

Allegory and Conversion in Juan Valera's *Pepita Jiménez* (1874)

Introduction: A Story

I “got saved” when I was eight years old and spent the next eight years wondering whether it was real. The problems started early. In my church (Baptist, the Southern variety), “conversion” was an oddly ritualized enterprise involving a formulaic, almost incantatory prayer and a specific set of (expected) emotional responses. The precise nature of that emotional response was never entirely clear to me, but people tossed around words like “relief,” “elation,” and “delight” a lot (there were also lots of great metaphors: “It feels like an elephant being lifted off your chest” was my favorite). Naturally, it was this sort of experience—or else something very similar—that I anticipated as I knelt at the foot of my bed on the evening of March 23, 1993. My mom knelt beside me, her hand resting gently on my back, and we began to pray: “Jesus, I know I’m a sinner; I know I can’t get to heaven on my own. So I confess you as Savior and Lord of my life. Would you come into my heart and save me? Amen.” I opened my eyes and looked up, waiting for the rush of gooey euphoria to overtake me. But nothing. I felt absolutely nothing at all. In fact, I felt worse than nothing. In the absence of elation, I was overcome with the desire to induce it, to fake it, to generate, as if by an act of will, the experience that was supposed to serve as the index of my conversion. And I did. It didn’t hit me immediately—though of course it should have—that a feigned conversion experience was probably insufficient for securing my eternal salvation. When it did hit me about 15 minutes later, things went downhill quickly. Indeed, over the next eight years, the disconnect between what I had actually experienced and what I felt required to pretend that I had experienced—or, put another way, the disconnect between the self that feigned the experience and the subsequent self that became conscious of the first self’s deception—haunted me. I tried, more times than I care to recall and with something

bordering on obsession, to repeat the experience; I begged God, sometimes sobbing, sometimes on the brink of hysteria, to save me, but each time I prayed I saw only that little eight-year-old boy kneeling next to his bed, trying desperately to convince himself and everyone else of something he knew wasn't real. I wanted to be converted. I wanted it more than anything. But I had ruined it; I had mocked God; and the possibility of authentic transformation had closed off forever.

I can't be sure, but I doubt that my struggle with conversion is atypical. Indeed, it seems to me that the structure of Baptist spirituality (at least as I know it) in some ways encourages these kinds of difficulties. And this is simply because if conversion is, as Bill Leonard suggests, a "hallmark of Baptist identity," then it is primarily as a *personal experience* that it acquires significance.¹ "The Baptist Doctrine of the Church," for instance, a statement approved in 1948 by Baptist Union of Great Britain, has it that conversion is "always a personal experience" wherein the "individual" responds to God's gracious offer of salvation and so "receives the assurance" that "he is the child of God." "It is this vital evangelical experience," the Statement continues, "which underlies the Baptist conception of the Church."² The implicit model of "vital evangelical experience" is, I think, St. Paul, whose dramatic transformation on the road to Damascus came fully equipped with visions, miracles, and a voice from heaven. And while there was no official ruling on the matter, one nevertheless got the sense that one's own conversion experience was supposed to follow suit.³ Kenneth Cauthen has rightly linked this stress on

¹ Bill Leonard, *Baptists in America* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), 88.

² "The Baptist Doctrine of the Church," in Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1959), 285. While the 1948 Statement clearly stresses the personal nature of conversion, Paul Fiddes rightly points out that "to be a person is to be more than an individual" and hence that, for Baptists, salvation has an equally important social or corporate dimension. See his "The Understanding of Salvation in the Baptist Tradition," in *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003): 228-248.

³ From a theological perspective, this isn't exactly right. The 1948 Statement, for instance, makes it clear that conversion experiences may be "swift and emotional or *slow-developing* and *undramatic*" (285, my emphasis).

“personal experience” in Baptist life to our anti-creedalism—and, more specifically, to our sense that the individual soul “stands alone in God’s presence,” as the 1948 Statement puts it.⁴ But placing experience center-stage is at least potentially problematic, since if conversion has an “existential” or “experiential” aspect, it also has an “epistemological” aspect: how, exactly, do I *know* that I’ve been converted? One way of answering this question is simply to collapse the epistemological into the experiential. A.H. Ackley does just this in his famous hymn “He Lives,” which asks, “You ask me how I know he lives?” and answers: “He lives within my heart!” Because I do, in other words. But this answer always seemed to me pitifully unconvincing. I, after all, had had plenty of *experiences*, but none of them translated directly into anything like knowledge. Just the opposite in fact: the more experiences I had, the more I doubted that experience could, even in principle, furnish compelling reasons to believe in one’s own conversion. The problem, I think, is that experience simply isn’t self-interpreting; it doesn’t tell you anything on its own. For an experience (and particularly a *conversion* experience) to mean something, you have to *read* or *interpret* it in a particular way. It is precisely this conflict between the desire for pure, unmediated knowledge and the necessity, the inevitability of interpretation that I would like to flesh out in the rest of this essay. And to do that, I want to look at a novel that both highlights and complicates the notion of conversion as an act of interpretation.

Pepita Jiménez (1874), by the nineteenth-century Spanish novelist Juan Valera, is a kind of God-or-the-girl tale in which Luis de Vargas, a young seminarian studying in Madrid, falls desperately in love with the recently widowed Pepita while visiting his father in Andalucía. The novel’s central conflict turns on Luis’ attempt to reconcile his (spiritual) love for God with his

⁴ Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 62.

(carnal) attraction to the young Andalusian widow. In the end, God loses: Luis decides to abandon the priesthood for the pleasures of married life.

