The Prompter's Box: Modern Drama's Allegories of Allegory

[M]y task is a bit like that of someone trying to build something out of old stones that he is digging out of the ruins of something that was also, in its day, built out of stones from a ruin.

—Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (302)

The Prompter's Box is a brief dramaturgical essay that appears at the beginning of selected issues of *Modern Drama*, imagining the articles themselves as interrelated acts within a larger intellectual dialogue. The goal of such an introductory essay is to present the reader with certain streams of thought that may illuminate aspects of, or enable connections between, individual articles, without instructing the reader in how to understand each essay. One crucial idea or trope that is central to the articles that appear in this issue is allegory. But, since they do not present us with a transparently coded system of signs and meanings, the plays that these articles examine also force us to ask a more difficult question: what exactly is allegory? Many modern dramatists have disliked openly allegorical readings of their works, even when the term has seemed most applicable, regarding the mode as simple-minded or illustrative of reductive truths. Writing about Arthur Miller in 1953, the critic Henry Hewes remarked,

> Although many people have seen Miller's previous plays as political or allegorical, the playwright is definite in his denial of any such simple intention. "I am not pressing historical allegory here, and I have even eliminated certain striking similarities from *The Crucible* which may have started the audience to drawing such an allegory" [quoting Miller]. (Hewes 25)

Yet this limited understanding of allegory has been countered by a much richer notion of what it means to "speak otherwise," an idea that has linked

drama and criticism inextricably in twentieth-century literary theory, at least since Walter Benjamin's famous study of German tragic drama. For allegory is self-critical, as Northrop Frye suggests, when he writes in *Anatomy of Criticism*, "It is not often realized that all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery. […] Commentary thus looks at literature as, in its formal phase, a potential allegory of events and ideas" (89). We are talking about allegory today because each of the following articles describes instances of postmodern drama that, in commenting upon its own status as literature, allegorizes allegory.

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At the beginning of his preface to *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man remarks that the book "started out as a historical study and ended up as a theory of reading" (ix). De Man's curious disclaimer that he was forced by local difficulties of interpretation beyond his (and his generation's) control to adopt a position that is un- or even anti-historical imagines historical study and literary theory as separate projects, but it also, paradoxically, both suggests his own historical contingency and teasingly posits an opposition that the rest of the book deconstructs. As he puts it in his chapter on Proust, "These initially static polarities are put in circulation by means of a more or less hidden system of relays which allows the properties to enter into substitutions, exchanges, and crossings that appear to reconcile the incompatibilities of the inner with the outer world" (60). The substitutions and exchanges of figurative language (in short, texts) arise from the difference de Man posits between intention and meaning; in these terms, the text enacts a performance of difference that both subverts and re-inscribes the coercive power of (intrinsic or extrinsic) authority. That *writing* – of Proust, Rilke, Nietzsche, Rousseau, or de Man himself – refers to its own language is a sign not of solipsism but of self-criticism and, by extension, of ethical engagement with "the world."

Allegory is a mode, a representational process, constituted by internal difference. Although not a genre itself, allegory combines diverse genres and posits within itself a heterogeneity – or at least a duality – of meanings. But, unlike ancient theories of allegory, which imagine a transcendental language that reconstitutes logocentric, didactic, and frequently divine messages, modern (or post-romantic) theories have envisioned allegories as contentious sites of negotiation between the world and ideas, history and theory, form and content. As Benjamin remarks, "[Allegory] is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is" (162). For Benjamin, baroque allegory, refracted through the lens of modernism, becomes a site of uncertainty, contamination, violence, and decay.

Yet Benjamin's study is itself not immune to idealist, romantic, even Platonic aesthetics. "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts," he writes in a

