

Patrick Fessenbecker

How Do You Know an Allegory When You See One?

Gary Johnson: *The Vitality of Allegory. Figural Narrative in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press 2012. 296 pp. Hardcover USD 41.95. ISBN 978-0814211823

In his new book, notable for its brevity and clarity, Gary Johnson attempts two goals. The first is a recuperation of allegory, both as a term applicable to contemporary narratives and as a category of fiction worthy of attention. Johnson traces a history of literary criticism, starting with Samuel Coleridge, whereby the notion of an ‘allegory’ fell into critical disfavor, and then rejects the assumptions that led critics like Coleridge to prefer the aesthetics of the ‘symbolic’. The second major goal of the book is to introduce and defend a critical vocabulary capable of conceptualizing the many different kinds of allegory: a distinction between “strong” and “weak” allegory is central to the book’s argument, and the later chapters of the book develop a number of additional categories – “thematic allegory”, “ironic allegory”, and so forth – that Johnson uses to capture various nuances in a text’s structure.

Structure of the book

Johnson opens the book with an explication of his definition of an allegory: it is a work “that fulfills its rhetorical purpose by means of the transformation of some phenomenon into a figural narrative” (p. 9). Suggesting that part of the reason allegory has fallen into disfavor is a too-narrow definition of the term, Johnson contends that critics need to reject the view that sees allegory as “only a genre”, and correspondingly develop a “theoretical approach to allegory” that attends to texts which are not allegories proper but which “have traces or hints of allegory in them” (p. 4). Thus, the book’s six chapters – the first five of which are devoted to explicating a different kind of allegory – are at once steps in his development of an interpretive framework and in his overall recuperative argument, as they detect the “traces” of allegory in texts which a more stringent definition of the term would not classify as such.

The book’s first two chapters offer readings, respectively, of what Johnson calls “strong” and “weak” allegory. “Strong allegory”, he explains, is what one might think of as allegory proper. In such a text, each of the “disparate parts of an individual narrative work together to produce a strong sense of thematic coherence” (p. 36); in other words, every element of a text fits into a reading of

it as an expression of a message. Johnson offers two examples, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1946) and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1949), and in both cases suggests that a clear grasp of the author's intention is a central element of an allegorical interpretation. In particular, borrowing a term from Peter Rabinowitz (1987), he argues that a movement from the "narrative audience" to the "authorial audience" – from the audience that enters diegetically into the world of the story, to the audience that grasps what the author intends the movements in that world to represent – is an essential feature of strong allegory (p. 39). "Weak allegory", on the other hand, occurs when one part of the text seems to invite an allegorical reading while other parts contradict that reading; it is a narrative "that *evokes* allegory while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it" (p. 54, emphasis in original). Here, Johnson's primary example is Franz Kafka, and in particular his short story *The Metamorphosis* (1915). As Johnson argues, the fact that Gregor's transformation into a cockroach is – to say the least – not "mimetic" invites an allegorical interpretation; however, the fact that the text's other elements do not cohere to make Gregor's change a figure for some larger point confounds the allegorical impulse, and thus makes the text a "weak" allegory.

The next three chapters address "embedded allegory", "thematic allegory", and "ironic allegory". "Embedded allegory" involves brief allegorical narratives included in larger framing narratives; Johnson recognizes three sub-categories depending on the "nature of the relationship" between the frame and the embedded narrative (p. 82). "Independent" allegories, where the examples are Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), are parables with messages that seem to connect to the work's broader theme. More precisely, the reading of the embedded allegory points a reader to the view that the entire work must be allegorical, and further seems to connect to the broader allegorical meaning of the whole text. "Dependent" allegories, however, do not point outward to the entire work in this way. The example Johnson gives is John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958), which contains a deeply figurative dream on the part of one of its characters. While the dream is an allegory, Johnson argues, it serves only to further characterize the dreamer, and does not lead one to see the entire work as an allegory. Finally, interdependent allegories are essentially intertextual, involving the embedding of an allegory drawn from another text entirely. These can include famous cultural archetypes, like the figure of Satan, but also more contemporary allusions, as in the use of Kafka's stories in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003).

