

On Walter Benjamin

Our purpose here is to demonstrate that the spirit of allegory manifests itself quite unambiguously both in the theory and in the practice of the modernist avant-garde.

It is no accident that, for decades now, critics have drawn attention to the basic affinity between Baroque and Romanticism on the one hand and the foundations of modernist art and ideology on the other. The purpose of this tactic is to define—and legitimate—the latter as the heirs and successors of those great crises of the modern world, and as the representatives of the profound crisis of our present age. It was Walter Benjamin who furnished the most profound and original theorization of these views. In his study of Baroque tragic drama (*Trauerspiel*), he constructs a bold theory to show that allegory is the style most genuinely suited to the sentiments, ideas and experience of the modern world. Not that this programme is explicitly proclaimed. On the contrary, his text confines itself quite strictly to his chosen historical theme. Its spirit, however,

goes far beyond that narrow framework. Benjamin interprets Baroque (and Romanticism) from the perspective of the ideological and artistic needs of the present. His choice of this narrower theme for his purpose is peculiarly happy, because the elements of crisis in Baroque emerge with unambiguous clarity in the specific context of German society of the period. This came about as a consequence of Germany's temporary lapse into being a mere object of world-history. This led in its turn to a despairing, inward-looking provincialism, as a result of which the realist counter-tendencies of the age were enfeebled—or became manifest only in exceptional cases like Grimmelshausen. It was a brilliant insight that led Benjamin to fix on this period in Germany, and on the drama in particular, as the subject of his research. It enables him to give a vivid portrayal of the actual theoretical problem, without forcing or distorting the historical facts in the manner so often seen in contemporary general histories.

As a preliminary to a closer scrutiny of Benjamin's analysis of the Baroque from the vantage-point of the problematic character of contemporary art, it will be helpful to take a quick look at the distinction between symbolism and allegory established by Romantic aesthetics. This will reveal that their position was here much less clearly defined than that of thinkers in the crises that preceded or followed them. The reasons for their intermediate position are manifold. Above all, there was the overwhelming impact of Goethe's personality, with his clear insight into this very problem—which he too, as we have seen, regarded as crucial for the fate of art. This factor was intensified by the powerful drive towards realism in art active in Goethe, but by no means in him alone. Furthermore, Romanticism thought of itself as a transitional phase between two crises. This led to specific, if questionable insights into the historical nature of the problem, but also to a certain defusing of the inner dilemma implicit in any attempt to define allegory.

Schelling, in his aesthetics,¹ organizes the history of art according to the principle that classical art was an age of symbolism, while Christianity was dominated by allegory. The first claim is based on the tradition established by Winckelmann, Lessing and Goethe; the second is intended to provide a historical underpinning for a specifically Romantic art. It is not so much the absence of any really precise knowledge of the Christian era that makes this scheme so vague and ambiguous, as the fact that its perspective is all too monolithically Romantic. It does away with that conflict already familiar to us between symbol and allegory in sculpture, and even interprets as allegorical authors and works in whom the primacy of realistic symbolism is indubitable. Solger takes over Schelling's distinction, but defines it more sharply at the level of general theory.²

The real theoreticians of the crisis tendencies of allegory in Romanticism were Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. Their sifting and propagation of the idea of crisis, and of allegory as a means of expression appropriate to it, has close affinities with the philosophies of history just outlined. But whereas, particularly for Schelling, the problem is rendered less acute by

¹ *Werke*, Stuttgart and Augsburg 1956, Vol. 1, 5, p. 452.

