MARK BYRON

History, Text, Allegoresis

> Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.[1]

What is allegory? What can it tell us? What kinds of intellectual and tropological structures inform the production and reception of allegory? Is it generalizable, or is it specific to particular cultural formations? The vast project of Fredric Jameson's *Allegory and Ideology* locates these questions in the long history of allegorical analysis, identifying the structures that undergird much of the Western tropological imaginary and that provide ways of modulating individual identity with collective action and belief: namely, ideology. Yet Jameson's critique of allegory goes beyond this relation, showing how more complex forms of allegory extend into allegoresis, whereby the gaps and slippages in the structure of allegory afford libidinal energies that in turn subject allegory to its own critical apparatus.[2] Such an allegorization of allegory never rests upon its conclusions, but maintains a transitivity that rejuvenates the intellectual systems of critique and the cultural systems of literary and artistic production. Allegoresis is the production of meaning defined by the horizon of ideology: it is structured by deferment, where the literal surface of texts gives way to a network of meaning in a process of excavation. This process of "reading against the grain," a hermeneutics of suspicion, is for ideology what revelation or apocalypse has long been for theology: an efficient method by which to saturate text with maximal significance, and to have its parts produce compound discourses of significance, carried in the allegorical form. But allegory never fully shakes off this theological residue, even in the most secular age. Allegoresis instead is the energy by which textual expression is made to reveal more than it would, to return the leavened stock of images, tropes, and figures to an essential generative condition. Jameson sets out

[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York and London: Verso, 1977), pp. 177-8.

[2] Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019). All references are from this edition and are incorporated into the text.

his theory of allegory in the opening chapter of *Allegory and Ideology*, "Historical: The Ladder of Allegory." On close examination this formidable historical excursus makes the case for transitivity, where the very figure by which allegory is envisioned—the ladder—becomes its means of flight into allegoresis.

Scaling the Ladder of Allegory

In setting out his theory of allegory Jameson first rejects the two-level simile common in Greek and Roman epic—such as the Homeric deific figures of Δεῖμος (dread) and Φόβος (fear)—in which a comparison is made between heroic action and a secondary process through the function of *amplificatio*. The problem resides in the secondary figure—meant to perform a revelatory function—becoming reversible with the primary figure, resulting in the two-fold system descending into static symbolism (this problem of the symbol is one to which Jameson returns in his examination of Romantic ideology). Instead, Jameson proclaims the fourfold structure of allegory, first codified by Origen in the third century CE and subsequently adopted as a device in Judeo-Christian eschatology and apocalyptic literature. Allegorical narratives subject to the operations of the fourfold structure proliferate meaning not only by virtue of multiple interpretations—Dante's division into literal, typological, moral, and anagogical in his letter to Can Grande—but also by the movement between these levels, where residual tension or paradox produces an impetus to a further discovery of meaning. When this process of proliferation becomes unwieldy or exceeds the control of the text, as Jameson argues is the case in postmodern literature, then a process of *allegoresis* prevails.[3] Allegory is thus discontinuous, and when it succeeds it shows the rift

[3] Jameson largely deals with the Western tradition of allegory in literature and theology, including its Near-Eastern and North African roots. It is noteworthy that the concept of *allegoresis* has been successfully applied to Chinese literary history. The *Classic of Poetry* or *Shijing* (詩經)—one of the Five Classics purportedly compiled by Confucius in the fifth century BCE from a poetic tradition spanning the eleventh to the seventh century BCE—has produced a long history of voluminous commentary, often described by Western sinologists as "allegorical." By engaging the concept of *allegoresis* Pauline Yu reorients the reception of the *Shijing* closer to Western notions of epic than allegory. See Pauline R. Yu, "Allegory, Allegoresis, and The Classic of Poetry," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 43.2 (1983): 377-412. Zhang Longxi brings the *Shijing* and its commentary tradition into dialogue with the Western tradition of allegory, exploring how processes of reading with allegorical intent—*allegoresis*—differ between these traditions, producing distinctive social and political contexts of reading and interpretation. See

between the psychological and the social (or the unconscious and the political). Movement between these levels performs the crisis of ideological representation—like the movement of tectonic plates to reveal the structure beneath the earth's surface—and which on closer viewing is the crisis of representation itself. Allegory holds together the individual and the social in a precarious unity, but by revealing the rifts between them it provides the means by which to critique the production and function of ideology.[4] What if we were to turn this mode of analysis to Jameson's own text? Would its rhetoric, intertextuality, historical awareness, and argumentation reveal a process of allegorising, or even allegoresis?

