

INTRODUCTION

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC



THIS STUDY EXAMINES the ancient history of an idea, or perhaps it is better called a hope or desire. What do we expect from poetry? Is it an entertaining diversion? An edifying tale? A craft whose masters delight and move us with their elegance and fine workmanship? Yes, perhaps. But a few bold souls, ancient as well as modern, have it in mind that poetry will do something more for us. They suspect that the poets' stories might say more than they appear to say, and that their language might be more than just words. Though these readers are likely to concede that the poets work with the mundane stuff of everyday speech, they still hear in their words the faint but distinct promise of some truer resonance, of a subtle and profound knowledge that arrives in a concealed form and is waiting for a skilled reader to liberate it from its code. Some go further and take poetry as a vehicle into a region where more sober minds fear to tread, where the limitations and encumbrances of our regular lives do not exist, and where we might meet, finally face to face, the deathless gods themselves. This realm is familiar to most of us, as a superstition or a moment of insight. It lies just beyond the always receding horizon that circumscribes our day-to-day existence. Though some say it is only a phantom, others are equally sure that it exists and are drawn away by its Siren song toward what they have learned from tantalizing daily experience to be always just out of reach. With a certain regularity, ancient readers find passage to this realm by the same means. They are transported by what they understand to be the inspired poets' most profound and most deeply resonant poetic creations, which they mark with the same Greek term, *σύμβολα*, or "symbols."

The symbol has a familiar enough standing in contemporary thinking on literature. In most standard reference works, a symbol is a deeply resonant literary image thought to have some special linkage with its meaning: the word "organic" frequently appears in its various definitions. We owe to the Romantics the symbol's modern apotheosis into the role of master literary device. As I will discuss in my concluding chapter, the modern symbol is connected with its ancient legacy, but only through a circuitous and difficult route. This study attempts to

2 INTRODUCTION

retrace the oldest segments of this path. In order to do so, we will pass through an overgrown tangle of debates and discussions, problems and possibilities, cosmologies, theologies, and metaphysical schemes that have long since lost their relevance—and yet whose concerns, motivations, and agendas endure, even to this day, in and through the category of symbolic language. With this in mind, I consider what I present here to be a genealogy, of sorts, of classical notions of the symbol, insofar as they are relevant to its history in literary commentary.

A historian focusing on the large body of texts and scholarship that in recent tradition constitutes the field of classical literary criticism will be tempted to conclude that the symbol is a foundling in the history of criticism, as though it arrived a fully formed orphan on the doorstep of the modern age in the late 1700s. As opposed to metaphor (Greek *μεταφορά*) which critics of many later periods reconstruct as a regnant trope with explicit attention to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the literary "symbol" has a more obscure classical history. It almost never appears in the texts of the ancient authors that are typically collected in anthologies of classical literary criticism, such as Aristotle, Demetrius, Horace, Quintilian, or Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Indeed, the concerns that are generally seen to be embedded in the modern symbol—to produce a form of representation that has an intimate, ontological connection with its referent and is no mere mechanical replication of the world, that is transformative and opens up a realm beyond rational experience, that exists simultaneously as a concrete thing and as an abstract and perhaps transcendent truth, and that conveys a unique density of meaning—are all quite alien to the concerns of these ancient readers. As has often been recognized within the scholarship that treats these figures, the work of Aristotle is their most prominent touchstone, and it is from rhetoric that they derive their literary-critical categories. They generate an approach to poetry and a method for studying it by adapting conceptual tools first developed for the study of the public delivery of persuasive prose: schemes of tropes, levels of style, figures of speech and thought, criteria of genre, methods of moving the emotions of an audience. This approach leads these critics to generate a particular kind of criticism. Ever mindful of the audience and of the poet's role in communicating a message to his listeners, they tend to value clarity above all as the chief virtue of poetic language. They investigate which tropes are useful and which to avoid, which levels of diction are appropriate to the various types of subject matter, or how to produce a particular effect in an audience, whether fear or pity, delight or awe. The greatest poets, in this reckoning, are those able to achieve these ends most effectively and clearly. They aim at an understanding of poetry in the abstract and in general, considered as a *techné* with its own specifications and charac-

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC 3

teristics. They proceed mainly by analysis—by identifying, classifying, and investigating the various species of the poetic genus. The rhetorical approach tends toward a criticism that focuses on composition, that is, on producing a “how-to” manual for would-be poets. For the most part these critics see the great poet, something like the great orator, as a master craftsman who produces a finely wrought piece of work with skill and elegance. For these purposes, neither Aristotle nor ancient rhetoricians had much interest in “symbols.” The notion is almost entirely absent from the conceptual apparatus they use to analyze texts.

But in trying to understand the literary history of the symbol we find more fruitful ground when we turn to a second body of ancient texts and a second corpus of scholarship. These ancient texts, produced by literary commentators commonly known to modern scholars as the allegorists,¹ display a nearly continuous and lively interest in literary σύμβολα. For reasons that bear some reconsideration, these readers have generally not been included in contemporary studies under the heading of ancient literary criticism. In marked contrast to critics in the Aristotelian tradition, these readers see their task to be primarily interpretive, not analytical.² While allegorists emerge from different traditions, and with many differences in the details of their methods, we can make a few general characterizations of ancient allegorical reading.³ Allegori-

¹ The term allegory has the benefit of an etymological link to an ancient Greek term, ἀλληγορία, which played a part in the tradition, though not the starring role. We will see that the term αἰνγμα and its cognates are most consistently used by our critics; σύμβολον is the second most common term, followed by the two terms by which the tradition is most often referenced by contemporary scholars, ἀλληγορία and ὑπόνοια. “Allegory” has the disadvantage of invoking a genre of writing, not developed until the early medieval period, in which a writer personifies abstract ideas and encodes a formulaic, one-to-one correspondence between each character and some concept, abstract principle, or element of the physical world. This kind of allegory has only a little to do with the ancient tradition, as will become clearer in the early chapters of this work. While some ancient writers, notably Ovid and Vergil, surely incorporated the insights of allegorical readers in their poems, ancient allegorism is a phenomenon of reading, not writing. See below, chap. 1. Even as late as Eustathius, an ἀλληγορητής is an interpreter of allegories, not a writer of them.