In the chapter on "thematic" allegory, Johnson notes the close relationship between reading for the theme and reading for an allegorical message (a point I will return to in a moment); he illustrates the distinction by offering a reading of Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) that shows it as thematizing and critiquing precisely the impulse towards allegory. Roth's novel emerges, then, as a story which is about allegory but which is not itself one. "Ironic Allegory" contrasts Dante with Thomas Mann, and argues that *Death in Venice* (1912) ironically undermines its protagonist's story about himself: while Aschenbach tries

to construct one allegory about himself and his aesthetic admiration for the young Tadzio, the growing distance between the protagonist and the narrator undermines this allegory, showing his sexual desire and ultimately his downfall. The final chapter of the book weaves together these categories in a reading of an additional John Barth story, arguing that this more nuanced set of categories reveals the allegorical elements in even such a postmodern story as “Click” (2004).

Core Arguments

Johnson positions his argument within two debates in literary criticism. In terms of the history of debates about allegory, his primary interlocutor is Paul de Man, and in particular his famous essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality” (1969). On Johnson’s reading, de Man values allegory because it “thematizes” the gap between the sign and its meaning; as he puts it, “allegory, for de Man, stands as testament to the unbridgeability of this difference separating signifier and signified” (p. 72). Against this impulse, Johnson wants to emphasize the fact that oftentimes the difference seems quite bridgeable: “Readers of actual allegories, I contend, usually find that the allegorical signs succeed pretty well in representing something” (p. 15). The sort of allegories de Man might emphasize fall in Johnson’s account into the category of “weak allegories”: certainly there are texts that invite allegorical responses and then frustrate them, but for Johnson these are by no means characteristics of allegory as a whole.

The second major critical discussion in which Johnson participates is narratological. Here, his primary interlocutor is James Phelan: he draws particularly on Phelan’s notion that the process of reading narrative involves a “feedback loop” where “genetic issues”, “the text itself”, and “readerly concerns” exist in a recursive relationship that produces meaning (p. 16). As Johnson explains, his various categories will often be distinguishable through their input into this feedback loop: strong allegories will see genetic issues – the author’s intention in composition, for example – aligning with the text itself, whereas weak allegories are quite likely to see conflicts.

The book would perhaps have benefited from fuller characterizations of both of these debates. For instance, while Paul de Man and Samuel Coleridge are undoubtedly important figures in the history of thinking about allegory, they are hardly the only critics worthy of significant engagement: to mention two of the most significant, Hans Georg-Gadamer is reduced to one passage summarizing a history of the demotion of allegory, and Walter Benjamin is lumped in with de Man as a writer who “recast” allegory “in terms that would be more appealing to a twentieth-century audience” (p. 71). While there are important connections between the thinking about allegory in Benjamin and de Man, this would seem to be painting with a rather broad brush.

Similarly, Johnson's key move of rejecting the view that allegory is a genre has a longer history, and is less controversial, than he acknowledges. For instance, Theresa Kelley's *Reinventing Allegory* (1997) receives a single mention: Johnson reduces her to one of a list of critics who think that allegory is "dead" (p. 1-2). But it is precisely the point of Kelley's argument that allegory survived into modernity by mingling with other genres. As she puts it, "because allegory after the Renaissance often looks like a transgressive mutant of earlier forms, it is more useful to approach its modern history with a different premise about how genres work. Much as Renaissance theories of genre emphasize the "resources of kind" in generic hybrids and modes, so does allegory gain new strength by being impure, anomalous, and monstrous" (p. 10). This does not seem very different from Johnson's view; in fact, Kelley's point that modern allegory is not separable as a distinct genre, and has reinvented itself by blurring generic boundaries, seems essentially identical with his claim that critics need to recognize allegorical elements in works that cannot be classified as traditional allegories. And it is frankly odd to cite her as claiming that allegory dies after the Renaissance, since the book goes on to trace the allegorical elements in nineteenth-century figures like J.M.W. Turner and Robert Browning and concludes with a discussion of Iris Murdoch and Angela Carter.