In many ways, *Pepita Jiménez* is a strange place to go for spiritual edification, especially for a Baptist. This is true, in the first place, because Valera's novel is explicitly Catholic (most things in nineteenth-century Spain were), and Catholicism is still very much a mystery to me. But it's also true because, in a fairly obvious sense, the novel is anti-religious: it tells the story, not of Luis' glorious conversion *to* religion, but rather of his slow (and sometimes painful) realization that the delights of carnal pleasure outweigh the subtler, less tangible pleasures of the spiritual life. In the context of Restoration Spain, the novel's anti-religious (or, more properly, anti-clerical) overtones are explicable as part of a general effort by Spain's educated elite to wrest power away from a still hugely influential Catholic Church and so to bring Spain in line with more progressive, liberalized countries like France.⁵ I discussed these matters on the exam (and I would be happy to discuss them further if you like), but my real interest lies elsewhere. Specifically, I am interested in the precise mechanism by which Luis effects what he will later call his "conversión," and I am interested in that mechanism because it seems, paradoxically, to provide a model for understanding why my own "conversion experience" was so difficult and, in many ways, so traumatic.

In the next few sections, I want to look more closely at the mechanism of Luis' conversion. What I will suggest, in broad strokes, is that his transformation is not so much an experience as an act of interpretation, more specifically, an act of *self*-interpretation. To frame the discussion, I begin with a brief overview of the interpretive model that governs Luis' vision of the world and so will govern my analysis of the novel.

⁵ Evans and Thomas ("Alternative Conversions, Priesthoods, and Religious Constructs in *Pepita Jiménez* and *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*," *Hispania* 90 [2007]: 479-89) have argued this point convincingly.

I. The Analogical Imagination

In a letter to his uncle dated April 4, Luis writes the following:

It is not hidden to me that all these material things are like the letters of a book, like signs and characters wherein the soul, attentive to its reading, can discern a deep meaning and read and discover the beauty of God.⁶

The idea of the *liber naturae*, to which Luis clearly alludes, was a commonplace of medieval theology, where it served to mediate between the terrestrial and celestial spheres and thereby guarantee the coherence of Christianity's dualist ontology. Viewed through this lens, the natural world appears not as a glob of inert matter, but rather as a dynamic and symbolic reality in which physical entities harbor spiritual significance. Throughout *Pepita Jiménez*, Luis will use this interpretive strategy to resolve the novel's central conflict: the antagonism between spiritual love (God) and spiritual love (Pepita). That is, Luis will legitimize (or at least try to legitimize) his love for the Andalusian widow by portraying his carnal desire as the representation of a spiritual reality. Ultimately, the plan backfires: though Luis begins by deploying the strategy of analogical interpretation as a way of spiritualizing his attraction to Pepita, he ends up using a similar strategy to justify his decision to abandon the priesthood and marry her.

To get a little clearer on how this conversion-by-analogy works, I would like to situate Luis' conflict, and the strategy he employs to resolve it, within what has become, since Romanticism, an important and protracted polemic in literary studies: the debate about the relationship between symbol and allegory. *Pepita Jiménez* is not a Romantic novel, of course, but the polemic that emerged within Romanticism has roots in the same analogical vision of the world exemplified by Luis. As I shall argue, however, Valera's protagonist is profoundly

⁶ Juan Valera, *Pepita Jiménez* (Buenos Aires: Stockcero, 2004), 22: "No se me oculta que todas estas cosas materiales son como las letras de un libro, son como los signos y caracteres donde el alma, atenta a su lectura, puede penetrar un hondo sentido y leer y descubrir la hermosura de Dios" (my translation). All subsequent references to the novel will be given parenthetically.

ambivalent about the two terms of this binomial; he vacillates between symbolic and allegorical diction and seems mostly oblivious to the implications of substituting one for the other. This ambivalence (or, if you like, confusion) not only renders Luis incapable of reconciling divine and profane love, but also makes it startlingly easy for him to set aside his commitment to the priesthood for the pleasures of marriage.

II. Luis, Pepita, and the Analogical Imagination

Augustine begins the first book of *De doctrina christiana* with a distinction between *res* and *signum*. At first glance, the distinction seems obvious: a *signum*, on the one hand, is something used to signify (paradigmatically, a word), while a *res* is something signified by a *signum* (say, a rock). For Augustine, however, the distinction turns out to be difficult to maintain, since, given the Christian doctrine of Creation, everything that might seem a mere *res* turns out to be the symbolic representation of its creator and therefore the *signum* of a spiritual reality. In other words, if a rock is, in a certain sense, merely a rock, it is also, as created, a sign, since it reveals something about the nature of the being that created it. The implication, of course, is that there is no such thing as a “thing” *stricto sensu*, since all created objects acquire a certain degree of symbolic significance by virtue of their relationship with God.

Augustine’s discussion of the *res-signum* binomial is exemplary of what we might call the “analogical imagination”—the idea that created entities bear some resemblance to (and hence signify) their creator. It is precisely this imagination, moreover, that forms the philosophical background of Luis’ vision of the world. For instance, in a letter to his uncle dated April 4, Luis writes: “if I love the beauty of earthly things for themselves, and if I love them excessively—that’s idolatry; I must [instead] love them as the sign of a hidden, divine beauty” (22).⁷ At this

⁷ “Si amo la hermosura de las cosas terrenales tales como ellas son, y si la amo con exceso, es idolatría; debo amarla como signo, como representación de una hermosura oculta y divina” (the translation is mine).

point in the plot, Luis is still blissfully unaware of his attraction to Pepita, and, indeed, the entire discussion of the natural world as the “manifestation of God’s love” occurs within the context of a theological discussion motivated, as Luis himself puts it, by the accusation of some “impious people” that “our holy religion” moves souls to “hate everything about this world” (21). As the novel advances, however, this analogical interpretation of the world ends up serving as the major premise in Luis’ attempt to reconcile divine and carnal love. Indeed, a month later, in a letter dated May 7, Luis resorts again to a kind of analogism, but this time the context is amorous, not philosophical; Valera’s protagonist has been wounded, and definitively so, by Cupid’s arrow. In retrospect, of course, the wounding was a long time coming. Two letters earlier, for instance, Luis had praised “Pepita’s beauty and corporal elegance” and, despite the “perfect purity of his thoughts,” had gone on at some length describing the “beauty of her eyes,” the “pearly enamel of her teeth,” and the “fresh purple of her lips” (35). In the May 7 letter I alluded to earlier, Luis finally confesses his crescent attraction to Pepita and takes measures to curb it. And, as I indicated before, these “measures” turn out to be little more than an application of the analogical theory of interpretation to his conflict between spiritual and carnal love.

