Maureen Quilligan, The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre

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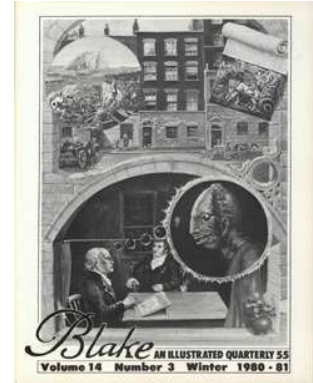
(Australia) 2 (1967), esp. 271-74, which showed in detail that Damon was often wrong about Blake's understanding of the Bible. Perhaps the number of scholars who, like Tolley, can forego use of the *Dictionary* is larger than I have supposed. Still,

I can think of few books or articles published during the last fifteen years that would not have been better if the elementary pre-publication question I ask in my second paragraph could really he answered "yes."

Maureen Quilligan. **The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre.** Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979. 305 pp. $15.00.
Reviewed by Nelson Hilton.

Maureen Quilligan's *The Language of Allegory* nowhere mentions Blake, yet it should prove highly rewarding to those students interested in Blake's verbal art, and particularly to those pursuing his murky distinction between "vision" and "allegory" (*VLJ*, E 544).

Quilligan's thesis is that the defining characteristic of non-mechanical allegories--what links them into a genre--is "their very particular emphasis on language as their first focus and ultimate subject" (p. 15), and her book unfolds the consequences and operations of that focus through a theoretical framework (the book moves from sections on "The Text" to "The Pretext," "The Context," and "The Reader") larded with discussions of "allegories" as diverse as *Piers Plowman*, Melville's *The Confidence Man*, and *The Crying of Lot 49*. For Quilligan, the kind of language which is the subject (and object) of allegory displays three interrelated features: it is polysemous, non-arbitrary, and--striking to read in a work of contemporary literary criticism-- it asks for a reader "willing to entertain the possibility of making a religious response to the ineffability invoked by [allegory's] polysemous language" (p. 223).

Emphasizing "the possibility of an otherness, a polysemy, inherent in the very words of the page,"

Quilligan proposes to reorient the idea of allegory "away from out traditional insistence on allegory's distinction between word said and meaning meant, to the simultaneity of the process of signifying multiple meaning" (p. 26). The allegory can then be seen as a kind of extended pun, generating its narrative out of wordplay, unfolding "as a series of punning commentaries, related to one another on the most literal of verbal levels--the sounds of words" (p. 22; though here one must query, why not the graphic shapes of words as well? sound is not the most literally *literal* of verbal levels). A Blakean example might be "Of the primeval Priests assum'd power" (*BU* 2.1), where you must wonder about prim and proper evil priests and then the power they assumed or that you assume they have--fit questions to open the book of your reason (among other possi- bilities). Such a text--manifesting Quilligan's suggestion regarding the function of wordplay in allegory--addresses the reader's production of meaning and forces him "to become self-conscious of his own reading" (pp. 21, 41). The end result of this dynamic is to make the reader aware of his or her own interpretative acts, to force the reader to reflect on how the text has been read, and in reflecting on this operation to realize the choices he or she has made about the text and, finally, the kinds of choices the reader makes in life (p. 253). The effect of the confused "Argument" (which means,

"literally," "to make clear") of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* perhaps offers an oblique example for Quilligan's contention that "the effect of wordplay is to make the reader self-conscious of reading by indicating the primary importance of the verbal surface rather than the imagined action. The narrative's self-reflexiveness to its own verbal medium (not to its action) by decentering the reader's interest, unsettles the focus, so the reader becomes more conscious of his own production of meaning" (p. 254). "Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the burdend air" seems as much about verbal (and graphic) media as about any imagined action.

The two remaining defining features of the language of allegory are expressed in the contention that

> Allegories are not only always texts, predicated on the existence of other previous, sacred texts, they are always fundamentally about language and the ways in which language itself can reveal to man his highest spiritual purpose within the cosmos. As such, allegory always presupposes at least a potential sacralizing power in language, and it is possible to write and to read allegory intelligently only in those cultural contexts which grant to language a significance beyond that belonging to a merely arbitrary system of signs. Allegory will not exist as a viable genre without this "supra-realist" attitude toward words; that is, its existence assumes an attitude in which abstract nouns not only name universals that are real, but in which the abstract names themselves are preceived to be as real and as powerful as the things named. Language itself must be felt to have a potency as solidly meaningful as physical fact before the allegorist can begin; out of its magic phenomenality—out of language sensed in terms of a nearly physical presence—the allegorist's narrative comes, peopled by words moving about an intricately reechoing landscape of language. (p. 156)

Quilligan's belief that "Allegory calls attention to the other—in a word, to God, or to some sort of possible sacredness" should be related to her argument that the Bible is the necessary "pretext": "All allegories incorporate the Bible into their texts . . . and its problematic incorporation into the text becomes therefore a defining characteristic of the genre" (p. 96). I confess some puzzlement here—it is as though Quilligan wishes to characterize allegories as "logocentric" exercises, deferring to "the word," "scripture," "the book," but chooses instead to localize those signifieds as the Bible. This formulation is one of several that cannot easily be applied to Blake, despite his belief in the Eternal Vision contained in the Bible. Milton, Shakespeare, Paracelsus & Behmen, the American and French Revolutions are equally among Blake's informing pretexts; and these in turn are equally manifestations of imagination, the pretext (or, preludium) of an imminent and immanent sacred power. Besides, Blake's early statement about creating a "Bible of Hell," and his later assertion that "that God from whom [all books are given]" is again speaking through him, suggests that not the Bible

only, but all works of imagination are privileged. Quilligan herself seems to admit this wider scope of allegory, recognizing that "since allegories take as their province all the wisdom stored in the repository of man's language, they, of necessity, tend to an encyclopedic sprawl" (p. 141).

