Allegory in America: From Puritanism to Postmodernism (Studies in Literature and Religion)

Madsen, Deborah Lea

Extract from: Deborah L. Madsen, *Allegory in America: From Puritanism to Postmodernism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996. ISBN: 978-0-333-64618-2

INTRODUCTION

The substance of this book has evolved over a number of years. Initially, I became interested in the poststructuralist reappraisal of allegory and the apparent potential of allegory to explain characteristics of American postmodernist writing. From there, I worked backwards, as it were, to the nineteenth-century Renaissance narratives of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, which referred me to the origins of allegorical interpretation in classical and biblical exegesis. From there, I pursued an evolving tradition of allegorical hermeneutics through the upheavals of the European Reformation, and the emergence of a distinctive style of Protestant allegory, to the rhetoric of the Puritan mission in the New World. Much of this earlier work formed the substance of *Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre* (1994) which, as the title suggests, explores the generic status of

allegory. What intrigued me in the course of the research, more than the remarkable longevity of this style of writing and the narrative genre to which it gave rise, was the coincidence between the writing of culturally significant narratives in an allegorical style and a moment of peculiar cultural tension, even crisis. Allegorical interpretation originated in ancient Greece at a time when the sacred myths of Homer and Hesiod were coming under attack from a sceptical audience which rejected the literal truth supposedly represented by these stories. Hebraic culture, particularly the community at Alexandria, took up the hermeneutic strategy offered by allegory in order to protect the Torah from the threat posed by invasive Greek philosophies to the authority of the sacred book. And Christian exegetes made use of allegory in order to incorporate the Hebrew Testament, together with the New Testament, into a new Bible which would answer pagan and Judaistic hostilities towards the new Christian theology. Again and again, at any moment when the textual justification for a particular cultural order was threatened by historical change or by a shift in dominant beliefs, it was to allegorical interpretation that exegetes had recourse, in order to shore up the authority and legitimacy of their sacred book.

The case has been no different in the history of American rhetoric. Confronted with the mystery of the New World and the hostility of its landscape, the Puritan colonists of the first generation also had recourse to allegorical interpretation. They interpreted their mission as a sacred calling out of the spiritual bondage of Europe and into the New Canaan of America. There, this

saving remnant of God's European congregation would establish a purified and perfectly reformed Church to stand as an example to all the churches of the world; they would found a nation to be as 'a citie upon a hill', a redeemer nation capable of saving all the peoples of the earth from their unredeemed selves. They interpreted their trials as signs of God's merciful chastisement of His chosen people. Starvation, Indian attack, disease and internecine conflict all symbolized God's concern for their spiritual welfare and for the success of their mission. Hardship was God's means of warning them of the dangers of complacency as well as of backsliding. The allegorical interpretation of these experiences within the context of biblical models, particularly the example of Moses who led his redeemed people out of bondage in Egypt into the freedom of the Promised Land, lent legitimacy to the sufferings of the settlers and also to their colonial ambitions but, perhaps more importantly, this style of allegorical interpretation gave rise to a powerful mythology of the colonized New World.

Allegory provided the rhetorical structure for what has become a pervasive and long-lived mythology of the New World, whilst the 'grand narrative' of America as a 'redeemer' nation produced a corresponding ideology of manifest destiny. What this meant, within the terms of allegorical rhetoric, was that the manifest sacred destiny of America was to subdue and to redeem the wilderness of the continent: this was the predestined future mapped out for those who would look to the biblical models inscribed by God. This vision of American national identity has since become known as American 'exceptionalism' and this term will

appear again and again in this study of American allegory. For allegory's engagement in the rhetoric of national identity is twofold. Allegory not only provided the powerful rhetorical means for expressing such an 'exceptional' national destiny, allegory also made available a focus for those whose vision of what New World history *should* look like departed from the orthodox view of America as a redeemer nation. Allegory became the rhetoric of dissent as well as the voice of orthodoxy. And this duality has been sustained throughout the history of American allegory, from its seventeenth-century beginnings to the late twentieth century. Just *how* allegory evolved this function within the context of American culture is the focus of this book.

The first chapter offers a survey of the Old World models of allegory that were taken to the New World by the first generation of Puritan settlers. These expressions of allegory's potential, both as a method of interpretation and as a narrative genre, provided a measure of what allegory could achieve. At the same time, these allegorical structures functioned as a common exegetical language, comprehensible to the congregationalist theologians of the Old World who formed the primary audience for colonial rhetoric. It was they whom the American Puritans desired to convert to their vision of a purified and truly reformed Church. Allegory provided a structure of thought common to both and a metaphorical site for their ecclesiastical debate. Therefore, the inherited models of allegorical discourse exerted a prescriptive influence over the evolving form of colonial allegory. The chapters that follow address this evolution by sketching out the

tradition of American allegory. This is not an exhaustive account of all of the varieties of allegorical practice that have emerged within the American literary tradition. Rather, I focus upon the mainstream and in particular upon the tradition of dissent which reacts against the long-lived Puritan mythology of the redeemer nation. At first, colonial dissidents such as Roger Williams provide the terms for an investigation into the rhetoric of a counter-discourse of New World potentialities. This counter-history is expressed in terms that work upon the vocabulary of allegorical typology in such a way as to subvert that rhetorical structure and turn it against its orthodox purpose. Allegory is made to work against itself and to expose the ideological manouevring that underlies orthodox typology.