The problem Luis sets for himself is deceptively simple. “The image of Pepita is always with me,” he tells us: “it’s always present in my soul [...] it stands between me and God” (48-9). Note, in the first place, that this is just a recontextualization of the same conflict between “the beauty of earthly things” and the “beauty of God” that Luis confronted earlier (22). That is to say, if before it was physical beauty, abstractly conceived, that kept Luis from seeing and appreciating divine beauty, it is now a particular instantiation of physical beauty (Pepita) that impedes to his spiritual growth. The problem, of course, is that concrete instantiations of physical beauty are significantly more difficult to resist than abstract ones. For, as Luis himself

explains, even if “the beauty and the concept of God are infinite and comprehensive,” and even if Pepita’s beauty is “finite, limited, and concrete,” the latter happens to be more attractive than the former (48). We can imagine his reasoning: “I can see Pepita, but I can’t see God. I can touch Pepita, but I can’t touch God. I could even have sex with Pepita, but I can’t have sex with God!” Concepts, it turns out, don’t have legs. To solve the problem, Luis turns again to the strategy of analogical interpretation and tries to infuse the concept of God with a little zest by “dressing it up” (*revestirlo*) in an “imaginary form” (49). As he makes clear a paragraph or so later, by “imaginary form” Luis simply means “symbol.” If I am to “absorb and drown out the image, the memory of Pepita,” he tells us, “[I need] a semblance, a symbol of the infinite concept” of God (49). One way of thinking about Luis’ invocation of the “symbol of the infinite concept of God” would be to see it as a kind of leveling mechanism: since God’s intangible, metaphysical beauty is, under normal circumstances, no match for the allure of Pepita’s physical beauty, he needs something to even the odds. This is where the symbol comes in. By providing a material instantiation of an immaterial concept, the symbol makes it more likely that Luis’ love for God will be able, as he puts it, to “do battle” with the “image” of Pepita and thereby reclaim its privileged status in his spiritual life.

But, as I suggested earlier, the symbol is only one of two rhetorical devices that Luis deploys throughout the novel. The other is allegory; and, in the remainder of this essay, I would like to look at the ways in which these two figures alternate, crisscross, and eventually get in each other’s way in Luis’ attempt to reconcile divine and profane love. I begin with a brief description of the distinction between allegory and symbol.

III. Allegory, Symbol, and the Romantic Polemic

As Paul de Man explains in his important essay, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” the Romantics,

especially the more theoretically astute among them, divided figural language into two categories, the symbolic and the allegorical, and built a rather complex theory of art on the superiority of the former to the latter. This emphasis on symbolism at the expense of allegory constituted a decisive rupture in literary history, since, at least until Goethe, allegory had been the figural mode par excellence. In his *Versuch einer Allegorie* (1766), for instance, the German art critic Johann Joachim Winckelmann labeled as “allegorical” all art that had a meaning beyond the literal (which included pretty much all of it), and as late as 1798, Friedrich Schlegel, no marginal figure in the development of Romanticism, could write that “all beauty is allegory” and that we can “only express the highest [truths] allegorically.”⁸ By the end of the eighteenth-century, however, the general mood had begun to shift, and the symbol eventually came to unseat allegory as the paradigm of figural diction. We owe the seeds of that inversion to Goethe, who in the last quarter of that century argued that allegory and symbol weren’t simply different but also *antithetical* rhetorical modes. Like Coleridge a little later on, Goethe conceived allegory as a figural mode in which a single sign (say, a dove) refers, rationally and mechanically, to a single meaning (say, peace). Complaints about the “rationality” or “mechanicity” of the allegorical sign are frequent in the Romantic polemic, answering, as they do, to the suspicion that allegory can be reduced to a kind of mathematical equation: *this* sign equals *that* concept—and nothing else. Much later, and in a very different philosophical context, Hans Gadamer repeated this criticism when he said that allegory has “run its course” as soon as we ascertain its meaning; in other words, once we learn that “dove” equals “peace,” there’s really no work left to be done.⁹ The symbol, by contrast, doesn’t signify but rather *suggests*; it refers not to a single, specifiable

⁸ Schlegel, “Gespräch über die Poesie,” in *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler, 19 vols. (Munich: Schönigh, 1961-1971), II, 324.

⁹ See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and William Glen-Doepel (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 67.

meaning, but rather to multiplicity of different (and potentially incompatible) meanings. It is, to cite Gadamer once more, “endlessly suggestive in [its] indefiniteness.”¹⁰

In his essay, de Man builds on these Goethian (and Gadamerian) insights and argues that the primary difference symbolic and allegorical diction has to do with *temporality*. He begins by citing Coleridge, who, in a famous passage from *The Statesman’s Manual*, characterizes the symbol as “the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal.”¹¹ As this citation suggests, Coleridge’s symbol is, to paraphrase a really bad 90s rock band, the place where worlds collide: it is where the natural meets the supernatural, where the physical meets the spiritual, where the visible meets the invisible.¹² Perhaps most importantly, however, it is what permits the jump from the one to the other—the jump, for instance, from “all these material things” to “the hidden beauty of God” that Luis tries so desperately to make. de Man goes on to draw two conclusions from Coleridge’s account of the symbol. The first conclusion is that the symbol has the structure of a synecdoche—the rhetorical figure in which a part (a sail, for instance) stands in for the whole (a ship). This is important because synecdochical relationships have (or are alleged to have) a kind of organicity, a kind of uncontrived naturalness. For instance, letting “sail” stand in for “ship” is not simply to manufacture a relationship from thin air, since “having sails” is in some sense constitutive of shipness.¹³ As it turns out, however, concrete examples of the symbol are hard to come by and often unenlightening. In an 1819 lecture, for example, Coleridge cites the boat/sail example as an illustration of symbolic diction, but it’s hard to see why someone would get excited about an example you could find in any

¹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 67.