Quilligan's remark concerning "those cultural contexts" necessary for the intelligent reading and writing of allegory is also unsatisfyingly vague. She refers to "those periods when language is felt to be a numinous object" (p. 281); furthermore, allegory attempts to place the reader in relation to self and to society as a whole ("which is considered as well to be part of a cosmic play"), and "this whole process relies on a public acceptance of the polysemous potency of language to connect these (now, to us, disparate) realms" (p. 192). This feels true as far as it goes, but one is driven to wonder: when were those periods? what is the psycho-social-economic-spiritual matrix behind the context she posits? Nineteenth-century New England was evidently one of the periods—judging by the presence of examples from Hawthorne, Emerson, and Melville (but who was reading *The Confidence Man* "intelligently" when it was published?) Examples from Nabokov and Pynchon, and quotations from Foucault suggest that we are again entering one of the periods. Medieval and Renaissance England of course. The correspondences get difficult to see. Obviously, the one glaring example (since it offers no sample of real allegory) of an *un*privileged period is eighteenth-century and romantic English literature. Given "the essential affinity of allegory to the pivotal phenomenon of the pun" (p. 33), that period's strictures on the pun manifest its rejection of allegory. For Quilligan, that wide body of literature serves only to make a negative point: "After Pope, poetry's main value lies in the intricate process by which words uncreate darkness, bringing up from private recesses the previously unacknowledged fundament of human experience. The privacy of the romantic lyric, its devaluation of didactic purpose, along with the often-stated romantic distaste for a mechanically conceived allegory, reveal what might, in another context, be unlikely to be perceived as a generic fact about allegory—that its purpose is always public, at the least, 'national'" (p. 191). Whatever else may be objected, one sees vividly the liability of generalizing without taking account of the Blakean particular (*M* 1, "Public Address," *inter alia*).

Indeed, the issues raised by Blake's "Sublime Allegory" (letter, 7 July 1803) are, so to speak, *isomorphous* with the questions suggested but not answered by Quilligan's provocative book. Or perhaps simply—although it manages to embrace *The Crying of Lot 49*—Quilligan's conception of allegory would not include Blake; for all its emphasis on "polysemy" Quilligan's book seems to involve a conception of the text curiously closed to "dissemination"[1] and even poetry (after Spenser). Quilligan notes "allegory's characteristic concern for process," which "can be spoken of only in terms of . . . language" (p. 221), yet her reader feels in the end that despite the invocation of "the sacred," "language" is just another name for process to facilitate the academic concern for defining a genre.

She says that her interpretation "suggests that allegory goes beyond mere literary categories" and that "The approach to allegory I have been describing attempts to show how each work provides a conscious portrait of the reader in the act of reading" (p. 241). Portrait for whom? is the text merely a profound mirror in which the reader sees his or her manipulations of the text? Or, what seems closer to the almost mystical, unspoken vision of the book (and closer also to Blake), is the "portrait" itself "conscious," taking its life as "a Representation of what Eternally Exists. Really & Unchangeably" (*VLJ*, E 544). For Blake, of course, this is a description of "Vision & Imagination" as opposed to "Fable or Allegory . . . a totally distinct & inferior kind of poetry." But it strikes this reviewer that Quilligan has in part written about just such Vision, seen as "concern for process, for the complicated exfoliation of interdependent psychic, intellectual, and cultural revelations, which can all be spoken of only in terms of the force that shapes them all: language" (p. 221). Ultimately, however, "Process," "language"-- "going forth & returning wearied," "the Words of Eternity"--seem in Quilligan's conception to be separate from some pre-existing "sacred": the genre she is limiting is marked by "a truly allegorical concern for a sacred pretext" (p. 284). The ambiguity of the last quotation would be appreciated by the Devil of *The Marriage*, for whom "All Bibles or sacred codes. have been the causes of . . . Errors." For Blake, "language" itself, "process" itself is sacred and holy, and the true perception of such states, Vision: to defer with Quilligan to some earlier sacred is to invoke "an allegorical abode where existence hath never come" (*Eur* 6.7). Read dia-bolically (allegorically?), Quilligan's book helps us to understand why "Allegory & Vision ought to be known as Two Distinct Things & so called for the Sake of Eternal Life."

Lest I leave the reader with the impression that Quilligan wanted to write on Vision but ended up trying to define allegory, let me repeat that *The Language of Allegory* offers a great many inspired moments and deserves close consideration by any reader interested, as all readers of Blake must be, in "all-powerful Human Words!" (*J* 24.1). The last words here ought to be hers:

> Perhaps language cannot redeem language, so that poetry cannot redeem society; fiction may only entertain. But all allegorists do aim at redemption; and because they must work with language, they ultimately turn to the paradox at the heart of their own assumptions about words and make the final focus of their narratives not merely the social function of language, but, in particular, the slippery tensions between literalness and metaphor. They scrutinize language's own problematic polysemy. (p. 64)

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[1] The word is glossed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the intro-duction to her translation of Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: " . . . Derrida offers this version of textuality: A sowing that does not produce plants, but is simply infinitely repeated. A semination that is not *insemination* but *dissemination*, seed spilled in vain, an emission that cannot return to its origin in the father [i.e. author]. Not an exact and controlled polysemy, but a proliferation of always different, always postponed meanings" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976; p. lxv).