² Solger, *Erwin*, Berlin 1815, pp. 41–9.

his incorporating it within an objective philosophy of history, Schlegel takes as his starting-point the loss of a mythology that might serve as a foundation for culture, and above all for art. The loss is seen as the index of a crisis, even though he still hopes and believes that the creation of a new mythology will make it possible to find a way out of the impasse of the profound crisis of his own day. Since for Schlegel every mythology is nothing other than 'a hieroglyphic expression of Nature around us', transfigured by imagination and love, it comes as no surprise to see him conclude that 'all beauty is allegory. Simply because it is ineffable, the highest truth can only be expressed in allegory.' This leads to the universal hegemony of allegory in all forms of human activity; language itself, in its primordial manifestations, is 'identical with allegory'.³

It is plain to see that such an analysis increasingly tends to cut allegory free from its old links with the Christian religion—links which were precisely determined and even laid down by theology. Instead, it establishes its affinity with a specifically modern anarchy of the feelings, and with a dissolution of form which leads in its turn to the collapse of objective representation [*Gegenständlichkeit*]. It is Novalis who finds an explicit formula for such trends. 'Stories without [logical] links, only associations, like dreams. Poems that are merely melodious and full of beautiful words, but without any meaning or coherence—at best only a few stanzas which are comprehensible—like a mass of fragments composed of the most heterogeneous objects. At best true poetry can only have a general allegorical sense and an indirect effect, like music, etc.'⁴

Compared to these uncertain, obscure and self-contradictory statements by the Romantics, the picture of German Baroque tragedy etched by Benjamin is remarkable for its impressive internal consistency and coherence. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of his often brilliant polemics, such as the one against Goethe, or of his illuminating detailed analyses. We must start by emphasizing that his whole interpretation of Baroque does not stop short with a contrast between Baroque and Classicism, or with the attempt (typical of some later eclectics) to establish Mannerism and Classicism as related, complementary tendencies. Instead, he makes a direct attack on his target: the unveiling of the principle of art itself. 'In the field of allegorical intuition', he says 'the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished. For the *eidōs* disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contains shrivels up . . . A deep-rooted intuition of the problematic character of art . . . emerges as a reaction to its self-confidence at the time of the Renaissance.'⁵ However, the problematic character of art is that of the world itself, the world of mankind, of history and society; it is the decay of all these that has been made visible in the imagery of allegory. In allegory, 'the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape'. History

³ Friedrich Schlegel, *Prosaische Jugendschriften*, Vienna 1908, Vol. II, pp. 361, 364 and 382.

⁴ Novalis, *Werke*, Jena 1923, Vol. II, p. 308.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, NLB, London 1977, p. 176.

no longer 'assumes the form of the process of an eternal life, so much as that of irresistible decay'. However, 'allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.'⁶

Thus Benjamin sees with absolute clarity that, though the opposition of symbol and allegory is crucial to the aesthetic definition of any work of art, it is not ultimately the spontaneous or conscious product of aesthetic considerations. It is fed by deeper sources: by man's necessary response to the reality in which he lives and which assists or impedes his activities. No detailed examination is required to show that, with all this, what Benjamin is doing is to take up and extend in a more profound way the problem of modern art, as defined two decades before him by Wilhelm Worringer in his book *Abstraction and Empathy*. Benjamin's analysis is deeper and more discriminating than that of his predecessor, and more specific and sensitive in its historical classification of aesthetic forms. The resulting dualism which, as we have seen, was given its first, highly abstract definition by the Romantics, now crystallizes out into a firmly based historical description and interpretation of the modern crisis in art and ideology. Unlike Worringer and subsequent critics of modernist art, Benjamin feels no need to project its spiritual and intellectual foundations back into any primordial age, in order to foreground the gulf separating symbol and allegory. Nor is his achievement significantly impaired by the fact that socio-historical undercurrents remain somewhat vague and unfocused.

Benjamin's study, therefore, starts from the idea that allegory and symbol express fundamentally divergent human responses to reality. His incisive criticism of the obscurities in the formulations of the Romantics turned a spotlight on the fact that, in the last analysis, the allegorical mode is based on a disturbance that disrupts the anthropomorphizing response to the world which constitutes the foundation of aesthetic reflection. But since what we see in mimetic art is man's striving for self-awareness in his relations with his proper sphere of activity in nature and society, it is evident that a concern with allegory must undermine that universal humanity which is always present implicitly in aesthetic reflection. Without generalizing as broadly as we do here, Benjamin expresses himself very firmly on this point. 'And even today it is by no means self-evident that the primacy of the thing over the personal, the fragment over the total, represents a confrontation between the allegory and the symbol, to which it is the polar opposite and, for that very reason, its equal in power. Allegorical personification has always concealed the fact that its function is not the personification of things, but rather to give the thing a more imposing form by getting it up as a person.'⁷