¹¹ Cited in Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), 192.

¹² I refer to the Boston-based group Powerman 5000.

¹³ Not all ships, of course. Aircraft carriers, for instance, don’t have sails.

rhetorical handbook under the entry on synecdoche.¹⁴ The best example I've come across belongs to Friedrich Schelling, who tells us that Mary Magdalen is exemplarily symbolic because she “not only *signifies* repentance but is living repentance itself.”¹⁵ Here the organic relationship between symbol and symbolized (between sign and meaning) is reasonably clear: “Mary Magdalen” *means* “repentance” by *participating* in repentance, since she is, in some sense, the thing she symbolizes.¹⁶ The second conclusion is a corollary of the first, namely, that if the symbol works like a synecdoche, it also works *atemporally*. To see what I mean, recall that de Man is operating with a broadly Saussurian conception of language according to which signs refer to, and derive their meaning from, their relationship with other signs rather than their relationship with the external world. On this view, moreover, signification is a radically temporal affair: in order for a sign to mean, it must refer to another sign—and referring takes time. Part of the symbol's attractiveness is that, by making signifier and signified consubstantial, it erases this temporal delay and opens up the possibility of stable, self-sufficient meaning.

Unlike the symbol, allegory has the structure, not of a synecdoche (part for whole), but rather of a metonym, since, according to de Man, the relationship between an allegorical sign and its meaning is purely conventional. “Dove,” for instance, means “peace” not because of any natural, organic relationship between the two terms, but rather because the literary (and religious and philosophical) tradition has decreed, albeit implicitly, that the one should mean the other. For de Man, however, even more important than its metonymic constitution is the fact that the allegorical mode has an essentially *temporal* structure. He gives as an example Julie's garden in

¹⁴ Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), II, 41

¹⁵ Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, sec. 87. The choice of examples was probably influenced by Schelling's conviction that the symbol must have a material substrate, on which see Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), ch. 1.

¹⁶ Schelling makes this point explicitly: “An image is symbolic whose object does not merely signify the idea but is that idea *itself*” (*Philosophy of Art*, sec. 87).

La nouvelle Héloïse, a garden traditionally interpreted according to one of the central motifs of Romantic poetry: the notion of an intimate, reciprocal relationship between the internal state of the poet's soul and external aspects of the natural world. As M.H. Abrams has convincingly argued, this motif answers to the dual Romantic contention that the present state of fragmentation and discord was preceded by an idyllic moment of harmony between humanity and nature and that part of the point of poetry (in the broadest sense of *poiesis*) is to facilitate the restoration of that lost paradise.¹⁷ Indeed, as Northrop Frye has suggested, the “main direction” of Romanticism’s “quest of identity tends [...] toward a hidden basis or ground of identity between man and nature.”¹⁸ In *La nouvelle Héloïse*, then, Julie’s Elysium would be precisely the place where Rousseau’s protagonist discovers that she is in fact one with the natural world, where the lost harmony between humanity and nature can finally be restored.

But de Man will have none of this. In a controversial revision of decades of Rousseau scholarship, he argues that in his construction of Julie’s garden, Rousseau appeals not to an actual landscape—and much less to a landscape in which the human mind discovers a kind of analogy with the external world—but rather to a series of literary *topoi*, above all, the famous garden described in the first part of the medieval romance *Le roman de la rose*. In this way, concludes de Man, Rousseau’s account of the garden has as its object, not the natural world, but rather another literary text. For de Man, moreover, it is precisely this relationship between one text and another text, between one sign and another sign, that at once defines the allegorical mode and distinguishes it from the symbol. For whereas the symbol depends upon a kind of

¹⁷ See Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1973). Of course, this is something of an oversimplification. Not all Romantics shared these convictions. But Abrams shows that a lot of them did.

¹⁸ Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982), 33.

organic unity between figure and meaning, the “allegorical sign” always “refer[s] to another sign that precedes it.”¹⁹

One way of thinking about the difference between symbol and allegory, then, would be to see the symbol as dramatizing the big, bad logocentrist claim that language might put us into contact with something eternal and transcendent, and allegory as dramatizing the deflationary Saussurian claim that signs refer only to other signs. Another way of thinking about the difference would be to say that the symbol works to elide the gap between word and meaning, while allegory works to pry it open.²⁰ Yet another way of thinking about the difference would be to say that the symbol operates according to a vertical logic (a physical sign points to, by participating in, a transcendent reality) while allegory unfolds on a horizontal plane (one sign refers back to another sign). In either case, the point is that allegory is an essential temporal mode. By making one sign refer to refer sign (rather than to the world), allegory participates in what Derrida will call *temporisation*: the idea that meaning and concepts are never present to themselves, but are instead deferred endlessly down a chain of signifiers.²¹ In a similar fashion, the meaning of an allegorical sign is never contained within the sign itself; rather, allegory, unlike the symbol, depends for its significance on its relationship with other signs—signs to which it can refer but with which it, again unlike the symbol, can never coincide.

IV. Pepita as Symbol, Pepita as Allegory

So that’s a kind of rough-and-ready description of the distinction between allegory and symbol. Now, in the rest of this essay, I want to look at another scene in which Luis revisits the same strategy of analogical interpretation that he has deployed throughout the novel. In this case,

¹⁹ de Man, “Rhetoric,” 207.

²⁰ In *Theories of the Symbol* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984), Todorov offers this pithy formulation: “[the symbol] fuses signifier and signified, [allegory] separates them” (214).

²¹ Derrida makes this point in his celebrated essay “Différance” (in *Marges de la philosophie*), among other places.

however, Luis seems to vacillate between the symbolic and the allegorical modes; he begins with the former, but quickly, albeit subtly, slides into the latter. It is precisely this confusion, so I will argue, that makes possible his conversion.

