

I have been teaching a course on the Allegorical impulse in the arts of the 1970s and 1980s in the US. And oddly enough, maybe even fortuitously, I received the following story from a student.

This is what she wrote:

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The Cooper Union once had an old well with “fresh and clean” water.

The water was fresh and clean enough that some thought they should dig a second well nearby.

As predicted, digging the second well disturbed the ground, and caused a crack in the old well. Toxic sludge leaked in. The water soon turned muddy and smelly.

The second well’s diggers were caught in the act but most were allowed to run away.

They were soon replaced by new well keepers.

Some of the new well keepers had once, long ago, drank the fresh water, and knew how it looked, smelled, and tasted. Others had never tasted it. They’d only read about it in books, but they seemed eager to remind everyone of their commitment to the idea of fresh water.

The new well keepers spent a long time examining the muddy waters in the old well and then one day they announced:

“Listen people, 76% of this water is still fresh. Only 24% is toxic. And we will clean this up but it will take 10 years. In the meantime, we urge everyone to keep drinking the water, because, as far as we know and as our experts have confirmed, no one has gotten sick yet from 24% sludge. And besides, our choices are limited: We can die of thirst in 40 days or drink this. And please take comfort from the fact that the regular water that everyone else is drinking is only 50% fresh which makes our 76% fresh water exceptional.”

At this point, someone yelled: How will you clean the water?

They answered: We will dump a lot of purification tablets in the wells, so much that the percentage of sludge will gradually be reduced.

Someone else yelled: Will you ever stop the leak?

They answered: No. But we will make sure our supply of tablets is very very large.

Someone asked: Will the water be fresh again?

They answered: It will soon look, taste, and smell fresh-like. Isn’t that the same thing?

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Of course, I tried to point out to my student the “simplicity” of this story, in how it trivializes the complexity of The Cooper Union’s situation, and of the hard work and commitment of the people in this room, in this institution and outside of it, past and present. I reminded here that no one here is “celebrating” the “necessary” compromises. To which she answered:

“All allegories are flawed and simple. All compromises negate promises. I was just trying to give you a sense of the bitter taste in my mouth. Must be the purification tablet’s aftertaste.”