famous figure that is an allegory of allegory, "what ruins are in the realm of things" (178). This line does what it describes, enacting in its form the simultaneous separation and imbrication of things and ideas, and while Benjamin imagines the allegory of German tragic drama as a site of tension between immanence and transcendence, he does not entirely eschew, at key moments, this idealizing dualism. As he says elsewhere, "The idea thus belongs to a fundamentally different world from that which it apprehends" (34). In short, while historicizing baroque/modernist forms of suffering, frustration, and redemption, Benjamin nonetheless posits an essential separateness or antipodal relation in a parallel construction of the kind that de Man's opening sentence refers to and critiques. It was, after all, Benjamin's project to write the sort of history of romanticism that de Man mentions. In his one reference to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, de Man describes the work as an instance of blindness (not a "truly dialectical history"), though the product of a genuinely dialectical mind (81). Benjamin's richly complex and idiosyncratic study represents an epistemological crisis, as indicated in "The Epistemo-Critical Prologue [Erkenntniskritische Vorrede]" (the German also punning on the etymology of criticism/crisis), that is at once both baroque and modernist. For Benjamin, the intensely expressive, gestural, hyperbolic form of German tragic drama indicates a failure in articulated (spoken) language that realizes itself as script, a tension between pictorial image and meaning that is best understood by analogy with sacred hieroglyphs. "[T]he *Trauerspiel*," therefore, he says, "which grew up in the sphere of the allegorical, is, in its form, a drama for the reader" (185).

In their contribution to this issue, Hana Worthen and W.B. Worthen investigate precisely the blurring of the distinction between allegory and allegorical interpretation or reading as it is enacted and ironized in Martin McDonagh's play *The Pillowman*. They describe allegory as an explanatory frame and metaphor for interrogating art's implication in the world, subjecting "ethical concerns to the shaping priorities of formal allegory" and, by extension, suggesting that the ethics of art are "inseparable from the ethics of allegory." McDonagh's play about a writer whose stories of sadism and child-murder are alleged to have resulted in sadism and child-murder by his brother in the "real world" (McDonagh 26) is set in a police interrogation room in a totalitarian regime. Inside the cell, texts may point to something else, but that something is intrinsic to language. The two detectives and the writer literally and figuratively challenge the antinomies of allegory. *The Pillowman*, write the Worthens, "frames the work of art in the often-violent dialectic between intention and execution, between the formalities of the art work and the forms of work it can be made to accomplish in the world." The interrogation room is a space of both the investigation (forensic and literary) and the enactment of torture and murder.

In the face of sadistic interrogators, the writer Katurian Katurian, whose

name represents repetition and difference, insists that there is no "linkage" (McDonagh 6) between his writing and the world, between stories and crimes, literature and history, ideas and things. One of his "best" stories, "The Three Gibbet Crossroads," is a "puzzle without a solution" (17). It depicts a man left to starve in a cage across the road from two other dead or dying men in cages with placards in front, one of which reads "Rapist" and the other "Murderer" (17–18). The man cannot read the placard before his own cage, but passers-by read his crime and treat him as the worst of the three. Finally, a highwayman comes, and without telling him what he has done, shoots him through the heart and departs laughing. "This story is a pointer," says one detective, "It is saying to me, on the surface I am saying this, but underneath the surface I am saying this other thing" (18–19). At the heart of the stories and the play is the image of the rotting corpse, a figure for history and legibility, for suffering, loss, and temporality, animated only in the act of storytelling. It is an image that recalls Benjamin, who writes, "It is indeed characteristic of the sadist that he humiliates his object and then – or thereby – satisfies it. And that is what the allegorist does in this age drunk with acts of cruelty both lived and imagined" (184–85). The allegorist, like the sadist, devalues, degrades, and mortifies his object but also constitutes it as an object, knowable within a dynamic characterized by compulsive repetition and ultimately absorption by the subject.[1]

The relationship between allegory and writing in particular is central to twentieth-century revisions of the concept. As Craig Owens compellingly argues,

> If allegory is identified as a supplement ["an expression externally added to another expression" (to quote Benedetto Croce; see below)], then it is also aligned with writing, insofar as writing is conceived as supplementary to speech. It is of course within the same philosophic tradition which subordinates writing to speech that allegory is subordinated to the symbol. [...] For allegory, whether visual or verbal, is essentially a form of script – this is the basis for Walter Benjamin's treatment of it in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: "At one stroke the profound vision of allegory transforms things and works into stirring writing" [quoting Benjamin]. (Owens 215–16)

Occupying a vital space in twentieth-century dramatic art at the intersection of language and vision, writing (and reading) and speech, text and performance, allegory is a mode of re-writing, re-reading, and re-vision, of repetition-and-difference that has resonated in the modern experience not only of totalitarianism but also of the intensified dialectic of authority and anarchy within postmodernist forms of expression.