In a letter dated May 30, Luis confesses a kind of “split” in his personality: it’s as if “I have two souls,” he tells us, “two understandings, two wills, and two imaginations” (60). The two sides of this split correspond, of course, to the two poles of the conflict that has governed the novel as a whole: the carnal and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, Pepita and God. In this case, however, Luis has a new strategy: instead of trying to extirpate the carnal side of the conflict, he proposes kind of reconciliation. And, unsurprisingly, this reconciliation takes the form of the strategy of analogical interpretation that I have been describing—but with a subtle change: “I will make of Pepita a symbol, an allegory, an image of all that is good and beautiful. She will be for me like Beatrice was for Dante—a figure and representation of my country, of knowledge, and of beauty” (60). Note the change. In the May 7 letter, Luis was looking for a symbol of “the supreme concept of God” so that that symbol could “absorb and drown out” the image of Pepita (49). In this letter, however, Pepita herself has become the symbol of the very concept with which she once locked in mortal combat. The solution is brilliant. By making Pepita the “figure and representation” of a transcendent reality, Luis obviates the need to choose between the spiritual and the carnal, since, as a symbol of divine love, Pepita, like Mary Magdalen, simultaneously *participates* in the idea she symbolizes. And so Luis gets the best of both worlds: by loving Pepita, he loves God. Problem solved.

But things can’t be that easy. And they aren’t. The first thing to see is that this is the only place in the novel where the terms “symbol” and “allegory” appear in the same context (and indeed the only time in which “allegory” appears at all). Furthermore, the structure of Luis’

comment seems to suggest that he takes the two terms as synonyms. A “symbol [...] of everything good and beautiful” would, in his view, be the same as an “allegory of everything good and beautiful.” But this simply isn’t true. As I argued in the last section, symbol and allegory aren’t simply different but also conflictive rhetorical modes. Unfortunately, Luis nowhere indicates that he is thinking in terms of the symbol-allegory dichotomy (at least not as the Romantics conceived it), and it would be slightly unfair to accuse him of failing to maintain a distinction that he never proposed to maintain in the first place. It *would* be—if the text itself didn’t suggest, at least implicitly, a distinction between these two rhetorical modes. Which it does.

Look closely at Luis’ language. He begins by portraying Pepita as the representation of a spiritual reality, specifically, as a “symbol” of “everything good and beautiful.” In this sense, the Andalusian widow functions in Luis’ discourse according to the Romantic definition of the symbol; that is, she serves as a mediator between the terrestrial and the celestial. But the reference to Beatrice (“she will be for me like Beatrice was for Dante”) changes everything, for by associating Pepita with Dante’s beloved, Luis shatters the vertical, atemporal relationship between the symbol (“Pepita”) and the symbolized (“everything good and beautiful”) and introduces an irremediably temporal element. Put differently, if the relationship between “Pepita” and “everything good and beautiful” is the relationship between a spiritual reality and the symbolic representation of that spiritual reality, then the relationship between “Pepita” and “Beatrice” is a relationship in which one sign (“Pepita”) refers, not to a spiritual reality, but rather to *another* sign (“Beatrice”). Which means, of course, that it is allegorical in de Man’s sense.

In this his final attempt to reconcile his love for God and his love for Pepita, then, Luis

ends up blurring the distinction between two rhetorical modes—modes which are, according to my argument, incompatible. If, on the one hand, Pepita is a symbol of the love and beauty of God, then she can mediate between the celestial and the terrestrial spheres, but if, on the other, she is merely an allegory of Beatrice, then she can no longer perform this mediating function, since the relationship “Pepita” and “Beatrice” is not the relationship between a physical reality and a spiritual reality, but rather a relationship between one sign and another sign. To be sure, this confusion seems trivial (symbol? allegory?—who cares?), but it becomes important when, in the second part of the novel, Luis effectively abandons the symbolic mode (he stops looking for a “symbol of everything good and beautiful”) and gives himself over entirely to allegory. In my view, moreover, it is precisely this shift from one rhetorical mode to the other that explains his “conversion.”

For instance, after the protagonist’s first sexual encounter with Pepita, the narrator draws a comparison between the grief-stricken protagonist and Judas Iscariot: “His face was painted with horror,” he tell us, “and something of the desperation of Judas” (122). In an earlier letter to his uncle, Luis, recalling his first kiss with Pepita, had made a similar comparison: “When I remember that kiss and those words of farewell, I compare myself with Judas, who also sold [Christ] with a kiss” (64). One way of understanding these comparisons, which appear throughout the novel, is as a kind of *self-allegorization*: that is, just as Luis had turned Pepita into an allegorical representation of Beatriz, so he has now turned *himself* into an allegorical representation of Judas.²² Only a few pages later, however, Luis’ despair is gone. And so is Judas. Now the protagonist sees himself, not as a betrayer, but rather as Boaz—Ruth’s (i.e., Pepita’s) kinsman-redeemer and a typological prefiguration of Christ (113). By substituting Boaz

²² Another way to understand them is as examples of the rhetoric of the medieval *exemplum*, on which see Levilson Reis, “Narrative and Exemplum: The Case of Juan Valera’s *Pepita Jiménez*,” *South Atlantic Review* 62.2 (1997), 29.

for Judas, Luis simultaneously converts Pepita into Ruth and thereby justifies his decision to marry her (just as Boaz had to marry Ruth, so Luis, as a representation of Boaz, has to do the same).

In one sense, of course, the die was already cast, since, by having sex with Pepita, Luis effectively disqualified himself from the priesthood. By itself, however, sex is insufficient to account for the transformation. There are, after all, a number of different ways one might respond to an unanticipated sexual encounter. Luis might, for instance, have borne the guilt of his actions into old age and died a shriveled, penitent octogenarian. Or he might have just killed himself. But he didn't. Instead, he chose to justify his actions by swapping Judas for Boaz. But note that this justification is simply the result of an allegorical substitution: as an allegory of Judas, Luis is a betrayer, but as an allegory of Boaz, he morphs, almost magically, into a kind of redeemer—and, more importantly, a redeemer who, in order to carry out his act of redemption, must marry Pepita. In this way, Luis' conversion depends upon a rhetorical trick; it coincides precisely with his abandonment of the symbolic mode and his decision to read himself as an allegorical type of Boaz. Put differently, it is precisely when Luis ditches his symbolic vision of the world and replaces that vision with an allegorical vision that he is able to bring about his transformation.