As though to demonstrate the proliferating energy of allegory, Jameson declares two contrary claims: firstly, the "secret that allegory is itself allegorical," that is, that it generates interpretation of narrative and then, inevitably, interpretation of its own mechanisms; and secondly, that it is "a surgical instrument and a diagnostic tool" prompting theologians of all stripes to "read reality itself as an inescapable swarm of allegories with all the exegetical obsession of any garden-variety paranoiac" (1). Allegory has two sworn enemies: the "unity of living symbol," which nullifies its generative energy, and realism, which grounds itself in the materiality of existence rather than abstractness (2). The deep religious roots of allegory tell one important story, but another is contained in the literary origins of allegorical forms, namely Stoic commentaries on Homer's *Iliad* that proliferated in the Alexandrian era and that established a tripartite allegorical structure. In this arrangement, Jameson explains, individual characters functioned symbolically for the passions as well as for the physical dimensions of the known

---

Zhang Longxi, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[4] Gordon Teskey's genealogy of allegory opens with a similar claim to that which Jameson makes about the relation between the individual and the social: "the cultural purpose of allegory […] is to call forth from the reader, through interpretation, a continual translation of human experience into an arrangement of visual forms, an ideology." Allegory is founded on a rift between the real and the ideal, the literal and the moral, and is a means of bridging that rift—its figural compound function "as a labyrinth and as a veil" is captured in the etymology of text (the Latin *textus*, "tissue, web," and *texĕre*, "to weave," and ultimately the Proto-Indo-European root **teks*, "to weave, to fabricate"). See Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), xi-xii, 2-3.

universe (11-13). Jameson claims this form of allegory gave expression to both psychology and physics, but fell short in its omission of the process of representation, the allegorizing energies of allegory, and thus had the effect of forestalling the interpretive essence of allegory itself. Other models, such as the two-level "point-to-point" allegories of Plato (the cave allegory in *Republic* 514a-520a), or Albert Camus's *La Peste* (epidemic as allegory of Nazi occupation), also fail in their foreclosures, prone to flattening into symbolism or static pedagogic tools when read as fables (9-11).

Jameson locates the generative energy of allegory in the fourfold model (*quadrigia*) codified by Origen in the third century CE and adapted by Dante in his own allegorical schema, set out in his Letter to Can Grande.[5] This schema reconciles events in the Old Testament with the Life of Jesus in the New Testament as well as the eschatological or revelatory function of Christian theology.[6] The four levels set out by Dante are: 1. the literal or historical, the matter at hand (e.g., the Israelite flight from Egypt under Moses); 2. the allegorical or mystical, the secret or hidden meaning (e.g., the salvific life of Christ); 3. the moral or subjective (e.g., the salvation of the soul); and 4. the anagogical (e.g., the

[5] The classic Latin edition and English translation of Dante's text is in Paget Toynbee, *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae: The Letters of Dante* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1920), pp. 160-211. Scholarly analysis of Dante's Letter is prodigious, and in recent decades has dwelt upon the veracity of Dante's authorship by virtue of internal and external evidence. For an overview of this debate—itself an expression of *allegoresis* in its own way—see Robert Hollander, *Dante's Epistle to Cangrande* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). Carlo Ginzburg provides a more recent evaluation of the question of authorship, and therefore meaning, in Dante's text in "Dante's *Epistle to Cangrande* and its Two Authors," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 139 (2006): 195-216. See also Albert Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[6] Jameson has long identified the imperative in medieval allegory to reconcile Jewish religious texts with the New Testament—positioning those precursor texts as both historical and prophetic. This opens a relation between individual lives and a social-historical collective on the allegorical level. See *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 29.

fate of humanity in the Last Judgment).[7] This example closely follows the logic of typology but retains a capacity for further interpretation, as Jameson notes:

> the historical (literal) fact of the descent of the Hebrews into Egypt and their subsequent liberation will stand as a figure for the death and resurrection of Christ, an interpretation that by no means excludes other meanings and other kinds of allegorical interpretations of the same event. (26)