² By “analytical” I mean a mode of criticism that is primarily dedicated to locating and mastering various classifications and characteristics of poetry, considered as a *techne* with unique rules and specifications. By “interpretive” I mean a mode of criticism that sees the text primarily as a repository of hidden wisdom and envisions its task as the extraction of these meanings. There is an analogue here, which will come into play in my concluding chapter, to the relationship between modern formalist criticisms and those approaches based on hermeneutics.

³ Of course this sketch is no more exhaustive than the sketch of rhetorical criticism given above. It rather presents rules of thumb that apply in the production of allegorical commentaries. It will also be noted with some frequency below that many allegorical critics show an equal facility with the tools and approaches of rhetorical criticism—which

4 INTRODUCTION

cal readers may or may not display interest in generating classificatory schemes for tropes or levels of style, or in any formalist questions at all. Allegorical critics sometimes show an interest in locating and analyzing the mechanics of the poetic craft, considered as a *techne* of composition; sometimes they do not. Nor are they wedded to the idea of poetry as governed by the needs of the poet to communicate to an audience. More consistently in the allegorical commentaries, one sees a view of the individual poet (or some *ur*-mythmaker) in isolation, as a figure with some special insight into the underlying structures that govern the world, the hidden way of things. Allegorists are more likely to approach the poetic text not as a finished example of a craft but as a *sui generis* artifact. Where rhetorical critics see a polished handiwork, allegorical commentators tend to see a deep well of wisdom, which everywhere nearly vibrates with arcane observations on the structure of the world and the place of humans and gods within it. Allegorists see great poetic language as deeply figurative, with the potential always, even in the most mundane details, to be freighted with hidden messages. They spend the bulk of their critical energy, not on isolating the features of ποιητική in the abstract, but on particular scenes, within the (usually hexametric) lines of the great poets, which they see as murky and allusive puzzles, more precisely enigmas [αἰνύγματα] or symbols [σύμβολα], that carry some hidden message. Precisely reversing the scale of poetic virtues put forward by critics in the Aristotelian line, the allegorists claim that *unclear* language, whose message is by definition obscured, is the chief marker of great poetry.

Whereas the rhetorical approach shares tools and assumptions in common with oratory, we will see that the allegorical approach shares conceptual tools with other well-attested fields of interpretive inquiry in the ancient world, including divination, magic, religious rite, and certain traditions of esoteric philosophy. As their associations with these other fields suggest, allegorists, uniquely among classical readers, see in poetry the promise of conveying complete and fundamental truth. One conclusion to which this study points is that allegorism reveals the literary-critical impact of one of the best-attested popular views of the poets, that the poet is a kind of prophet. (This stance toward literature may sound vaguely familiar to post-Romantic critics. Indeed, I suspect

is to say that the rules of thumb here are not to be taken as excluding other approaches. The critic who produces an allegorical commentary is not barred from other forms of commentary as well, even when those other forms of commentary grow out of a quite different set of opening premises. One often sees rather sober textual criticism alongside exuberant interpretive leaps. The author of the *Life of Homer*, for example, shows a strong interest in formalist questions in one part of his text, but this interest is attributable to a Peripatetic influence and not to an allegorical one (see chap. 4).

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC 5

that it is not too strong to say that the Romantics reinvented it for the modern period.)⁴ Among the ancients it is the distinct domain of readers with allegorical affiliations. Pure Aristotelians do not, in general, have such heady visions of poetry, nor do they expect to find in it such grand truths. Where Aristotle and his followers see a master craftsman, the allegorists tend to see a master riddler and a savant who can lead the skilled reader to the most profound knowledge the world has to offer. This contrast will be worked through in chapter 1.

Among the allegorists we encounter names that are perhaps not as familiar as Aristotle or Horace, in texts and translations that are not as widely available.⁵ Among these are, in the classical period, the Derveni commentator and fragments from Metrodorus of Lampsacus and Theagenes of Rhegium; in the Hellenistic period, Chrysippus and Crates of Mallos; in the early Roman, Cornutus, Pseudo-Plutarch, and Heraclitus the Allegorist; in the late Roman, Porphyry, Sallustius, and Proclus. The category of the symbol, I will argue, is one of the allegorists' most distinctive conceptual tools, albeit one that does not arrive on the scene until the Hellenistic period. As we will see in chapter 2, the classical "symbol" is quite a different notion from the later allegorical one. A conclusion reached by Walter Müri in his philological study of *σύμβολον* some seventy years ago still holds: in the classical period, the word "symbol" is used almost exclusively to mean the token that authenticates a contract. But as we will see in chapter 2, a few unique contexts—in the mysteries, Pythagorean philosophy, and divination—facilitate its move from the marker of social agreements to a pivotal category in the literary imagination of the postclassical ancient world. It is securely attested as a critical term for reading literature in the third century B.C.E., when the Stoic Chrysippus uses it as a term of art of his allegoresis, but we have hints that the notion was in place as early as

⁴ In sharp contrast to the Romantics, the ancients did not generally distinguish between the "symbolic" and the "allegorical" mode. As contemporary critics, especially Paul DeMan, have pointed out, the Romantics define their "symbol" in opposition to medieval and Renaissance notions of literary allegory, which struck them as mechanistic. The Romantic reinstatement of the symbol to primary position brings back a classical notion of allegorism in response to a neoclassical criticism that took its cues from the Aristotelians.