V. Allegory, Irony, and Conversion

In some ways, Luis' slide from symbol to allegory was predictable, since the symbolic solution (Pepita as "figure and representation" of divine love) was never really going to work anyway. Recall that the point of the symbol is to collapse the distance between the infinite and the finite by incarnating the former in the latter. Construed symbolically, Pepita would perform this function by simultaneously signifying and participating in divine love, thereby allowing Luis to

love God without surrendering his desire for the Andalusian widow. But for this to work, Luis would have to be allowed to love like he really wants to love her—physically, carnally, biblically. Otherwise, the God end of the deal still comes out on top, and we're back where we started from. Unfortunately (or, depending on your convictions, fortunately), the structure of the Roman Catholic priesthood makes this impossible. And so if Luis is going to get with Pepita, the only real solution is to stop looking for a symbol of “everything good and beautiful” and start looking for a way to feel better about himself for sacrificing God to the girl.

The allegorically induced slide from Luis-Judas to Luis-Boaz is precisely this mechanism. But if that shift is in some ways predictable, it is also irresistibly comical. After nearly a hundred pages and dozens of anguished letters to this uncle, Luis' finally dispels his doubt with a simple allegorical substitution. “If I'm Judas, I'm a traitor. But wait! I'm not Judas; I'm Boaz. But that means I'm not a traitor; that means I'm a redeemer! Now I can marry her. Indeed, I *have* to marry her!” But wait—what just happened here? No more anguish, no more guilt, no more shame, no more remorse—and all because you switched one name for another? Of course, most critics (and, tellingly, the narrator himself) have noted the startling haste with which Luis slides from inconsolable reprobate to cheerful husband (it takes about two pages in the novel), and, as a result, most have judged his “conversion” skeptically.²³ But what accounts for our skepticism? What accounts for our sense that Luis hit the easy button? The answer, I think, has to do with a feature inherent to allegorical discourse. The first hint of peril is Isidore of Seville's (560-636) identification of the seven “species” of allegory, the first of which is irony, which Isidore defines as a phrase whose allegorical meaning is contrary to its literal meaning.²⁴

²³ Evans and Thomas, “Alternative Conversions,” 481 note the “astonishing speed” with which Luis justifies his decision to abandon the priesthood and marry Pepita.

²⁴ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX* (Oxonii: e Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1911), 1.37.23: “Ironia est sententia per pronuntiationem contrarium habens intellectum.”

But this is at least potentially problematic, since if a text's allegorical meaning can be not only other than, but also *contrary* to its literal meaning, then allegory becomes inherently unstable. Walter Benjamin makes much of this idea in his analysis of allegory in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German *Trauerspiel* (mourning-play). Likening allegory to ruins, Benjamin suggests that for the allegorical interpreter, anything "can mean absolutely anything else."²⁵ The point is that since the relationship between allegorical sign and allegorical meaning is mechanical, decreed by the allegorist (or by the allegorical interpreter), there's no reason why any particular sign (say, a dove) should point to one meaning (peace) rather than another (say, discord). Another way of putting this point would be to say, as I indicated before, that the relationship between allegorical sign and allegorical meaning is purely *arbitrary*: since nothing means anything allegorically except by interpretive fiat, anything may potentially mean anything at all. This threat of "total substitutability,"²⁶ in which anything can point to or signify anything else, is perhaps what led Calvin to call allegorical interpretation a "contrivance of Satan to undermine the authority of Scripture."²⁷ Not coincidentally, Calvin's objection to allegorical reading sounds a bit like traditional literary criticism's objection to post-structuralist (especially deconstructive) criticism, namely, that, having eliminated the author as the locus of meaning, texts become infinitely interpretable. But of course to say that a text is infinitely interpretable is just another way of saying that it is un-interpretable (at least in any definitive sense) and hence that all potential interpretations are immediately susceptible to the charge of arbitrariness. *Pepita* makes this point clearly: since there is no reason (or at least no obvious reason) why Luis' sexcapade with the Andalusian widow should generate a Boaz-reading rather than a Judas-

²⁵ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 175.

²⁶ Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2003), 64.

²⁷ Jean Calvin, *Comentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Galatas*, in Guilielmus Baum, et al., eds., *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, vol. 78 (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863-1900), 234.

reading, there is similarly no reason to prefer the latter over the former (or vice-versa). In fact, the slide from one to the other seems to be purely decisional: Luis simply *chooses*. And he might just as well have chosen something else.

By making Luis' "conversion" depend upon a simple allegorical substitution, then, Valera encourages us to do two things. First, he invites us to see conversion, not as an experience, but rather as an act of interpretation. In one sense, this point is too obvious to merit mention, since from our perspective as readers, Luis' conversion could never be anything but an act of interpretation. We don't have access to the inner workings of his mind, and, as a result, the only information we have is information he gives us. But, in another sense, Valera's treatment of Luis' conversion is actually quite counterintuitive. For if, from the outside, conversion always requires interpretation, then from the inside (that is, from the perspective of the converted) it must surely be closer to something like pure, unmediated experience—the kind of experience, for instance, that I anticipated as I knelt beside my bed in the early Spring of 1993. Valera, however, suggests that this might not be quite true, for, in *Pepita Jiménez*, it is not only that we readers must interpret Luis' conversion, but also that the conversion itself is constituted by an act of interpretation. But, second, by making Luis' transformation depend not only on an act of interpretation, but also on an apparently *arbitrary* act of interpretation, Valera invites us to read his protagonist's conversion ironically. We are meant, in other words, to walk away from the novel wondering whether what the narrator calls Luis' "rapid transformation from mystic into non-mystic" (111), as the narrator puts it, was authentic or whether, instead, his "conversion" from the priesthood to the married life was an exercise in underhanded self-vindication.