This system proved to be an extremely versatile method by which to codify systems of knowledge in the late antique context. The *Psychomachia* of Prudentius (c.400 CE) consists of a verse narration of the battle between virtues and vices, and the Christian victory over paganism, and is credited with laying the foundations for later medieval allegories such as *Le Romaunt de la rose*, *Everyman*, and *Piers Plowman*. [8] Macrobius's early fifth-century text, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, revisits Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, the surviving part of the sixth book of his *De re publica*: Cicero's text develops the Ptolemaic schema of the nine celestial spheres, from which Macrobius generates a Neoplatonic reading that collates his wide knowledge of classical philosophy.[9] A third fifth-century example of encyclopaedic allegory is Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, in which verse and prose combine in a

[7] Origen's system was in fact threefold: at points where literal interpretation of the scriptures is nonsensical and would lead readers into error, meaning is produced at the levels of flesh, soul, and spirit. This unites the Old and New Testaments (tropological interpretation), and links them both with the universal destiny of humanity, but without the distinction between individual and collective destiny upon which Jameson draws in his allegorical system. See Book IV of *On First Principles*, in *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, trans. and intro. Rowan A. Greer (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 171-216.

[8] See Aaron Pelttari, ed., *The Psychomachia of Prudentius: Text, Commentary, and Glossary* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019). The classic scholarly treatment is Macklin Smith, *Prudentius' "Psychomachia": A Reexamination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[9] See Cicero, *On the Republic; On the Laws*, trans. Clinton W. Keyes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. and intro. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).

Neoplatonic fusion of intelligence and learning, establishing the seven liberal arts that were to frame higher learning throughout the middle ages.[10]

Jameson evaluates the fourfold allegorical structure as not simply two kinds of dualisms added together, "but rather a distinction between two kinds of negations, each of which generates a different opposition of its own" (44). This fundamental tension in the fourfold structure provides "gaps" between the various levels, the effect of which is not to diminish the allusive power of allegory but to provide a generative source of libidinal investment in those gaps: "genuine allegory does not seek the 'meaning' of a work, but rather functions to reveal its structure of multiple meanings, and thereby to modify the very meaning of the word meaning" (35). Such generative potential has been used to consolidate certain kinds of structural power, pointing to allegory's affiliations with ideology:

> the Church fathers allowed as to how the life of Christ might also be reinterpreted as the life of the Church, thereby reinstating a historical institutionality along with law, obedience, and other hierarchical features not necessarily foreseen in the original paradigm. (48).

The duality between individual subjectivity and the collective forces of history and economics is where ideology does its work, bringing these dimensions together and staging their controversies. Jameson credits Louis Althusser for "healing the rift" between the explanatory codes of subjectivity and collectivity in his notion of ideology as the mechanism by which individuals position themselves within a collective social structure. Ideology is thus a "cosmological" force when read through the fourfold structure of allegory, motivating the libidinal energy of the structure as the levels shift uneasily in mutual relation.

---

[10] For a translation of Martianus's text see William Harris Stahl, Richard Johnson, and E. L. Burge, *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts, Volume II: The Marriage of Philology and Mercury* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). For a critical discussion of the text's structure and meaning, see William Harris Stahl, Richard Johnson, and E. L. Burge, *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts, Volume I: The Quadrivium of Martianus Capella: Latin Traditions in the Mathematical Sciences, 50 BC–AD 1250* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

Allegory provides a means by which to investigate history, on one hand, and the processes of representation, on the other. By virtue of this relation it induces the problem of narrative, and of literature more generally, as a discourse in which the relation between the subject and the collective is articulated. Drawing on Althusser's opposition of *doxa* and *episteme*, Jameson sees science writing out or erasing the subject, just as Freud, in "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," sees authorship as wish fulfilment disguised with universalisms like the "human condition" that also write out the subject from discourse. Allegory delivers its message through the concealment of group identification, which would otherwise alienate those external to that group. Ideology thus replaces religion as the discourse that suffuses everything: "the secret of class or group identification must be concealed […] it is allegory that often achieves this concealment most effectively, for allegory delivers its message by way of concealing it" (17). In this sense allegory's clear genealogy back to the Talmudic tradition and the early Church Fathers is made clear (19).