⁵ The work of Robert Lamberton, from his Yale dissertation forward, has been most influential in changing this situation. See Robert Drummond Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: The Iliad and the Odyssey as Read by the Neoplatonists of Late Antiquity*, 2 vols. (diss., Yale University, 1979); Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, trans. and intro. Lamberton (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1983); Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Readings and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Lamberton, and John J. Keaney, eds., *Homer's Ancient Readers: The Hermeneutics of Greek Epic's Earliest Exegetes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); [Plutarch], *Essay on the Life and Poetry of Homer*, ed. and trans. John J. Keaney and Robert Lamberton (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

6 INTRODUCTION

the second half of the fourth century. It shortly takes its place among the organizing concepts of allegorical commentary and is boosted into preeminence by the Neoplatonists.

While many of the allegorists perhaps remain obscure, a rather large and growing body of scholarly work has been uncovering them. A half-century ago, Jean Pépin and Félix Buffière pioneered the contemporary study of these figures and presented general narratives of these traditions of reading.⁶ Both scholars made myth a central category of their investigations and situated their works within the expansive studies of myth being done at that time by philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and historians of religion. Pépin's work is especially pronounced in this regard. His masterful introductory section situates ancient allegory within a wide survey of the modern study of myth, from Schelling through Freud and Jung. In more recent years, a series of scholars has been investigating the allegorists from many different approaches. Among the most fruitful works for literary study are those of Michael Murrin, James Coulter, Anne D. R. Sheppard, Robert Lamberton, Jon Whitman, Glenn Most, David Dawson, and James I. Porter.⁷ The influence of these scholars' work on my own will be apparent throughout, in particular Lamberton's *Homer the Theologian* and Coulter's "Mimesis: Eicon and Symbol," a section in *The Literary Microcosm*.⁸ Were it not for these two prior studies, the present one would probably not have been undertaken.

For several reasons, some worthy and some worth reconsideration, it is perhaps still the exception rather than the rule to find this scholarship, or the presence of allegorism more generally, reflected in the broader scholarship on ancient literary criticism. The allegorists are completely absent, for example, from most of the (now outdated) anthologies of ancient literary criticism, such as D. A. Russell and M.

⁶ Félix Buffière, *Les mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1956); Jean Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1958).

⁷ Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) and *The Allegorical Epic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); James A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976); Anne D. R. Sheppard, *Studies on the 5th and 6th Essays of Proclus' Commentary on the Republic*, Hypomnemata, vol. 61 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1980); Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Glenn W. Most, "Cornutus and Stoic Allegoresis," *ANRW* 2.36.3 (1989): 2014–65; David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); James I. Porter, "Hermeneutic Lines and Circles: Aristarchus and Crates on the Exegesis of Homer," in *Homer's Ancient Readers*, ed. Robert Lamberton and John J. Keane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁸ Coulter, 32–72.

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC 7

Winterbottom's *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), J.W.H. Atkins's *Literary Criticism in Antiquity* (1934; reprint, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1961), and J. D. Denniston's *Greek Literary Criticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1924). The perhaps standard contemporary work, *Classical Criticism*, (volume 1 of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*) was edited by one of the great scholars of the rhetorical tradition, George Kennedy; it gives the allegorical tradition ten pages in a late chapter and treats it as though it were an aberration of late antiquity. Kennedy himself treats the early tradition, from the Presocratics to the classical period, again in only a few pages, without mentioning that the early material has a continuous legacy throughout the remainder of antiquity, and he invites the reader to skip the chapter and move on to the mainstream tradition.⁹

These works and the field of study of ancient literary criticism in general tend to begin from the premise that the parameters of literary criticism as an ancient discipline are defined by Aristotle's *Poetics*. The allegorists' interpretive exuberances, of course, fall outside of literary criticism as Aristotle defined it, so one is more likely to see allegorism classified as speculative philosophy, naive science, or theology. The work of Buffière and especially Pépin, which identified myth—the coin of the realm in the study of religion in the 1950s—as the proper context for understanding allegoresis continues to have a strong influence on the field. The allegorists' interest in poetry is often characterized as only incidental to their philosophical and religious interests or agendas. In the strongest formulations of this view, the allegorists are seen as only “using” poetry to pursue their agendas in these other fields, not as interested in literature for its own sake.¹⁰ But this is, of course, a complicated claim. I will turn to it in a moment.

Such views on allegorism run somewhat counter to what one finds in the current scholarship on allegorism itself. While I am not aware of an

⁹ “Readers whose interests in criticism are not theoretical may, however, prefer to skip to chapter 3” (78). The allegorists are seen to be doing theoretical criticism, where the rhetorical critics, apparently, operate on the theoryless plane of common sense.

¹⁰ This view is pervasive. See, for example, George Kennedy, *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, *Classical Criticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 86, where allegory is cast as a “tool” of philosophical and religious rhetoric; D. A. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 42, where the Stoic allegorists are said to “use” poetry as a propaedeutic for philosophy, and 95, where allegory is said to “have to do more with the history of religion and ethics than with that of literary criticism”; G.M.A. Grube, *The Greek and Roman Critics* (Cambridge: Hackett, 1968), 55–56, where the allegorists are said to “use” the poets as authorities “for their own ideas”; and finally, Michael Burney Trapp, “Allegory,” in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