What I am calling the "ironic" reading of Luis' transformation takes a highly specific

form. In a brilliant article on the psychology of laughter, the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) locates the essence of irony in what he calls the ability to “split oneself in two (*se dédoubler*) and attend to the phenomena of one’s own self as a disinterested spectator.”²⁸ This notion of self-doubling is key to the ironic consciousness, since, in a very basic sense, irony means *distance*—the capacity to step back from our ordinary dealings with the world and contemplate ourselves and our lives from the perspective of a detached observer. For Baudelaire, moreover, the self-detachment inherent in irony has the effect of creating a kind of bifurcation within the self. Consider a simple example.²⁹ Suppose you’re walking down a sidewalk when you trip on a raised portion of concrete. Now, on the one hand, since human beings walk upright, we tend to believe in our superiority over the natural world. The fall, however, reveals that this sense of superiority is simply a mystification. Powerful though we may be, a small depression in a walking path can still, quite literally, bring us to our knees. But also, and more importantly, this revelation of mystification has, in Baudelaire’s view, the effect of creating within us two distinct “selves”: a former, mystified self which believed erroneously in its superiority to the natural world and a second self that has become conscious of that mystification. It is here, moreover, that irony takes root, for by allowing the demystified self to take some distance from its mystified counterpart, the fall-induced *dédoublement* permits the demystified self to contemplate, with a kind of detached, ironic incredulity, its erstwhile mystification—to see the arrogance (and humor) in fancying oneself superior to the natural order, and so to read the mystified self as a whole in this skeptical light. But—and this is the rub—if the arrogant, pre-fall self was simply a mystification (and hence subject to the ironic gaze

²⁸ Baudelaire, “De l’essence du rire,” in *Curiosités esthétiques: l’art romantique et autres oeuvres critiques*, ed. H. Lemaître (Paris: Garnier, 1962), 215ff.: “la force de se dédoubler rapidement et d’assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes de son moi” (the translation is mine). My reading of Baudelaire’s essay owes pretty much everything to de Man.

²⁹ Which I owe to Paul de Man, “Rhetoric,” 204.

of the demystified, post-fall self), what guarantees that the ostensibly demystified self is not just another mystification? What, in other words, guarantees that the second, post-fall self cannot be subjected to the same ironization to which it subjected the mystified, pre-fall self? And what, in turn, guarantees that the self that ironizes the post-fall self cannot itself be ironized? One could repeat this question *ad infinitum*—which of course is what the ironist does. As Paul de Man points out, since the “ironic mind” is unwilling to “accept any state in its progression as definitive,” Baudelairean irony “is an endless process that leads to no synthesis”³⁰ Once it gets rolling, irony is hard to stop.

It is perhaps now clear why allegorical self-interpretation lends itself so readily to ironization. By allowing Luis to fashion a multiplicity of different selves (Luis-Dante, Luis-Judas, Luis-Boaz, etc.), allegory also creates a variety of opportunities for self-doubling: Luis-Boaz can look back, ironically, at Luis-Judas, while Luis-Judas can look back, ironically, at Luis-Dante. But, interestingly enough, Luis almost never takes advantage of these opportunities. After reading himself as Boaz, he seems to forget ever having read himself as anything else (Dante, Judas, Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross—one could go on for a while). In fact, Luis seems wholly incapable of recognizing and appreciating the frequent and dramatic splits in his *moi* and hence of assuming the degree of self-detachment that irony requires. In my view, moreover, it is precisely this inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to read himself ironically that allows Luis to carry off his “conversion” with such apparent ease. Since he is unable (or, again, unwilling) to step back and contemplate the astonishing number of selves that he has produced trying solve the God-or-Pepita problem, Luis accordingly sees no need to weave those selves into a coherent whole. And so he reads himself now as Dante, now as Judas, now as Boaz—and all without missing a beat.

³⁰ Paul de Man, “Rhetoric,” 220.

VI. Some Concluding Speculation

Now, to return, somewhat abruptly, to where I started: my problem was just the opposite of Luis'. No matter how much I prayed or sobbed or begged, I simply couldn't forget that, once upon a time, a little eight-year-old boy that looked a lot like me knelt by his bed and pretended to get saved, told everyone he had gotten saved, was baptized like he had gotten saved, joined a church like he had gotten saved—but really hadn't. Or at least wasn't sure that he had. What this meant, of course, was that each subsequent attempt to secure my conversion involved not just one but two selves: the self attempting to have the experience and the former self that had attempted to induce the false experience. The real problem, though was that, with these two different constantly in play, I learned to read each consecutive self as a repetition—or, if you like, an allegory—of that former, deceptive self; and so each attempt to return to a pure experience of conversion (the experience, that is, of elation, of relief, of elephants' being lifted off one's chest) invariably prompted the ironist's question, "Was it real (this time), or are you just deluding yourself (like last time)?" It was impossible, for me at least, to get back behind, or dig down beneath, this question and hence to convince myself not only that *this* particular "conversion experience" was authentic, but also that *any* such experience might ever be.