This genealogy develops Jameson's earlier thinking in *The Political Unconscious*, particularly his critique of Northrop Frye's instalment of allegory at the centre of literary studies. Frye adapts the fourfold model of allegory into an anti-interpretive mode of reading in which hermeneutics develops from literary texts rather than being imposed by an external system, and where "[a]ll commentary is allegorical interpretation."[11] Frye's view of allegory as a fundamental structuring element of literature draws on the communal power of myth and the collective representation borne out of religion, turned to literary expression in a modern secular context. Jameson shows how Frye adapts the fourfold schema as four phases of literary meaning: the literal level has the reader alert to the order of language; the formal level provides a phenomenological awareness of literary content as image (where a narrative might convey a symbolic structure or "world"); the mythical or archetypal level locates the text within larger structures of literature and civilisation; and the anagogical level presents archetypes (cities, gardens, and so on) through which is expressed the symbolic consciousness of the collective. Yet Frye's system differs from the classic fourfold structure in one essential way. Rather than anagogy representing human destiny, as in traditional fourfold models

[11] Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 89.

of allegory, Frye takes this a step further by framing the array of archetypes as elements in a human body conceived at a cosmic scale:

> Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way. This is not reality, but it is the conceivable or imaginative limit of desire, which is infinite, eternal, and hence apocalyptic. By apocalyptic I mean primarily the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body which, if not human, is closer to being human than to being inanimate.[12]

This marks an inversion of the moral and anagogical levels, whereby the "essentially historical interpretive system of the church fathers has here been recontained, and its political elements turned back into the merest figures for the Utopian realities of the individual subject."[13] Jameson sees in this gesture a displacement of apocalypse and the end of history by a "metaphysic of desire," a return to William Blake's "absolute man," where political or ideological force gives way to personal ecstasy. This serves to focus Jameson's emphasis upon a social hermeneutic in which the anagogical level in the traditional fourfold model is transformed into an expression of collective will or ideology.

Allegory and Ideology builds on this earlier analysis, amplifying a critique of Romanticism and its supersession by national literary pedagogies. Allegory's processes of concealment retain the bonds of material production, where symbolism instead tends to transcendence. The Romantic symbol, for example, overwhelms older allegories at the moment of bourgeois modernity (35), producing a crisis where the multiple publics and languages of Romanticism are replaced with the unity of the public (hegemony) and the constitution of a national literature, installed within the modern university system (51-2). This historical development bears consequences for the production of literature in modernity, where the "fall from truth into allegory is the fate of most attempts, from Romanticism to the high modernist period, to produce a Symbol for a secular and relativistic bourgeois age" (54). Conversely, Hans-Georg Gadamer traces the relative fortunes of allegory and symbol to the decline in rhetoric in the nineteenth

[12] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 119.

[13] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 74.

century and the spontaneous creativity of genius, where allegory is framed as mechanical and the symbol is inspired. Symbol brings together "sensible appearance and suprasensible meaning […] the union of two things that belong to each other."[14] Gadamer sees the genealogy of allegory in the project to unite Christianity with classical culture, forming the basis of the art and literature of modern Europe until the break with such dogmatic bonds gave culture sufficient freedom to determine the suspect nature of allegory as an aesthetic framework.

The eclipse of the fourfold system of allegory with the hegemony of the Romantic symbol led to various reappraisals of allegory as a viable interpretive model. Jameson rejects Walter Benjamin's expansive notion of allegory—taking in religion, philosophy, aesthetics, politics, and history—despite Benjamin's fierce critique of the symbol. Instead, Benjamin's notion of allegory as a radical artistic practice and its location in baroque aesthetics is, for Jameson, a theorization of decoration or over-ripeness rather than a viable hermeneutic model.[15] This is despite Benjamin's subtle approach to history, where allegory makes the past present in the Event,

> transforming a "homogeneous" continuity of time into the moment, the *Jetztzeit*, the time of the now, the *grand soir*, it affirms the existence of the Event in the present, incarnated and resurrected, fulfilled, while retaining the older theological figure. (88)

For Benjamin allegory is a way of seeing, a disposition toward the world that entails a critical function exceeding its aesthetic origins. Jameson also rejects Paul de Man's tropological structure of allegory as too explicitly inhuman, an unfortunate consequence of the linguistic turn of the twentieth century, in which the subject is at the mercy of language's power to undermine intention: "Language then alone can be said to be 'successful,' if not authentic, insofar as it is designed

---

[14] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edn, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 67.

[15] See Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, intro. George Steiner (London: Verso, 1977). For a critical account of Benjamin's theory of allegory, see Howard Caygill, "Walter Benjamin's Concept of Allegory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 241-53.

to designate its own inner tropological dynamics and thereby to admit its own communicational or cognitive impossibility"(63).[16] Yet the two concepts of alienation and reification are useful as diagnostic abstractions in an attempt to define modern allegory and the processes of meaning production. The problem of representation is folded into this dynamic, whereby the unity produced by the process of alienation turns processes into objects, reifying them for the purposes of exchange.