8 INTRODUCTION

explicit reappraisal of the question of whether it is appropriate to consider allegorism within more general studies of “literary criticism,” a quite positive “yes” seems to animate some of the recent scholarship, where literary issues are often close to the surface. One thinks especially of Coulter’s and Lamberton’s pathbreaking work in this vein.¹¹ An article on the best-known early allegorist appeared in *TAPA* in 1986 under a title that also reflects this view: “The Derveni Commentator as Literary Critic.”¹² A change can also be observed in the evolving views of perhaps the single most important recent scholar of ancient literary criticism, D. A. Russell. His article on “Literary Criticism in Antiquity,” in the second edition (1970) of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, stated quite broadly that “Most ancient criticism is a byproduct of rhetoric,” and goes on to call Aristotle “the fountain-head of most later criticism.” He nowhere mentions allegorism. But in the third edition of the *OCD* (1996), while he maintains the fundamental importance of rhetorical criticism, he also includes several references to allegorical strategies of reading and drops the characterization of ancient criticism as a “by-product” of rhetoric. Andrew Ford’s recent *Origins of Criticism*, which appeared as this manuscript was in the final stages of preparation, gives thorough consideration to allegorism as one of the roots of classical aesthetics.¹³ I follow these cues, and place the allegorists within a rather broad context of ancient literary criticism.

Of course, the positions we take on these issues depend entirely on what we mean by literary criticism. I will here work from the premise that ancient literary criticism comprises the whole collection of ancient theories, practices, and techniques of reading literary texts. Whether the readers I examine have other, secondary (or even primary) motivations is for me less important than the role they play in generating influential and normative rules for reading literature. I have taken this approach not only because it is impossible to understand the development of the literary symbol without it but also on account of the (well-known) difficulty in sorting out more exclusive rules from the ancient categories. It is hard to find a self-conscious genre of “literary criticism” in antiquity. The ancient terminology provides little help. The idea of a literary κριτικός was mainly an Alexandrian one, designating a scholar who makes judgments about who should be included in a canon and who should

¹¹ See, e.g., Coulter, 5–31. Lamberton seriously entertains such a view of Porphyry (120) but expresses mixed views about Proclus in this regard (179, 185).

¹² Madeleine Henry, “The Derveni Commentator as Literary Critic,” *TAPA* 116 (1986): 149–64.

¹³ Andrew Ford, *Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 67–89.

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC 9

not.¹⁴ If we made our category stick to this native criterion, not many ancient readers would be included. For example, while Quintilian would surely count as a *κριτικός*, many other rhetorical critics would not; neither would Aristotle himself, for that matter, since he inaugurates his “poetics” by uncovering the mechanisms by which the poetic craft functions, not by making canonical judgments. It is even more difficult to find an ancient analogue for our notion of the “literary.” Rather, one finds *ποίησις*. But once again this category confounds our consideration of several rhetorical critics who are primarily interested in prose speeches rather than poetic texts. It will similarly disqualify the allegorists, who regularly use their interpretive tools on esoteric philosophers (writing in prose more often than in hexameters) and cultic practices, as well as on Homer.

But even according to a broader notion of literary criticism, can any of the allegorists legitimately be counted as “literary critics”? We ought first to consider the important allegorical tracts produced by figures who have no clear nonliterary interests and no identifiable philosophical axes to grind. The author of the *Life of Homer* and Heraclitus the Allegorist are rather single-minded in their devotion to Homer and attempt a full account, by their own ingenuous measures, of his greatness. They might then be called “literary critics” before they are called anything else. But often, to be sure, one would be hard-pressed to label a given allegorical reader a literary critic in any exclusive sense. It would be absurd to insist that the Derveni commentator, for example, a temple priest likely from the late fifth century B.C.E., should be considered (or considered himself) *more* a “literary critic” than a mystic figure, a mediator of the divine, with special insight into the world through a close affiliation with a certain Orphic poem. (Ten centuries later, remarkably enough, the same description would aptly fit a Neoplatonist like Proclus, perhaps the most important figure within the tradition of the ancient symbol, whose work will occupy us in chapter 7.) For entirely different reasons, Stoics like Chrysippus or Cornutus make odd fits under the heading “literary critic.” If a discrete label for these figures is required, one feels no need to call Chrysippus anything other than what he is usually called, a philosopher, while Cornutus might best be described as a cultural anthropologist.¹⁵ Like other allegorical readers, they see the poetic text as one among several significant sources of in-

¹⁴ For usage of the term, see Gregory Nagy, “Early Greek Views of Poets and Poetry,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. George A. Kennedy vol. 1, *Classical Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1, 68.

¹⁵ See A. A. Long, “Stoic Readings of Homer,” in *Homer’s Ancient Readers*, ed. Robert Lamberton and John J. Keane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 55; cf. Most (1989), 2026.

10 INTRODUCTION

sight into philosophical and theological questions. In the case of the Stoics, Glenn Most (in his criticism of Steinmetz) has taken the allegorists' application of their methods to nonliterary materials as well as literary as sufficient evidence that they are not interested in "*Dichtung als Dichtung*."¹⁶ However, we may then feel some need for an explanation of the overwhelming preference for literary evidence in the allegorical sources. Typically, for every interpretation of a cultic practice one finds a dozen readings of the poets. Even Cornutus, who picks up more nontextual evidence than the other allegorists, draws most of his information from the poets, and his explicit statements of theory focus on poetic issues. This tendency is pervasive. Whatever a particular allegorist is after (and there is no universal answer), he tends to see poetry as the most potent source of it.¹⁷ We have to conclude that allegorical readers see something of distinctive value in poetry.¹⁸

A judgment that decides allegorical readers are not literary critics on the grounds that they turn their tools on sources beyond poetic texts is further complicated by the general lack of critical purity in antiquity. After all, an extended line of such reasoning could just as easily prevent us from considering readers like Dionysius of Halicarnassus or Quintilian, for example, as ancient literary critics—for these writers' primary interest is unequivocally rhetoric and *not* poetry. (An analogous argument would rule Freud out of the history of twentieth-century criticism.)¹⁹ We are of course right to allow that Quintilian deserves a cen-

¹⁶ Most (1989), 2023–26.