This brings the key elements of the problem sharply into focus. However, Benjamin is concerned only to establish aesthetic (or trans-aesthetic) parity for allegory. For this reason he does not go beyond mere description, albeit a conceptually generalized one. He ignores the fact that to give things a more imposing form is to fetishize them, in contrast to an

⁶ Ibid. pp.166 and 178.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 186-7.

anthropomorphizing mimetic art, with its inherent tendency to defetishization and its true knowledge of things as the mediators of human relations. Benjamin does not even touch on this issue. Subsequent theorists far less critical than Benjamin do make frequent use of the word 'fetish' in the later manifestoes of avant-gardist art. But, of course, they use it to mean something 'primordial'—as the expression of an authentically primitive, 'magic' attitude towards things. It goes without saying that neither in their theory nor in their practice do they notice that an attempt to retrieve an archaic magic culture could take place only in the imagination, while in reality they uncritically accepted the capitalist fetishization of human relations into things. Nor is the situation altered in the slightest by the frequent substitution of 'emblem' (in its more recently acquired meaning) for 'fetish'. For in allegorical contexts an emblem expresses nothing if not an uncritically affirmed fetishization.

In the Baroque, Benjamin rightly discerns the indivisible union of religion and convention. The interaction of these two elements creates an atmosphere in which allegory undermines any real objective representation from two different angles. We have already considered the tendency towards fetishization. However, Benjamin has also perceived that this factor sets another, contrary one in motion. 'Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance.'⁸ This is the religious world of devalued particularity, a world in which the particular is preserved in its devalued state. An unfetishized thing is necessarily constructed from its qualities, its details; unfetishized thinghood is the way a determinate particular just happens to be. To go beyond this, the internal relationships between appearance and essence, detail and the objective ensemble must be intensified. An object can only be rationally organized, it can only be raised to the plane of the individual (*Besondere*), the typical, as a totality of rationally arranged details, if the details can acquire a symptomatic character which points beyond themselves to some essence.

When Benjamin rightly points out that allegory wholly abolishes detail, and with it all concrete objective representation, he seems to be diagnosing a much more radical annihilation of all particularity. But appearances are deceptive; such annihilation actually implies recurrence. Such acts of substitution only mean that interchangeable things and details are abolished in the concrete form in which they happen to exist. Hence the act of abolition affects only their given nature and replaces them with objects whose internal structure is wholly identical with theirs. Therefore, since what happens is that one particular is simply replaced by another, this abolition of particularity is nothing more than its constant reproduction. This process remains the same in every allegorical view of representation, and by no means implies a conflict with its general religious foundations.

In the Baroque itself, however, and particularly in Benjamin's interpretation of it, a new motif becomes apparent. This is the fact that the

⁸ Ibid. p. 175.

transcendence which provides the context for the process we have just outlined no longer possesses any concrete religious content. It is entirely nihilistic—though without modifying the essentially religious character of the process. Benjamin notes: ‘Allegory goes away empty-handed. Evil as such, which it cherished as enduring profundity, exists only in allegory, is nothing but allegory, and means something different from what it is. It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents.’ And equally perceptive is Benjamin’s insight that it is ‘the theological essence of the subject’ that is here expressed.⁹ And this subjectivity, whose creativity has exceeded all bounds and arrived at the point of self-destruction, has a mode of receptivity corresponding to it. Here too, Benjamin’s unremitting rigour provides the essential commentary: ‘For the only diversion the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory.’¹⁰ Benjamin is much too precise a stylist for us to be able to ignore the pejorative undertones implicit in his use of the word ‘diversion’. Where the world of objects is no longer taken seriously, the seriousness of the world of the subject must vanish with it.

⁹ Ibid. p. 233.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 185.