

Fable and Allegory in Political and Moral Thought

Sebastià Alzamora. Writer, literary critic and cultural manager

Rhetorical figure and literary genre respectively, the allegory and the fable were two of the preferred instruments of many great writers of all times, at least from classical antiquity to the Enlightenment; and, as tools of literary writing, they were also, logically, of speculative and philosophical thought, expressed in analogical terms. Now in modern times, their use has become gradually neglected or abandoned, and analogical thought, characteristic of literature in general, and of poetry in particular, has preferred to express itself through other genres and figures, such as metaphor, image, sinesthesia or sinecdoche; or through complex and more or less systematic constructions, such as the short story or the novel of ideas.

Preferences and stylistic evolutions aside, and although the prejudice means that for many the allegory and the fable seem like remnants of the past, the truth is that they still conserve all their instrumental power, and offer themselves to today's writer, at the start of the 21st century, as fully valid tools for creation, which need not be opposed, but added naturally to the aforementioned. In short, allegory is usually defined in current manuals of literary rhetoric as "a continued metaphor" (perhaps we would prefer sustained, using musical terminology); in other words, that the allegorical expression is especially apt for the correspondence – Baudelairian, of course – between ideas and images, between real meaning and figurative meaning, which lends it an undeniable "modernity". Something similar happens with the fable, and its first cousin the

apologue, insofar as the type of representation carried out – normally through the convention of talking animals – is ideal for the illustration of ideas of a moral nature, which, finally, are the fundamental material of the great majority of the literary expressions of our time and others, whatever their genre or subject.

Therefore, to the extent that many of the major works of the literature of Ramon Llull are composed based on the allegory and the fable (we have in mind the *Book of the Lover and the Beloved* or the *Book of the Beasts*, without going any further), it is no exaggeration to say that he is a writer much more alive for today's tastes than some commonplaces would have us believe. A veritable classic writer of western medieval literature who – like Chaucer, Villon, and many others – can still bring pleasure to his readers and provide highly useful models for other writers.

Resuming the reference to Charles Baudelaire and his "Correspondences", formulated in one of the first poems of *The Flowers of Evil*, a book that heralded modernism, "Correspondences" is a sonnet in which the poet condenses an aesthetic (and, therefore, also moral) set of ideas, which have been quite central from late romantic Symbolism until the present. Let us recall it for a moment, in the translation by William Aggeler:

*Nature is a temple in which living pillars
Sometimes give voice to confused words;
Man passes there through forests of symbols
Which look at him with understanding eyes.*

*Like prolonged echoes mingling in the
distance
In a deep and tenebrous unity,
Vast as the dark of night and as the light of
day,
Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.*

*There are perfumes as cool as the flesh
of children,
Sweet as oboes, green as meadows
— And others are corrupt, and rich,
triumphant,*

*With power to expand into infinity,
Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin,
That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses.*

A commentary on the poem and on the long shadow it has cast over the development of the avant-gardes and the modern literary discourse would be an arduous task and is not relevant here. Let us note just two aspects: on the one hand, the unequivocally Platonic basis of the poem, which is still a reading of the foundational myth of the cave applied to the contemplation of nature and to artistic creation. On the other, the fact that this system of cor-

respondences that Baudelaire describes is in the end quite simply a marvellously exact description of the way in which allegorical thought acts: it is about bringing worlds, or apparently unconnected realities, together, to obtain a broader and more complex vision of these realities. It is, in short, about binding, recalling the etymological origins of the word religion (*religare*). In other words, allegorical thought is a tool for understanding the reality which lies at the foundation of poetry and of religion, which are but forms of knowledge. Probably one of the first in the western world to understand this was Ramon Llull who, as shown by the *Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, was capable of composing high poetry based on religious foundations such as those of Christianity or those of Sufi mysticism. Ramon Llull, in a word, was one of the first great constructors of correspondences, and this binds him in the past with Plato and in the future with Baudelaire, in such a way that today not only do Lullian fables and allegories continue to be of use, but they remind us of the nature of poetry not only as a literary genre but as an intellectual power capable of crossing time and, who knows, of explaining and transcending it.