¹⁷ This view needs to be modified somewhat for the post-Plotinian Neoplatonists, whose texts of choice are usually the prose works of Plato. Two mitigating factors should be considered. First, as in Cornutus's case, the most detailed statements of theory appear under the consideration of poetic texts (in Proclus's study of Homer in the *Commentary on the Republic*). Second, this is not much different from the sorts of variations one sees within rhetorical literary criticism, where some critics focus nearly exclusively on the poets (Demetrius) and others are much more weighted toward prose speeches (Dionysius of Halicarnassus).

¹⁸ If one is looking for an equivalent of Aristotle in the extant allegorical tradition, that is, someone who self-consciously codifies a definition of poetry that excludes all other forms of discourse, one has to wait until the fifth century C.E., when Proclus produces, in the *Commentary on the Republic*, the most thoroughly articulated of the extant allegorical theories of poetry. See chap. 7.

¹⁹ One would, of course, be reluctant to call Freud a "literary critic," but even more reluctant to leave him out of a general consideration of twentieth-century literary criticism. Rather than saying that Freud was not interested in literature for its own sake, it seems more satisfying to say that he introduced a new vision of what literature is: he presented it as a near epiphenomenon of the mechanisms of repression and displacement. This view is, of course, persuasive to some later readers (whether explicitly Freudian or not), and they begin to see literature as an opening into the otherwise hidden components of the mind's interior life. Further, Freud helps us to better understand developments in the history of literature itself—since critical approaches have their effects on writers as well as readers. Our understanding of Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, would suffer greatly

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC 11

tral position in histories of criticism, even though he produces literary commentary nearly always within the context of rhetorical investigation. This has to do with our understanding that many in the ancient world thought rhetoric and poetry share a great deal. In a rather similar way, I am claiming, the allegorists begin from the premise that poetic questions are deeply intertwined with philosophical and theological ones, and that to neglect the latter is to neglect what is distinctive and unique, indeed definitional, about great poetry. There is, after all, nothing to prevent a reader from a view that poetry *as poetry* is a font of philosophical and theological insight. In a well-known passage, the early Stoic philosopher Cleanthes says something close to this:

Poetic and musical models are better than philosophical language and—while the language of philosophy is on the one hand sufficiently able to express things human and divine, it is on the other hand inarticulate and unable to express a language befitting the divine magnificence—the meters, the melodies, the rhythms as much as possible approach the truth of the contemplation of divine things.²⁰

ὅς φησιν ἀμείνονά τε εἶναι τὰ ποιητικὰ καὶ μουσικὰ παραδείγματα καί, τοῦ λόγου τοῦ τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἰκανῶς μὲν ἐξαγγέλλειν δυναμένου τὰ θεῖα καὶ ἀνθρώπινα, μὴ ἔχοντος δὲ ψελλοῦ τῶν θεῶν μεγεθῶν λέξεις οἰκείας, τὰ μέτρα καὶ τὰ μέλη καὶ τοὺς ῥυθμοὺς ὡς μάλιστα προσικνεῖσθαι πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν τῆς τῶν θεῶν θεωρίας. (Cleanthes, SVF 1.486)²¹

Cleanthes asserts that poetic language carries a special aptitude for handling stories about the divine. One can point to a certain dignity that poetry’s musicality will accord the gods, but Cleanthes goes slightly further than that; he suggests that poetry’s unique characteristics have epistemological implications as well. They have a bearing on how close human language is able to get to “the truth” of the divine. We will find this view to be a working assumption in several of the allegorical tracts under investigation here. In fact, though the allegorical tracts differ in

without Freud. Similarly, ancient allegorical criticism had an impact on writers. Michael Murrin has shown that Vergil self-consciously fashioned his Juno in book 1 of the *Aeneid* under the influence of traditional allegorical readings of Hera. See Murrin, *Allegorical Epic*, chap. 1; cf. Joseph Farrell, *Vergil’s Georgics and the Traditions of Ancient Epic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 257–58 and Robin Schlunk, *The Homeric Scholia and the Aeneid* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), 107–15.

²⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, all translation are my own.

²¹ While there is likely a problem with this text, the main point is not in doubt. Arnim follows Kemke (*Philodemi De Musica Librorum* ed. Johannes Kemke, [Leipzig: Teubner, 1884], 97 [col. 28, line 9]) and reads ψειλοῦ, which faces morphological difficulties, where I have ψελλοῦ. Kemke represents a lacuna directly above the form. While not fully satisfying, ψελλοῦ is at least attested.

12 INTRODUCTION

important ways, they are united in the idea that poetry has as its defining characteristic an ability to convey grand truths that more discursive forms of language are incapable of capturing. Such a vision of poetry is vigorously disputed by some ancient thinkers, Plato not the least. It is out of step with Aristotle's approach. To some modern philologists, it may seem overly Romantic. For contemporary literary critics, reattuned to this view by the Romantics and steeled against it by critiques from deconstruction, it may seem at the same time overzealous and oddly familiar. However it strikes us, this approach to poetry is common and unmistakable among ancient readers; it is among the most consistently attested premises of the allegorical stream of ancient reading.

Finally, on this point, it is probably still sometimes the case that the question of whether the allegorists count as sufficiently literary in their approach is confounded with a quite different one: whether a given allegorical reading seems acceptable or plausible. If it is not, this line of thinking goes, then the reader reveals him- or herself to be not interested in literature for its own sake. Of course, if one's ultimate goal is to generate a proper reading of a particular literary text, one will disregard certain interpretations and mark down others as tendentious or not useful. But if, on the other hand, one is a historian reconstructing ancient approaches to reading, it is counterproductive to invoke some general notion of plausibility of interpretation (or our own sense of justice to a text) as a criterion for judging whether a particular ancient reader is sufficiently interested in literature. The critical commentary of any generation of readers more often than not seems outlandish to the succeeding one.