Perhaps there is some key point of difference between Johnson and Kelley that justifies this dismissal. However, it is far from clear what precisely that point might be, especially in absence of a discussion of her view. In his presentation, the key figure advocating the allegory-as-genre-claim is Edwin Honig, and Johnson presents his own alternate view as an original response. Honig's account of allegory, however, is at this point fifty years old (his *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory* first appeared in 1959) and thus Johnson's decision to make Honig his primary interlocutor represents a troubling dismissal of later scholarship.

It is worth acknowledging, however, that Johnson is admirably humble about the status of the categories he has developed. He would not say that his categories are either exhaustive of the kinds of allegory or mutually exclusive (p. 9), and ends with the hope that he has "raised more questions about allegory" (p. 198) than he could answer. While he could and should have done more work to acknowledge his predecessors and fellows, such humility seems to me to merit a charitable response. In the spirit of raising some questions about allegory, then, let me turn from the history of criticism and press Johnson on one of his key terms.

Over the course of the book, it emerges that the key distinguishing feature of allegory is its use of what he calls "figural" transformation. This emerges most clearly when he's considering an objection, addressing an interlocutor who wonders whether reading for a weak allegory is just identical to reading for the theme:

Could we reasonably argue [...] that Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* offers us a choice among a number of potentially strong themes, including the sense of alienation experienced by modern humans or the difficulties of the writer's life? The short answer is that we certainly could [...] *Yet in these particular examples I suspect that*

readers will always be pulled toward allegorical interpretations because of the respective narratives' emphasis on figuration. (p. 135, emphasis mine)

When the rubber hits the road, then, what makes a text an allegory is its use of “figures” (cf. p. 7).

As I understand Johnson’s view, there are two elements that serve to create a “figure”, of the sort that invites a reader to allegorical interpretation. First, to be a figure is to violate the expectations of mimesis. This emerges at various moments in the text: “allegory is figurative or symbolic, and this serves to distinguish it from mimetic fiction” (p. 13); it is the “tension between the figural and the mimetic” that makes *The Metamorphosis* a weak allegory (p. 66); and when the narrator of *American Pastoral* “abandons the allegorized version of the protagonist”, he does so “for something more mimetic” (p. 137). Second, it seems that to be a figure is necessarily to be a character. Johnson does not quite say this, but it seems implicit in the non-mimetic criterion: after all, mimesis is primarily about the realistic representation of a character. Moreover, when he contends that “narrative is essential for allegory” because it creates a transformative process, the transformation seems largely to consist in establishing a link between a character and an abstract idea (p. 14). Johnson is slightly more inclined to speak of “plot”, as in his suggestion that concepts like “plot and temporal progression” are essential to the allegorizing process (p. 14), but it’s tough to see how an event in a plot could be figural without involving a character.

I want to raise a few questions about this means for detecting allegory, which seems to require more argument than Johnson gives. First, the notion that characters are figural and therefore allegorical precisely to the extent they are not mimetic precludes the possibility that a character might be both at once. Surely it is possible, in other words, to write a narrative that is both realistic and which conveys an allegorical message. Indeed, and this would be my second worry: one might think that a character could be allegorical *precisely to the extent* that he or she is mimetic. Put another way, insofar as characters realistically represent the experience of a larger class of people, they serve as “figures” for that class and thus allegorically refer to them. And surely this was one of the goals of the great social realist novels of the nineteenth century: one would miss the point of their respective stories, in other words, if one took *Madame Bovary*, *Oliver Twist*, or *Tess Durbeyfield* to be merely characters in a story and not figural references to a larger set of experiences that Gustave Flaubert, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Hardy meant to communicate.