But what does this desire for certainty about conversion, coupled with the apparent impossibility of ever attaining it, tell us? To begin sketching an answer to this question, I would like to turn briefly to a thinker very different from the ones I've been considering so far. In his 1740 "Personal Narrative," the American theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) cautioned that people are often "deceived" by the "affections" and "delight" that tend to accompany religious conversion and "mistake [them] for grace."³¹ These words appear near the beginning

³¹ Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative of his Conversion," in Perry Miller, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 73 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1957-2006), XVI, 791.

the “Narrative,” where Edwards recounts a season of “remarkable awakening” in his own life that turned out to be a false start. Six years later, Edwards would publish *Religious Affections*, the point of which was precisely to distinguish those “affections” that could serve as an index of authentic conversion from those that couldn’t. And yet—and yet one still gets the sense that conversion is ultimately out of our hands. The reason is easy to see. Since, for Edwards, God “choos[es] whom he would to eternal life and reject[s] whom he pleases,” and since our redemption depends *absolutely* “on the operation’s of God’s Holy Spirit,” it is only from the perspective of eternity that a definitive story of conversion can be told.³² It is only *then*, in other words, that we can be sure of our own salvation. But if this is right, then the desire for certainty about one’s conversion is just a modality of the desire to see things like God sees them, to have the kind of perspective that only God can have. Or, put the other way around, it is a manifestation of the desire to deny (or transcend) our humanity. I am reminded here of Stanley Cavell’s treatment of the role of skepticism in Western culture. As Cavell understands it, the “impulse of skepticism” is not so much an hypothesis that needs to be (or ever could be) refuted as an opportunity to glimpse something essential about the human condition; specifically, he says, it is an opportunity to see a “place,” indeed the “central secular place,” in which “the human wish to deny the condition of human existence is expressed.”³³ Cavell’s point is that skepticism reveals the ineradicable human desire to be free of the limitations of finitude and fallibility, to see things *sub specie aeternitatis*—in short, to be other-than-human. He goes on to suggest, however, that this longing to transcend human “conditionedness” is itself perhaps constitutive of our humanity, that part of what it means to be a human (as opposed, say, to a dog)

³² Edwards, “Personal Narrative,” 791-92, 799.

³³ Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: Chicago UP 1988), 5. My understanding of Cavell has benefited immensely from Fergus Kerr’s *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1997), ch. 6 and Stephen Mulhall’s *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

is the desire to be *more* than human, and so that to deny skepticism would be to deny our humanity. As Stephen Mulhall has convincingly argued, Cavell's "picture of human beings" as "essentially riven by a desire to deny their essence" chimes nicely with the Christian doctrine of Original Sin.³⁴ The first temptation, after all, was the temptation of knowledge, the temptation to shuffle off our mortal coil and become "as God." In this sense, skepticism—or, in my lingo, irony—about one's conversion turns out to be an element constitutive of what it means to be human (that is, fallen and hence in need of conversion) in the first place; it expresses both the fact of finitude and fallenness ("I can't be certain.") and the desire to transcend it ("But I want to be!"). And if skepticism (about conversion, about everything) does indeed help us see something essential about being human, then it should be embraced, not rejected.

It seems to me, moreover, that literature has an important role to play in teaching us to abide this tension between the recognition of finitude and the desire for transcendence, since literature is the place where our task as interpreters is most explicit, where we most obviously deal in *signs* that must be *read*, and hence where the kind of pure, immediate, ungainsayable knowledge I wanted about (say) my conversion is manifestly not forthcoming (I would like to say impossible). Take *Pepita Jiménez* as an example. On the one hand, Valera's invitation, and my decision, to read Luis' conversion ironically depends upon the assumption that we readers might know something about Luis that Luis himself doesn't know, that we might have some insight into his personality to which he himself is blind. Put another way, to argue, as I have, that Luis didn't *really* experience a conversion and that his use of the rhetoric of conversion was just a mask designed to veil another, less saintly desire is to succumb to the temptation of transcendence, the longing to be more a mere interpreter—to "look upon the heart," as God does, rather than "upon the outward appearance," as humans do. But this is a problem, since if the

³⁴ Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 104.

question, “Did Luis have a real conversion?” is central to my reading of *Pepita Jiménez*, it is also unanswerable (I would like to say nonsensical). It is unanswerable because Luis is a *literary character* (that is, a collection of words, not a real person), and I’m not sure what it could mean to ask whether a literary character “really had” any experience at all. What this suggests, of course, is that the novel simultaneously raises a question (“Did Luis have a real conversion?”) and renders it unanswerable (“Category mistake. Luis isn’t a real person, and so it makes no sense to ask whether he had a real conversion.”). Now, one might be inclined to suppose that a question’s unanswerability ought to count as a good reason not to ask it; and indeed one could see a good deal of recent literary criticism as responding to the sense that literary characters are inscriptions in social, ideological, and textual webs rather than real people, and so as deciding in advance that questions like “Did such-and-such character *really*...?” are unanswerable and, hence, pointless.³⁵ I agree that such questions are unanswerable, but I disagree that they are pointless; in fact, I think their unanswerability may be part of their pointfulness (so to speak). My thought here is that one of the ways literature works is by getting us to identify with characters, to think of them as real, to imagine having conversations with them—all the while reminding us that they are, after all, *just* characters, just collections of words, just marks on a page. Another way of putting the point would be to say that literature offers us the opportunity to reenact, even to inhabit, the Romantic debate between allegory and symbol. If the Romantic quest for the symbol is a manifestation of the desire to collapse the distance between sign and meaning, between the relative and the unconditioned, between heaven and earth, then the threat of allegory

³⁵ I am thinking specifically of Shakespeare criticism, where an emphasis on the study of characters (e.g., Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy* [1904]) has given way to an emphasis on the study of language and patterns of meaning, probably on the assumption that characters aren’t real people. For more on this point, see the first few pages of Cavell’s “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*,” in *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1987); Heather Dubrow, “Twentieth-Century Shakespeare Criticism,” in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974); and Jonathan Goldberg, *Voice Terminal Echo: Postmodernism and English Renaissance Texts* (New York: Methuen, 1986).

is precisely the threat that such a gap may be uncollapsible. The gist of my argument in this section, however, has been that the point is not so much to defuse this threat as to live to it, to keep both options alive and open, to wriggle around in the space between what Schlegel called *Witz* and *Ironie*—between the desire for knowledge, completion, and synthesis and the recognition that we are, after all, just human beings.³⁶ Of course, this is, in a certain sense, to make a romance of failure; it is to say that part of what it means to be human is to try really hard and to fall short. But God, I take it, specializes in our failures. Isn't that what *felix culpa* means after all?

³⁶ Here I have drawn on Simon Critchley's account of romanticism in *Very Little...Almost Nothing* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 99-138.