In the end, such classifications, like generic boundaries, run to the limits of their usefulness if they prevent us from seeing the cross-fertilization of ideas and intellectual practices from one field to the next. A quick look at one particular ancient reader of poetry will show the difficulty of developing exclusive categories for classifying ancient commentators. An A-scholion on *Iliad* 1.197 discusses the moment where the goddess Athena graphically intervenes in the action and restrains Achilles by his hair:

“By the yellow hair she grabbed the son of Peleus”: [Homer] says that she grabbed “the son of Peleus by the hair,” not “the hair of the son of Peleus.” Some ignorant scribes write “She grabbed the hair of the son of Peleus.” Through this he allegorizes the heat and passion of the hero. For people suffering from jaundice are like this.

“ξανθῆς δὲ κόμης ἔλε Πηλεΐωνα” ὅτι οὕτως λέγει, τὸν Πηλεΐωνα τῆς κόμης εἶλεν, οὐχὶ τοῦ Πηλεΐωνος τὴν κόμην. ἀγνοήσαντες δὲ τινες γράφουσι

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC 13

“ξανθῆς δὲ κόμης ἔλε Πηλείωνος”. διὰ τούτου δὲ αἰνίττεται τὸ θερμὸν καὶ ὀργῶλον τοῦ ἥρωος· οἱ γὰρ ξανθόχολοι τοιοῦτοι.²²

Here the critic disagrees with those who suggest a variant textual reading (the genitive of the Greek word meaning “Peleus’s son” for the accusative) and at the same time offers an allegorical reading of Achilles’ yellow hair. To say that the first observation is literary criticism but the second is not strikes me as somewhat forced. This scholion is not atypical of the mixed approaches one finds in allegorical texts.

What then is to be gained from the debate over whether to classify allegorical commentary as literary as well as (not to the exclusion of) religious and philosophical? First and most relevant for the immediate purposes of this study, as I have already mentioned, the ancient history of the literary symbol is nearly invisible unless we reconsider the issue. Without reckoning the ancient developments of allegory within the context of literary criticism more generally, it becomes impossible to discern the history that runs from ancient to modern symbol theories. Though I will do little more than suggest the connections in the concluding chapter, it will be clear throughout that what are usually thought of as strictly modern concerns—ontological linkage between signs and their referents, the notion that language is autonomous and creates a world rather than passively labeling it, and the view of the poet as a solitary genius attuned to the hidden truths of the cosmic order—all these positions have their roots in ancient thought and can be tracked through the study of the symbol. Second, the general definition of allegory that I have been suggesting, that allegorical readers are those that view the poet as primarily a font of subtle insight into the basic workings of the world, is visible only when set in the context of the ancient schools of literary criticism. This characteristic of allegorism is hardly noticeable when, for example, we view it solely within the traditions of physical and theological speculation that emerge with the philosophers. In these other contexts allegorical reading will not be much more than science manqué. It is often that, but it is always also more than that. As a corollary to this position, and as I hope is made clear in chapter 1, an investigation of the allegorists in literary-critical contexts gives us a place outside the more familiar Aristotelian currents, from which we are able to see aspects of Aristotelian criticism that are otherwise difficult to spot. In particular I will be suggesting that Aristotle’s notions of poetic language, which value clarity above all, are actually part of a decidedly anti-allegorical project that sits at the head of rhetorical criticism.

The view of allegorical reading that emerges in a literary context is more satisfying, in my opinion, than one that is often found in standard

²² *Scholía Graeca in Homeri Iliadem*, ed. Erbse (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969), 1.64.

14 INTRODUCTION

reference sources, though not as often in the scholarship on allegorism. One regularly reads that there are two forms of ancient allegorism, “defensive” and “positive,” both of which are motivated exclusively by extratextual concerns. Michael Burney Trapp’s article on Greek allegory in the third edition of the *OCD* presents this widely held view concisely: “Throughout the early period it is hard to be sure what the balance was between ‘defensive’ allegoresis (rescuing the poets and their myths from charges of intellectual naïveté and impiety) and ‘positive’ allegoresis (claiming the poets’ authority for the interpreter’s own doctrines).” While one can surely observe examples of defensiveness and forced reading in various allegorical commentaries, the defensive/positive split as an organizing principle has no ancient attestation and is beset with difficulties.

First, “defensive” motivations on the part of the reader and “positive” imposition of the reader’s own ideas are of course not mutually exclusive, and the conceptual boundary between them is in practice very difficult to arbitrate. To situate defensiveness properly, one must resort to some notion of the general state of mind of the interpreter: was he engaged in a polemic with some critic of Homer or not? While the polemical dimension is sometimes plain—for example, in certain interpretations of the tryst of Ares and Aphrodite, a scene which we know to have been offensive to some famous ancient readers—many allegorical readings (in my estimation, most of them) have no clearly identifiable defensive origin. And even in cases where defensiveness is present, more often than not this observation hardly scratches the surface of explaining what the reader is up to. What does it add to our understanding of allegorical reading, for example, if we could determine which of the following standard treatments had a polemical origin: the production of Achilles’ shield as a statement on the creation of human society,²³ Apollo’s arrows as the sun’s rays carrying plague,²⁴ the cave of the nymphs as a microcosm of the material world,²⁵ or the adventures of Odysseus as a human being’s journey through life to acquire wisdom and self-control?²⁶

The emphasis on defensiveness also relies on a standard and probably erroneous history of allegorism, according to which it arose in direct response to philosophers like Xenophanes who first launched attacks on Homer. But as Jonathan Tate pointed out some time ago, the works of

²³ Heraclitus the Allegorist *Homeric Allegories* 43–51, drawing from Crates of Mallos.