Allegory (literally "speaking otherwise," from *allo* [other] *agoria* [speaking]) has long been marked by a sense of incompleteness, of difference, and of

imperfection; it was just such a sense that led romantic theorists to dismiss allegory in favour of symbol, which, they believed, achieved a unity of subject and object, form and content. In the works of many twentieth-century theorists and authors, starting with Benjamin, allegory has been characterized by a sense of loss and decay, a structure of feeling steeped in mourning. "The Pillowman," the title story of McDonagh's drama, is itself a trope for the self-consuming dramatic text of mourning, a parable about a supernatural figure (the Pillowman) that assists child-suicides so that they won't grow up to suffer. Wearying of his horrible job, he finally performs the same service on an avatar of himself and "gently start[s] to fade away," hearing, at the last, "the screams of the hundred thousand children he'd helped to commit suicide coming back to life and going on to lead the cold, wretched lives" (McDonagh 47). Allegory is ruin and resurrection (ruin as resurrection); it enacts a re-cognition but also at the same time a misrecognition and denial, an image that comes into being because it simultaneously fades away. Allan Pero, in his article on Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*, writes that "[a]llegory arises from [...] metonymic deferral that informs its elusiveness as representation; it is this quality that provides it with its dramatic and psychological potential. The problem of deferral in allegory sets in play a particular relation to desire and its object, a space in which the speech of the other may be heard." The absence, to which allegory always already points, in this sense, directs our gaze not only to the traumatic past but also to the future, where symptoms and narratives accumulate.

Pero puts the problem of dramatizing "melancholy's relation to desire" into Lacanian terms as *méconnaissance* or "a kind of knowledge that is paradoxically based on a denial of lack." For at the centre of Albee's play, like McDonagh's, is the performance of a traumatic story, a monologue of love and objectification culminating in murder, in this case of a cat. The apparent denial of ethics through an aestheticized or euphemistic language (putting the cat "to sleep") indicates, Pero suggests, the problem of realizing traumatic memory in, or as, history. This problem is not only one of historical writing but also one of theatre, of seeing or spectatorial identification, for it is the problem of realizing a personal and cognizable subjectivity in spatial terms. *Trauerspiel*, the play of mourning for which the ruin is such a memorable trope, involves, Benjamin says, "the transposition of the originally temporal data into a figurative spatial simultaneity" (81).

Allegories collapse aspects of the present and the past, as Miller did in *The Crucible* or Brecht did in *Leben des Galilei*, redeeming the past for the purposes of the present. "Allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another," Owens writes. "In allegorical structure, then, one text is *read through* another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be" (204). The thematics of reading and the concomitant problem of legibility have been central not only to literature but also to the fine arts,

returning us to the central place of script in modern drama's allegories and to the pictorial dimension of theatre. Arguably the most important successor and critical interpreter of Brecht in the post-war German theatre, Heiner Müller dramatizes authorial self-consciousness and anxiety of influence as a return to the inescapable materiality (and corruption) of script. A paradigmatic example of "postmodern" drama, *Hamletmachine*, evolved from Müller's own translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for a production by Benno Besson at the East Berlin Volksbühne, Müller's nine-page text, the distillation of the two-hundred-page translation, presents a series of monologues and a montage of stage pictures, tied loosely together by the repetition of rhetorical and visual tropes. The figures that appear onstage proclaim their own alterity (e.g., "I WAS MACBETH" [57]) and continually underscore their status as literary creations. This theatrically heteroglossic text, as Kirk Williams argues, enacts a dialectical reception of Brecht's "epic" dramaturgy informed by Artaud's theory of theatre's irremediable doubleness. At the same time, the play can be understood to dramatize the duality and decay that is central to Benjamin's theory of *Trauerspiel*; for this is a mourning play, with the ruins of Europe and a decaying corpse of Hamlet's father as central tropes. The ruins are equated with the father's decaying corpse, the coffin pried open with a sword and the flesh distributed among the faceless crowd. In this play, fragmentation is realized in material terms but also as a form of dissemination. The tearing of the body is a form of textual destruction as production that Müller extends in what Williams calls "the play's most utopian gesture, the tearing of the author's photograph in full view of the spectator. The play turns back on itself here, suggesting that this particular drama, embedded as it is within the western dramaturgical tradition, has only recycled and therefore perpetuated an ancient and deeply flawed social script." Like McDonagh's play, *Hamletmachine* aims to destroy actual texts but also to suggest that there is no space outside the script. Like Katurian Katurian, Hamlet and Ophelia are not liberated by or from their texts; instead they are compelled to return to scripts that they had sought to escape. And yet, in Robert Wilson's controversial and now legendary 1986 production of *Hamletmachine*, these failures within the drama were represented as enabling theatrical (visual) conditions through the orchestration of sound, image, word, light, and gesture.