Jameson concludes his theorization of allegory by turning to its diagnostic function in its capacity to generate hermeneutic potential in the slippage between its levels, and to turn this potential back onto itself in an allegorical reading of its own capacity for allegory:

> It is clear enough that with the disappearance of the sacred text, and in a modern relativism, this reshuffling of the levels will in fact be an inevitable outcome, governed now less by a sense of what is orthodox than by what catches the eye, what focuses attention. (75)

Jameson seems to cede the powers of allegory to the strategies and even the marketability of allegoresis at this point. But this structure also governs the reflexivity of modern literature as a machinery for allegoresis: "Allegoresis begins when this self-specification or 'self-conscious' identification of the medium or media of the text becomes its allegorical level, so that its production becomes its own allegorical meaning" (58). The fourfold structure gives way to these "transversalities" where modern literary production "becomes its own allegorical meaning" (65). But is this strictly a modern condition? Are there not premodern, even ancient, theological texts that demonstrate this generative power of allegoresis?

The question then takes on specific weight: does "Historical: The Ladder of Allegory" undermine the argument for allegory by attempting to constellate too many ideas, arranging them within a determinate historical schema? Is this a flaw

[16] De Man's metacritical approach to figural language takes Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust as its subjects in *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), where the incomplete logic of figuration calls itself into question, demonstrating the text's unreadability.

and does it compromise the project set out in *Allegory and Ideology*? Can we read this chapter, and perhaps the entire book, as a process of *allegoresis*, the production of an allegorising energy that does not and cannot settle upon its hermeneutic objects but is condemned or liberated into tracing out lines of allegorical flight?

A Ladder to the Stars: Allegory as Allegoresis

The title of this opening chapter, "Historical: The Ladder of Allegory," places history squarely at the centre of Jameson's schema, but it does so with an allusion that bears a profound allegorical provenance. The divine ladder—סֻלָּם יַעֲקֹב—in Genesis 28:10-19 appears to Jacob in a dream, with angels ascending and descending, and the voice of God bestowing upon Jacob responsibility for the chosen people as he approaches the land of Canaan. Jacob awakens and names the place of his respite Bethel, the "House of God." By having usurped the blessing of his father Isaac meant for his brother Esau, Jacob had become the Patriarch of the Israelites and progenitor of the Twelve Tribes of Israel through his sons, and his dream marks the divine fulfilment of this destiny. As a foundation story for Israel the dream of Jacob's Ladder has generated a rich fund of Midrashic interpretation, revealing its generative powers of allegoresis to match Jacob's generative powers as patriarch of the Twelve Tribes. The dream signifies the exile of Jewish people—in Egypt, Babylon, and Persia—before the coming of the messiah, and it forms a bridge between heaven and earth as a locus of prayer. The Hebrew word for ladder *sulam* (סלם) shares with Sinai (סיני) the same numeric value in the *gematria*, the system by which Hebrew letters are assigned numerical value and from which words accrue symbolic meaning. This equivalence produces a correspondence between Jacob's dream and the bestowal of the Ten Commandments upon Moses—an event often interpreted as a typological precursor to Christ's resurrection and salvation of humanity. Philo of Alexandria provides four interpretations of the dream in his *De somniis*: the angels ascending and descending represent human souls; the ladder itself is a human soul and the angels are divine *logoi* (λόγοι) moving between its foot located on the earth and the head (νοῦς) unalloyed in its heavenly element; movement on the ladder

represents the human negotiation with sin and virtue; and the angels represent the changing realm of human activity.[17]

Jacob's Ladder became part of the tropological repertoire of the early Church Fathers, in which the body of Christ served as the ladder by which heaven and earth are joined, and upon which humanity may achieve salvation.[18] This interpretation drew upon the imagery contained in Jesus's address to Nathanael in John 1:51: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (King James Version). In the second century CE, during a period of intense Christian persecution, such apologists as Irenaeus and Tertullian figured the Church as the ladder of ascent to God. Origen spoke of the two ladders defining Christian life: the ascetic ladder climbed during life in pursuit of virtue, and that scaled by the soul after death toward God.[19] In his *Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa likens his subject's life in mystical terms, his "upward course" ascending "the ladder which God set up" for Jacob, and his fellow Cappadocian Gregory Nazianzus interprets the ladder as a figure for ascetic righteousness.[20] John Chrysostom used the ladder as an analogy for spiritual training essential to a Christian life and for a

[17] The relevant passage is *De somniis*, I, 146-148, in Philo, Volume V, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 375. For an account of Philo's fourfold interpretive system, see Patricia Cox Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 61-2. For the most authoritative account of the fourfold system of allegory, its origins and variations through history, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 3 vols, trans. Marc Sebanc and E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 2000, and 2009).