²⁴ Pseudo-Plutarch *Life of Homer* 202; Heraclitus *Homeric Allegories* 8; Cornutus *Compendium* 32.

²⁵ This is the subject of perhaps the most famous example of ancient allegorical reading, Porphyry’s essay on *Cave of the Nymphs*.

²⁶ Heraclitus the Allegorist *Homeric Allegories* 70.

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC 15

other figures, like Pherecydes of Syros, make such a narrative dubious and suggest that allegorical reading predates the philosophers' attacks.²⁷ Robert Lamberton also doubts that allegorism rose in response to philosophical detractors.²⁸ Moreover, and more importantly, defensive reading is not exclusive to allegory. One can defend Homer with all manner and means of critical tools, but it would not be useful to situate a binary of "defensive" versus some other category at the head of each critical approach whose tools are used to answer Homer's detractors. A figure like Aristarchus, for example, commonly "defends" Homer, if you like, but to create a large category of defensive readings might lead us to overstress his extratextual motivations and underappreciate the richness and importance of his methods. The sources attest to works titled *Homeric Problems* that likewise seek to exonerate Homer. Aristotle and Porphyry both wrote such books. Porphyry, who leaves us with our chief extant example, thought text-critical and Peripatetic methods and *not* allegorism to be his most useful tools in producing this work, though he was thoroughly familiar with all of these methods. Since nearly every kind of critical approach can be used to exonerate Homer from his detractors, and many approaches have been so used, in order to justify maintaining defensive allegorism as a primary organizing category, one should address the question of whether allegorism was used defensively to a greater degree than other ancient approaches. This has not been satisfactorily established.

On the other side of the binary, "positive" allegoresis, the problems are more severe. It is, after all, rather blunt to claim that *all* allegorical reading that is not defensive is an imposition of a reader's own views onto a text. This characterization of allegory is very old indeed. Cicero first put it in the mouth of the allegorists' detractors in his dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods* (1.41). As that work makes clear, it is useful polemic, but it is not much more than a caricature. We might compare, for example, one famous allegorist's reductive treatment of the stylistic interests of critics in the Aristotelian fashion: Lamberton has already pointed out that the great Neoplatonic commentator Proclus accuses them of missing the real point of writers like Homer and Plato and

²⁷ J. Tate, "On the Beginnings of Allegory," *Classical Review* 41 (1927): 214–15. Tate concludes that allegory was "originally positive, not negative," and that the primary motivation of early philosophical allegory was an attempt to appropriate and rewrite traditional mythic authority on the nature of things for a newly emerging philosophical discourse. "Thus allegory was originally positive, not negative, in its aim." See also, Tate, "On the History of Allegorism," *Classical Quarterly* 28 (1934): 105–7; and Tate, "Plato and Allegorical Interpretation," *Classical Quarterly* 23 (1929): 142.

²⁸ Lamberton, 15, n. 40.

16 INTRODUCTION

dismisses their “quibbling about style,” which he is happy to leave to others [τὴν περὶ τὴν λέξιν πολυπραγμοσύνην ἄλλοις ἀφέντες].²⁹ The classification of “positive” allegory glosses over the rather obvious point that a critic who is charged with reading something into a poem sees the text differently than the one who levels the charge. We can be sure that *no* reader (ancient or modern) understands himself or herself as foisting ideas onto a text that do not belong there. The one who proposes a reading, I think we are safe to assume, thinks the text will bear it. More interesting questions present themselves at this point: What is different about these readers’ vying notions of the text? What can we learn from them? What effect do these visions have on the history of reading? The answers to these questions are consistently more complex and interesting than we have yet appreciated.

In any case, a binary mapping of allegorism as motivated *either* by an attempt to save a poet from critics *or* by an attempt to enlist his authority for the allegorist’s own dogma claims that only extratextual motivations produce this rather large genre of ancient commentary and leaves out even the possibility that allegorists read poetry allegorically for no more complicated motivation than that they thought they were following the dictates of poetry itself.³⁰ Rather than focusing on a particular reader’s motivations, or exposing hermeneutical mischief, it is in my view more satisfactory to define allegorism by what all its practitioners have in common and what is observable in their commentaries and theoretical statements—whether they are defending Homer, twisting his words, or just reading him the way they thought he ought to be read. Whatever their differences, those who read allegorically share an approach that sees the defining characteristics of a poetic text as its surplus of meaning, its tendency to transmit these extra messages in a specifically enigmatic and symbolic fashion, and its need for a skilled reader who is attentive to poetry’s allusiveness and density of meaning.

By situating the allegorists and their symbols in a broader context of ancient approaches to literature, we see that they help us to modify not only our understanding of literary theory in the classical period but our overall view of the history of literary criticism.³¹ These observations will

²⁹ *In remp.* 1.164.8; cited by Lamberton, 178.

³⁰ A. A. Long has shown such a view to be operative in the writings of the Stoics of the formative period, though he argues that on this basis we should not call their reading “allegory” (Long, “Stoic Readings of Homer”). In my view, such a corrective can be applied to many readers commonly cited within the allegorical tradition, which suggests that our definition of allegory needs to be revised.

