

## HIDE AND SEEK

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### ABSTRACT

This response takes up the final question offered by David Lurie's essay: "In the end, is it ever possible to write a fully nonallegorical history of writing's origins?" by considering the nature of allegory, its relationship to hiding and invisibility, and the material quality of its character when invoked to describe an origin.

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David Lurie's essay is compellingly written and wonderful to think with. It ends with a question offered as a kind of invitation: "In the end, is it ever possible to write a fully nonallegorical history of writing's origins?"<sup>2</sup> I want to take up that invitation by considering a few aspects of the question that seem particularly significant: the nature of allegory, its relationship to locality, and the material quality of its character when invoked to describe the origin of something.

Here's how Lurie's piece defines allegory: "By 'allegory,' I mean a narrative whose elements—actors and actions—can be taken to correspond to another, hidden narrative involving other actors and actions. . . ."<sup>3</sup> One reason that allegory is so significant to the essay is that it's linked in historical writing with anachronism. But can a work of history ever not be anachronistic? Any storytelling is storytelling from somewhere (some *now* in time and space) and if being shaped by *now* rather than *then* is anachronistic, then all storytelling about the past is necessarily anachronistic. When we're talking about anachronism, though, we tend to mean something more than that. It's a term of judgment. It names something negative, a constellation of practices that include projection (into the past), imposition (of something into a space where it ostensibly does not belong), attribution (of a quality to something that confuses its context). It names an act of putting something into the wrong place. Being anachronistic, then, means being out of place.

In historical writing, allegory creates a particular way of being out of place. In an allegory, there's something where it shouldn't otherwise be: something is, in the words of the definition above, "hidden." Allegory involves a deception that's

1. A response to David Lurie, "Parables of Inscription: Some Notes on Narratives of the Origin of Writing," *History and Theory, Theme Issue 56* (December 2018), 32-49. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/hith.12084>

2. *Ibid.*, 49.

3. *Ibid.*, 33, n. 3.

intended to do a particular kind of work. I thought for a while, as I was writing this, whether allegory necessarily involved intention. I wondered, does something hidden necessarily have to be hidden by someone? A text can be anachronistic without that fact being worthy of criticism. But anachronism-as-epithet names an act that has been committed. Can a text itself commit an act? Can it deceive? For the purpose of Lurie's essay, it seems instead that the hidden narrative in an allegory is hidden by someone. The piece discusses "parables or allegories about present concerns of their authors,"<sup>4</sup> and by invoking the authors of the pieces it seems to imply intentionality.

All of this is to say, the allegorical narrative is deliberately hidden. But there are countless ways to be purposefully hidden, carrying different flavors of invisibility that have different implications. Does an allegory hide in the same way the punchline of an inside joke hides? (It invites the reader to decipher a code, something hidden in plain sight, if you know where and how to look and listen for it.) Like the eggs stashed away in the course of an Easter egg hunt, or the clues in a scavenger hunt? (This sort of half-invisibility is meant to stimulate the joy of the seekers.) Like the identity of a person whose face is partially concealed behind a mask? (Here, the invisibility protects a fantasy.) In all of these examples, an intentional invisibility hides the truth in a space at the edge of recognition. The hidden thing is just barely recognizable, prompting the observer to search for it by providing a hint that there's more than meets the eye. It's a flavor of hiding that invites generative play. And it's arguably the kind of hiding at work in an allegory. We tend not to associate these sorts of hiding with a nefarious kind of deception: in each case, the hidden thing is either meant to be found (perhaps by only a subset of people) or is meant to stay hidden thanks to an unspoken agreement on the part of the hider and the seeker. In all of these cases, in other words, the concealment is intended to bring a satisfaction than wouldn't be possible otherwise on the part of the viewer.

This is also the case, it seems, for the allegory at work in Lurie's piece: the deception is intentional and is ostensibly meant to elevate the reader's experience of the story. It's not necessarily a problem, any more than any aspect of the historian's storytelling craft is necessarily a problem, unless one espouses an ideal of historical storytelling in which it embodies straightforwardness, a performance of facticity, a rejection of hidden agendas. (We have been over this, as a field, in our many years of conversations about the illusion of objectivity. And we have been over the many problems with that ideal. Still, it seems to haunt our work and our conversations like a phantom.) The spaces at the edge of recognition, where the hidden things are, invite us to play, to fill in the blanks. Stories about the past can emerge from exceptionally fragmentary evidence: a document, a name, a tooth. The story is shaped by what is *not* there, what is hidden in time or space, because that *not* is where the freedom is. In the case of historical allegory, however, there's not so much an absence as an extra presence. There's something more, an overabundance, an overabundance that is material, and it produces a birth. (We'll come to that in a moment.)

4. *Ibid.*, 33.

In all of the examples above, the hiding takes material form. (Although the joke example is more indirect, as it relies on the materiality of the written or sonic voice of the speaker, the concealment is still material.) This is also the case in the origin stories in Lurie's essay. The material substrate that the stories are embedded within includes feathers and clay, rice, silk, tobacco, sheep, fire, earth, the heavens, knotted cords, a basket, paper, bows and arrows, necklaces, beads. The main figures in the story are working with materials to give life to a new thing. There's something about the birth of writing as a kind of organism—it has parents, after all, in one of the stories—from this material ground that seems important.

Could any origin story ever not be deeply material? It's hard to imagine. The story is fossilized in the material. It's the material base, and the distances that it affords, that together produce the magic and the power that animate the stories in Lurie's essay. That distance is what places the hidden phenomena at recognition's edge. And here is what's particular to writing: even among origin stories, the emergence of writing depends on a material base. It is fundamentally about making visible a previously hidden capability of matter to convey something new.

So, let's go back to the closing question of Lurie's essay: "In the end, is it ever possible to write a fully nonallegorical history of writing's origins?" Allegory seems inseparable from hiding. It's possible to imagine a history of writing's origins that is free of a hidden agenda in the form of an intentional deception. At the same time, any story of writing's origins is the story of a birth, a birth that is deeply material, and a material transformation that makes visible a potentiality that had been hidden.

It is this visibility that catches me. Because visibility depends on the viewer. (Or, in a historical account, on the reader.) And because of the promise of something hidden in any origin story (especially one so materially grounded as an origin of writing), the intention of the author doesn't matter if the reader sees something in the story nonetheless, and dwells in the space of the almost-recognizable long enough for a story to come into view. (The elements of the history become a kind of starry constellation, for the reader.) The presence of allegory in a history of writing's origins might, then, ultimately depend on the reader's willingness to see it, and thus to bring it into existence, regardless of authorial intent.

So, is it possible to write a nonallegorical history of writing's origins? No. Not as long as there are readers to dwell in it.

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