[18] For a general overview of the early Christian uses of the trope of Jacob's Ladder, see Katherine Masengill, "Images of Holy Men in Late Antiquity in Light of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: Framing Spiritual Ascent and Visualising Spiritual Hierarchy," in Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi and Francesca Dell'Acqua, eds, *Pseudo-Dionysius and Christian Visual Culture, c.500-900* (London: Palgrave, 2020), pp. 133-76.

[19] See Homily 27 on the Book of Numbers 33:1-2 in Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, ed. Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), pp. 168-70.

[20] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans., intro. and notes Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York and Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 113-14; Gregory Nazianzus, "Oratorio 38.13," in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 2, *Patrologia Graecia* 36, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris, 1858), 325B.

posthumous ascent to heaven, and Benedict transforms this into a trope for both ascetic practices and obedience to one's abbot in Chapter 7 of his *Rule*.[21] The generative exegetical potential of the episode of Jacob's Ladder reaches a critical and historical point of intensity in John Climacus, who as abbot of the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai literalizes the gematrial bond between ladder and Sinai. Climacus—"of the Ladder"—wrote *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Κλίμαξ, or *Scala paradisi*) in the early seventh century as a guide to monastic life, in which each step represented a virtue to be cultivated (or a vice to be rejected) on the path to salvation.[22] The thirty steps also represented numerically the life of Christ—who was thirty years of age at his baptism and the commencement of his ministry—and produces its own kind of allegorical or mystical interpretive mode. The text became a staple of Byzantine spirituality, generating an extensive commentary tradition, and retains its status in the Orthodox Church. As Jacob is considered a prophet and patriarch in Islam, the ladder is considered by Sufi mystics to be an allegory of the "straight path" of Islam, and thus a typological precursor to Muhammed's معراج (*mi'rāj* or ascent to heaven) from the Temple Mount. Muhammed meets a prophet at each of the seven levels of heaven during ascension with the archangel Gabriel—Adam, John the Baptist, Jesus, Joseph, Idris/Enoch, Aaron, Moses, and Abraham. The similarities with the structure of Dante's *Commedia* are unmistakable, and a venerable

[21] See Homily 83 in John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist. Homilies 48-88*, trans. Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1960), p. 416; and *Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. and ed. Leonard Doyle (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), pp. 12-15.

[22] John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, intro. Kallistos Ware (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982). Søren Kierkegaard adopted the pseudonym John Climacus in *De omnibus dubitandum est* (1841), *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), the latter text dealing with the alienating effect of language, belonging to the ideal realm, in its attempt to represent matters of faith that reside in the actual world. Kierkegaard's evaluation of this paradox has generated its own kind of allegoresis among philosophers, who debate the nature of its parodic intent: see Paul Muench, "Understanding Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript*: Mirror of the Reader's Faults or Socratic Examplar?" in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser, and K. Brian Söderquist (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2007), pp. 424-440. Kierkegaard also used the pseudonym Anti-Climacus in later texts such as *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) that sought to represent Christian belief from an existential viewpoint.

scholarly tradition tracing Islamic sources in Dante's epic gives particular attention to كتاب المعراج—*The Kitab al-Mirāj* or *Book of the Ascension*, translated into Latin (*Liber Scale Machomet*), Spanish, and Old French in the thirteenth century—knowledge of which Dante may have acquired via his mentor Brunetto Latini.[23]

The image of the ladder is heavily determined within Judeo-Christian scriptural discourse, but it also bears a charged valency in other ways relevant to Jameson's project in *Allegory and Ideology*. Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous formulation of the ladder metaphor as a mode of learning is the most prominent of these usages.[24] The penultimate proposition 6.54 of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* sets out the terms of the metaphor, as a mode by which understanding renders redundant—and indeed nonsensical—the pathway upon which it has been achieved:

> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on

[23] A comprehensive evaluation of Dante's use of *mi'rāj* materials can be found in Enrico Cerulli, *Il "Libro della scala" e la questione della fonti arabo-spagnole della Divina Commedia* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1949). See also Vicente Cantarino, "Dante and Islam: History and Analysis of a Controversy," in Jan M. Ziolkowski, ed., *Dante and Islam* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 31-44.