Shelagh Stephenson's *An Experiment with an Air Pump* is one of the most explicit recent instances of the dramatizing of relations between image and language, pictures and words, as an ethical – even didactic – mode of historical double-consciousness or, as Claudia Barnett puts it, of "organizing knowledge" in dialectical terms. The play represents two historical moments in its two acts – the first half is set in 1799 and the second in 1999 – leading, Barnett remarks, "the audience to ponder how the present becomes history." The play is framed, moreover, by two *tableaux vivants*, both versions of *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768), a painting by Joseph Wright of Derby. At

the opening of the play, one character comments on and interprets the work of art. As with *The Pillowman*, *A Delicate Balance*, and *Hamletmachine*, this play, its metafigural centre-piece in particular, has a body at its centre, a bird that, through a later substitution, becomes a woman, a figure for death and desire, although not for the death of desire. Aestheticizing the murdered body upon which he gazes lustfully, the amoral young scientist Armstrong declares, "She makes a beautiful corpse" (Stephenson 95).

Allegory always implies a theory of language (*logos*), of meaning(s), and, as Stephenson's play suggests, of archaeology. In this last sense, *Air Pump*, set amid the mines of Newcastle, taps a Foucauldian subtext. Foucault writes of the void at the centre and putative source of Velázquez's representation of representation in the painting *Las Meninas*. The problem of the "subject," Foucault explains, is at the core of the distinction between the epistemological level of knowledge and the archaeological level of knowledge (xiii). Like the other plays that are analysed in this issue, Stephenson's drama centres on the trope of the corpse (of which there are several instances: the dead cat, the "malformed" Isobel who attempts suicide and is then murdered, or a box of bones discovered beneath the floorboards in 1999). The articles in this issue show the relation between memory and allegory in drama to be a problematic of embodiment that is inextricable from "the word." As Isobel, the Scottish servant with a misshapen spine, explains to the scientists of the play (who include Peter Mark Roget of *Thesaurus* fame), "I only know words, sir. Words are what interest me" (22). Although words will prove insufficient to describe her anguish in a suicide note, the letter and the twisted body remain as texts.

Texts that "speak otherwise" require us both to read and to imagine otherwise, and, as Christopher Innes suggests in his article, "Allegories from the Past: Stoppard's Uses of History," in Stoppard's plays, historical montage, the framing and patterning of historical diversity, raises "question[s] of perception – of how we see things or rather of how we are taught to interpret what we see." Setting most of his plays in a historical past, Stoppard investigates processes of historical consciousness in relationships between dramatic form and content. Interrogating models of both historical and linguistic *difference*, Stoppard's plays teach us ways of reading themselves. Innes draws on Hayden White's literary historiography to show that, in Stoppard, history does not just inform the present but merges with it, generating plural, fragmentary, yet deeply interrelated histories. This idea is dramatized in *Arcadia*, a play set in two time periods (and a model for Stephenson's *Air Pump*), when one character remarks, "[T]here is nothing outside the march [of history] so nothing can be lost to it. The missing plays of Sophocles will turn up piece by piece, or be written again in another language" (38). Stoppard's drama, itself a form of historiographical criticism, subverts the alterity of the past and demands that historical discourse be analysed as a structure of language, the product of spe-

cial kinds of language use. It is in these terms that allegory haunts the present, returning like a hieroglyph demanding to be read.

NOTE

1   I am indebted to John McCole's rich discussion of Benjamin's metaphors for allegory (146–50).

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