The relationship between allegory and typology is complex, as will become apparent in the historical account of the two rhetorical forms. Basically, however, typology is a form of allegory. All typology is allegorical. But not all allegory is typological. Typology represents a formal restriction of the interpretative possibilities opened up by allegorical exegesis. In the argument that unfolds here, it is my contention that in the American tradition the typological restriction of allegorical freedom is politically motivated. The indeterminacy of allegorical expression and the freedom of thought that it encourages is regulated by the practice of typology which draws all signs into a strict pattern of promise and fulfillment. But this repressive power of typology has been coopted by a number of important American writers who have used the structuring capacity of

typology to express an alternative and dissenting vision of America's national identity and national destiny.

In the tradition of colonial dissidents, American Romantics such as Hawthorne and Melville used allegorical rhetoric to question the mythology of the New World and the relevance of America's exceptional dispensation to the culture of nineteenth-century America. Where Emerson saw a symbolic aesthetic as equal to the task of expressing America's spiritual destiny, Hawthorne and Melville use an allegorical discourse to expose the weaknesses of Emerson's position and to reveal the potential dangers of the subjective epistemology that Emerson recommends. The modern practice of allegory follows the sceptical precedent of Hawthorne and Melville rather than the example of Emerson. In the twentieth century allegory is represented, theoretically, as a fundamental expression of dissidence. Modern allegory confronts us with the unknowability of transcendent categories of experience and restricts our sphere of questioning to the subjective. The entire issue of national spiritual destiny is displaced into the issue of whether any meaning can ever carry an objective authority and collective significance. Postmodernist allegory, then, asks whether we can ever separate the perception of meaning from the subjective projection of significance and, if we cannot, whose interests are served by this ambiguity. Each of the historical chapters deals with a specific form of allegory which emerges in response to a particular moment of cultural crisis. And each historical chapter is followed by a

close textual analysis of a representative allegorical narrative or, in the case of captivity narratives, an exemplary style or sub-genre of allegorical narrative.

What I seek to show in all of the chapters which follow is that allegory has been the privileged form to which successive generations of American writers have turned in times of particular uncertainty and tension because allegory is, fundamentally, an indeterminate literary form. The essential indeterminacy of reference that characterizes allegorical interpretation and allegorical narratives lends to allegory the kind of flexibility needed to respond to the vicissitudes of cultural history. Allegory comes into its own during periods of uncertainty regarding the nature of communication, the reliability of language and the authenticity of culturally important texts because allegory is, above all, focussed upon the complexities and difficulties inherent in the activity of interpretation. As a literary genre, allegory is distinguished by the manner in which it thematizes the techniques of allegorical interpretation, providing a critique of hermeneutic methods even as it interprets the spiritual experiences represented by the narrative. From its roots in Hellenistic culture and the Christian compromise with Judaism, to its function in developing a peculiarly Protestant exegetical practice, to its role in the deconstruction of inauthentic and 'mystifying' symbolic discourses, allegory has intervened in all of the most important debates concerning the spiritual destiny of Western civilization. And allegory has played a corresponding part in the conflicts of a developing American civilization. As America has progressed from a settlement to a super-power, it is allegory which has provided

the site for an ongoing debate over the spiritual nature and destiny of the New World. Allegory has represented the orthodox vision of America as the chosen redeemer nation, the world's last and best chance, and allegory has given a voice to those who dissent from this vision, who use allegory only to reject what it has come to stand for. In this way, allegory represents an important tradition of intervention in the cultural politics of the New World. The development of this tradition and the nature of this intervention are the issues explored in the chapters which follow.

This study of allegory in America uses the techniques of poststructuralist analysis in order to reveal the indeterminacy which lies at the heart of allegory as a rhetorical form, an indeterminacy which can be traced back to the origins of allegorical interpretation in ancient Hellenistic and Roman cultures and is emphasized in Christian adaptations of allegory in typological exegesis. This indeterminacy, within the context of New World allegorical narratives, is seen to generate a style of writing based on a structure of deferrals that culminates in the disclosure of aporia, an irresolvable vacillation between transcendent categories of meaning that cannot be reconciled but, equally, cannot be ignored. It is this capacity to represent aporia, or a fundamental uncertainty of reference, that fits allegory so well to the task of responding to crises of reference that are of crucial cultural significance. This work is situated within the tradition of American rhetorical studies established by scholars such as Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, Philip Gura, Larzer Ziff and, recently, Mason Lowance and Anne Kibbey. I hope

that this book will complement the valuable work of these scholars by bringing together rhetorical analysis, critical theory and cultural study in instructive and enlightening ways.