[24] For a detailed discussion of Wittgenstein's use of the ladder image in the *Tractatus*, see Lynette Reid, "Wittgenstein's Ladder: The *Tractatus* and Nonsense," *Philosophical Investigations* 21.2 (1998): 97-151, especially 105-108. Reid also traces the origins of the image in Book II of Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), p. 489:

> And again, just as it is not impossible for the man who has ascended to a high place by a ladder to overturn the ladder with his foot after he ascent, so also it is not unlikely that the Sceptic after he has arrived at the demonstration of his thesis by means of the argument proving the non-existence of proof, as it were by a step-ladder, should then abolish this very argument.

> them, over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)
>
> He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.[25]

Wittgenstein's formulation owes a clear debt to Jewish apocalyptic literature and its Christian reception, whether or not he was consciously deploying a secularisation of Jacob's dream and its descendants. What gives this image particular relevance as an echo in Jameson's chapter title is its emphasis on the limits of language: if the reader follows Wittgenstein to this point and understands his aims in the *Tractatus*, one realises the nonsensical nature of all that has gone before and instead embraces the higher reaches of intellection.[26] Wittgenstein's text immediately places even this assertion into a system of allegoresis by concluding enigmatically: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Is understanding finally unutterable, contingent upon silent assent? Or is the perception of higher understanding a false condition, inducing all intellection into silence? Is the truth of the *Tractatus* then nonsense, by the terms of the argument, and thus by virtue of being nonsense proves Wittgenstein's final assertion true? If so, this paradox approximates Epimenides' famous dictum: "All Cretans are liars." But in another sense it closely resembles such theological paradoxes as divine superessence, that is: God is perfect and thus cannot be a positive presence or thing, as that would constrain His perfection; but God is not nothing as that would signify an absence, where God is everywhere and in all things; therefore God is unified, No-thing, and exceeds all things. Whichever way one may take Wittgenstein's aphorisms, and their echo in Jameson's chapter title, the concept of allegory is structured in theological terms even in its secularised form. More specifically, it is structured as a mode of negative theology, whereby essence is apprehended through presence, but is always displaced from it. This relation of allegory and divinity—whether the apotropaic structure of negative

---

[25] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, intro. Bertrand Russell, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul; New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1922), p. 90.

[26] Marjorie Perloff takes this image as a talisman for a specific kind of aesthetic, in which ordinary language is estranged and matters of everyday life become newly exotic subjects for experimental poetry and prose. See Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

theology or the secularised concepts of final meaning, ultimate logical truths, and an end to signification—is the libidinal energy that exceeds Jameson's fourfold model of allegory, inducing a process of allegoresis.

As the formative figure for Jameson's hermeneutics, the Ladder of Allegory is invoked historically, trailing its theological residues across the temporal plane. But its primal feature is transitivity: a movement towards the telos of history entailed in historical materialism, or the sanctified state of revelation in apocalyptic eschatology. The capacity to scale the ladder is the activation of exegetical potential, the activity of meaning-making. That such a figure is saturated with allegorical potential is hardly surprising: the human reach towards the sun and stars is one perpetually aware of its shortcomings and its need for prosthetic extension. Whether divine or angelic guidance of the human soul to a state of grace, the ascetic graduation through stages of frailty and privation towards purification, the ability to exceed individual psychology and to grasp collective life, or the architecture of ideas and methods of thinking that signify the increments of intellectual progress, until the great revelation is at hand—these capacities and actions move upwards, away from the earth and our modest beginnings. But these systems of allegory belie the libidinal energies of allegoresis, turning from the singular pursuit of some telos or another, and engaging in a collective process of meaning. This is the shared immanence of the text and its reader, the activation of discourse in which allegory supplies the rungs of the ladder, but the rails, the footing, the elevation, and the climbers embody the energies of allegoresis. Rumi's exhortation in دیوان شمس تبریزی (*The Diwan of Shams of Tabriz*) transforms the Sufic doctrine of the soul's mystical ascension into a guide for the embodied production of meaning in mutual comradeship: "Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder." Reft of a reader's fellowship, the text produces no meaning, its potentialities remain silent, allegoresis is stilled into bare symbol. The ladder is us.