At one point, Johnson establishes a version of this sense of the larger reference as a primary criterion for the successful reading of an allegory:

A reader of *Animal Farm* who remains confined to the narrative audience [...] has a very different experience with the narrative than does a reader who truly engages with what he or she is meant to be doing [...] if the reader never makes the jump from pigs and sheep to Trotsky and Lenin, then the entire rhetorical premise of the act of narrative communication has broken down. (p. 39)

In other words, it is essential for reading an allegory to move to the rhetorical message behind a given story. However, one might say very much the same

thing about the proper reading of truly mimetic stories: if one never makes the basic move from the story of Tess of the D'Urbervilles to the larger parable about women in nineteenth-century society – captured in Hardy's subtitle, "A Pure Woman" – then one might readily say the "act of narrative communication has broken down".

One might make the same point a slightly different way in the context of fundamental literary devices. Johnson opens the book with a brief history of the term "allegory", noting the relationship made between metaphor and allegory in classical rhetoric (p. 4-5). He persuasively argues that allegory cannot be thought of as a species of metaphor; as he puts it in his discussion of Aesop, "the substitutions in this parable do not depend on similarity [as they would in metaphor, P.F.]; instead, they result from the author's need to realize his rhetorical purpose" (p. 6). Johnson doesn't consider, however, one of metaphor's closest cousins – metonymy. But I am inclined to think some allegories work through exactly this device, letting the story of one person in a class stand as a parable or fable about – or allegory for – the experience of a much larger group of people, linked to the individual story only through association.

This contention is perhaps too broad to defend fully here, but let me note briefly that it is of a piece with those writers on allegory who would challenge the distinction between the "allegorical" and the "exemplary". Presumably, an invocation of this distinction would be the most natural response to my objection: Tess Durbeyfield is not an allegory for nineteenth-century British women, because she is an example of one. But as Paul Suttie puts it in an essay on Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, it is not clear that this distinction addresses the real problem. Suttie argues that

[a]n exemplary character no more literally 'is' what he or she exemplifies – the individual fictional person no more literally 'is' a *kind* of person – than the sort of character we would call a personification literally 'is' that thing, impersonal in kind; both types of reading [allegorical and exemplary, P.F.], equally, involve taking one thing as the sign of another. (Suttie 2000, 314, emphasis in original)

In other words, Hardy's Tess is not the set of real-world nineteenth-century British women, any more than Orwell's pigs are the set of real-world Soviet-style totalitarians. Both writers are using the story to signify something broader, and the critic does not answer the question of how texts invite readers to consider that broader significance by eliminating from consideration those texts where the particular character is a literal instance of the broader set in question.

Implications

My worry about Johnson's argument is thus twofold. Locally, I think he needs an additional category of allegory: namely, mimetic allegory, where a text is at once figural and realistic. More fundamentally, it seems to me his interpretive approach needs a more precise methodology; if it is possible for a text to be both mimetic and allegorical, then the fact that a text is not mimetic cannot be

the only means of inviting a reader to an allegorical interpretation. There is something right about Johnson's approach: to see characters as allegorical is to think that their actions require some other explanation than simply the desire to create realistic effect, and often that other explanation would involve an author's desire to communicate a message. But since it is possible to communicate a message precisely through realistic portrayals, the question of how to detect a 'figure' seems still unanswered.

To put this in narratological terms, one might borrow from James Phelan's useful distinction between mimetic and thematic approaches to character. While they might seem to be opposed, I am asking what happens when a character is thematically significant – and perhaps therefore allegorically meaningful – precisely because she is mimetic. As Phelan puts the point, writers can “employ mimetic means to didactic ends [...]: characters can be, simultaneously, possible persons and vehicles for carrying ideas” (p. 284). And I do not think a theory of modern allegory can be complete without an answer to this question.

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Patrick Fessenbecker
 Program for Cultures, Civilizations, and Ideas
 Bilkent University
 Ankara, Turkey 06800
 E-mail: pfessenbecker@bilkent.edu.tr

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