is no fundamental opposition in kind between allegory and symbol, how did the illusion of such an opposition arise? This is clearly a historical question and can only be answered historically. Allegory as a major mode of metaphoric expression was in decline from the late 17th century. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was the last major allegory in English. It is not that allegory has ever died out completely. Addison quite consciously revived it as a minor essayistic mode in the early 18th century and writers have never ceased, more or less spontaneously, to use whole fictional text worlds continuously as metaphorical source domains. The short story has persistently if not frequently produced allegories, as in Stevenson (1979), Forster (1954) and Lewis (1983). A longer text such as Orwell's *Animal Farm* is also clearly an allegory, its story world mapping in a continuous and detailed fashion onto the events and circumstances of the Russian revolution and Stalin's rise to power. One might also speak of a kind of 'weak allegory' in much genre fiction. In crime or detective novels the relation between the underworld and the forces of justice may represent religious patterns of sin, punishment and atonement, while in old science fiction alien invasions may represent communist subversion.<sup>1</sup> With the notion of weak allegory however we are on the borderline between allegory and symbol. Literary aesthetics has for the

last 200 years mainly assumed that something is an allegory if and only if there is a continuous metaphorical mapping from its story world onto some metaphorical target domain. This is equivalent to assuming a classical definition of the meaning of *allegory* in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. This however does not mean that *allegory* defined in this way is not referentially vague, for one of the defining terms, 'continuous' in 'continuous metaphorical mapping', is itself referentially vague. Just how frequently realized does a mapping have to be to be continuous? There is obviously no precise answer to this. As a result there is no sharp, but rather a highly fuzzy, boundary between allegory with its 'continuous' mappings and symbol with its 'occasional' mappings. This emphasizes yet again that, although there is a distinction worth making between allegory and symbol, it is one of degree rather than kind. It is real enough but not sharp. Thus, although we can identify many instances of minor and weak allegory since the end of the 17th century, it is still true to say that allegory has not been a major form for well over 200 years. There is no illusion about this. When Goethe and his successors sharply separated allegory from all other forms of metaphorical expression, they were stigmatizing as mechanical and unimaginative a genre that was vulnerable because it was no longer productive in a major way.

It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article to analyse the reasons for allegory's decline. One important aspect of this decline needs however to be noted. Although allegory was not exclusively linked to religious subject matter in medieval and Renaissance Europe, love being an important element in the allegorical tradition from *Le Roman de la Rose* onwards, it was nevertheless a predominantly religious mode. Tuve (1966) shows this very forcefully, and shows especially the importance for secular literature of the traditions for interpreting the Bible allegorically. Amongst the three most important allegories in English, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the first and the third are exclusively religious in theme while the second combines themes of religion and love. Medieval and Renaissance traditions of allegory were inextricably bound up with orthodox Christian traditions of religious symbolism and Biblical interpretation. The decline of allegory was closely linked to the decline of orthodox Christianity as the unquestioned frame of reference for European cultures. When Goethe and his successors attacked allegory they were attacking something identified with older forms of religious orthodoxy. When they praised symbol they were setting up their own 'imaginative' alternative to that orthodoxy. The situation was brilliantly if polemically characterized by Walter Benjamin:

The striving on the part of the romantic aestheticians after a resplendent but ultimately non-committal knowledge of an absolute has secured a place . . . for a notion of symbol which has nothing more than the name in common with the genuine notion. This latter . . . is the one used in the field of theology. (1977: 159–60)



We have arrived at the heart of the emergence of the opposition of symbol and allegory, what Benichou (1996) refers to as 'le sacre de l'écrivain', the anointing of the writer. In medieval and early modern Europe the Church and its elite members were the seat of intellectual and ideological authority. The Enlightenment changed all that with the full emergence of a secular intelligentsia whose often fierce antagonism to traditional religion is partially explained by its desire to oust a rival. The Enlightenment rejected the category of religious mystery; however, due to a range of political shocks and psychological needs, portions of the secular intelligentsia came in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to feel the need for a 'free' version of religious mystery, one to be supplied above all by poets and artists. This is what the doctrine of the symbol was about (Benichou, 1996: *passim*). The symbol was the free expression of the religiously inexpressible in the constantly shifting contexts of art and the world. The rejection of allegory, in its time referred to indifferently as allegory or symbol, was bound up with the rejection of traditional religious symbolism. Allegory was found unsympathetic because it was so closely linked to traditional religious orthodoxy and had become largely incomprehensible because the traditions of detailed religious symbolism that gave it sense had been lost as a consequence of secularization. Interestingly, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a deliberately accessible, popular, and relatively 'simple' allegory, continued to be ever more widely read in the 19th century. Allegory had not really become incomprehensible and repulsive as such. Rather its traditional forms had mostly become so. It might in fact be better to talk not of the replacement of allegory by symbol but rather of the replacement of traditional religious symbolism and allegory by more free-floating, semi-secularized, forms of symbolism and allegory.

The idea that symbol and allegory were fundamentally opposed in kind, that while allegory was arbitrary and mechanical symbol embodied the Infinite in and through the finite, was thus the ideological expression of the desire on the part of many literary and artistic intellectuals to constitute an informal, secular clergy. The symbol as they vaguely conceived it embodied their claim to quasi-religious authority. Ideological beliefs are motivated by interest rather than rationally justified (Giddens, 1979: 165–97). They thus frequently turn out to be rationally unjustified when scrutinized. The belief in a fundamental opposition of kind between allegory and symbol obeys this general rule. Allegory we have seen is not arbitrary and mechanical. Symbol is indeed, like allegory, highly motivated and endlessly suggestive but this is due not to some quasi-mystical union of the Infinite with the finite but to the nature of conceptual metaphor of which symbol and allegory both are large-scale expressions. The more recent post-structuralist 'revival' of allegory has of course rejected the idea of allegorical meaning as fixed and definite, and its radical relativism is part of a social situation in which intellectuals can no longer plausibly claim a quasi-clerical status. Nevertheless, though finding it difficult to give a positive account of allegory, it has clung to the idea of its being radically arbitrary and unmotivated. This however is precisely what we have seen it is not. As an expression of conceptual metaphor



allegory like symbol is highly motivated, motivated by the very nature of human cognition. To study allegory is to study a fascinating range of unique historical contexts and transformations. These contexts and transformations however can only be understood in the light of the constants of human cognition.

## Note

- 1 For the notion and examples of 'weak allegory', as well as the example of *Animal Farm*, I am indebted to the comments of an extremely perceptive reviewer, whose other comments I only wish I had the space to follow-up.

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## Address

Peter Crisp, Dept. of English, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong. [petercrisp@cuhk.edu.hk]