³¹ The work of Jon Whitman has been especially important in this regard. See, most recently, Jon Whitman, ed., *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000). Especially worth noting in this volume are Whitman’s introduc-

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC 17

occupy us briefly in the concluding chapter. General histories tend to treat the classical period as consisting of a few precursors—Plato, Aristotle, Longinus—to the great epochs and movements of literary criticism: the Renaissance, neoclassicism, Romanticism, and the modern period. This view leads to several problems: (1) The classical period can too easily be reduced to an Aristotelian monolith, with a few Platonic objections; (2) ancient criticism appears to be only marginally troubled by the question of mimesis, or the adequacy of language to capture certain fundamental truths about the world; (3) we have a distorted view of which “Plato” the Renaissance rediscovered; and (4) the Romantics are seen as rejecting “classical” principles with their embrace of the “symbol,” when it is probably closer to the truth to say that they are displacing one classical model with another, equally well-attested one (while introducing a myriad of refinements and innovations, to be sure). In all the observations that follow I hope to show that literary symbols have existed since ancient times, in forms that are sometimes strange, and with powers that are sometimes exotic, but nearly always displaying recognizable features and making claims that cast an instructive light on the problems and possibilities, verities and illusions, that animate even contemporary visions of the power of poetry. The case study presented here, of an ongoing debate in ancient criticism over theories of representation and the power of poets and their texts, will I hope suggest how much more is waiting to be done. While distant and sometimes arcane, the habits of reading developed here left an enduring legacy to later periods, and even to our own.

Finally, this study will implicitly question a view expressed among some scholars that allegorism is rare in the extant evidence, outside the main currents of ancient reading, and generally concentrated in the later periods. For reasons that are not at all clear to me, for example, Tate, who did the most important work on the allegorists early in the last century, assures us that allegory was “never, be it noted, popular among the Greeks.”³² However, if one is counting simple numbers of surviving texts, it is hard to say that allegorism is at all rare. At least half a dozen major allegorical tracts survive from the ancient period, roughly equivalent to the number of major tracts that survive from the rhetorical traditions of reading, and allegorical commentary is as well represented in the scholia as other kinds. Among ancient philosophers, opinion is decidedly split, with Aristotle and Plato clear opponents of allegoresis, but

tion and Robert Lamberton’s masterful “Language, Text, and Truth in Ancient Polytheist Exegesis,” 73–88.

³² Jonathan Tate, “Allegory, Greek,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1970), 46.

18 INTRODUCTION

with ardent support coming from the Stoics and their followers, whose work we will explore in chapters 3 and 4, and the Neoplatonists, to whom we will turn in chapters 6 and 7. Considering time distribution, a large group of allegorical works survives from the early and late Roman periods — but this is not much different from the distribution of tracts of rhetorical criticism. (One wonders what our notions of classical criticism would be had Aristotle's *Poetics* perished!) Furthermore, with the discovery of the Derveni Papyrus some decades ago, alongside the fragments of other famous allegorists from the classical period, we have indication enough that allegoresis forms a more or less continuous strand of literary thinking through the classical, Hellenistic, and early- and late-Roman periods. For these reasons it is difficult to accept that this method of reading was “never very popular,” that it was exotic or clearly outside of the mainstream, or that it was concentrated in late periods of literary thought.

It may be useful at this point to offer three final caveats. First, though I will from time to time emphasize certain inherent tensions between allegorical premises and the premises of rhetorical reading, we will see repeatedly that *most* literary commentators who suggest allegorical readings demonstrate an interest in and facility with a range of approaches to criticism: rhetorical, philological, and text-critical as well as allegorical. Some scholars take a critic's interest in textual or other forms of criticism as evidence that he could not have been interested in allegorical reading, or vice versa. For me, on the other hand, the opposition between allegorical and rhetorical readers is a heuristic one and not by any means a hard and fast division in the ancient sources. Prominent allegorists — including Metrodorus of Lampsacus, the Derveni commentator, Chrysippus, Pseudo-Plutarch, Cornutus, and Porphyry — show varying degrees of facility with several different ways of reading, not excluding rhetorical criticism. I would not want my approach, of highlighting through contrast, to reinforce the mistaken notion that we will find allegoresis in a remote archipelago, tucked away from the Aristotelian mainland.

Second, in looking more closely at allegoresis, I do not at all propose that one reading is just as good as the next, that any text will bear any interpretation, and that we ought to abstain from comparative critical judgment. In fact, I claim just the opposite. Comparative critical judgment is absolutely necessary for highlighting the insights and blindneses of the multitude of possible approaches to the task of reading. Bringing allegorism into conversations with other modes of literary criticism, in my view, only heightens and reawakens our sensitivity to such questions. For example, our reexamination of the ancient allegorists and the question of whether they recreate texts in their own image,

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC 19

might also sharpen our scrutiny of all who take on the heavy burden of giving exhaustive readings of texts as dense and distant as those of the ancient epic poets. For example, we might also wonder whether the recent generations of Homeric critics were exerting themselves too much when they tried to make Homer out to be a master reader of the “human condition.” Did such a notion—decked out as it is in universalist urges accreted from modernism, Romanticism, the Enlightenment, humanism, and ironically enough, from Stoicism—occur to Homer? It is highly dubious. Are these critics wrong to find it in Homer’s works? Maybe, but maybe not. Furthermore, any reading or any misreading may have something instructive to tell us about the preconceptions and expectations of the critics who forward it, the community in which they read, and the legacies of their views to later periods of literary and literary-critical history.

Third, I do not propose to lay bare some essential referent that lies behind the term “symbol,” in its Greek or English (or Latin, German, French, or Italian) variants. Any such claim would be tenuous indeed. Rather, the literary term is a critical tool, constructed by theorists of literature, in order to meet the needs of the work that they do. It does not label some stable, abstract mode of looking at the world that exists in nature and is waiting for us to discover it, like an element in some mythical periodic table of literary criticism. But it seems clear to me at this point that the term itself, which is perhaps to say the concept itself, considered as a particular unit of the historically linked Greek, Latin, Romance, and Germanic languages, has a history. The concept has been constructed and reconstructed over centuries, across cultures, and always for particular purposes, but never *ex nihilo*. This study attempts to locate and trace the earliest constructions and reconstructions in that history. Closer inspection of the various traditions of symbolic reading will reveal a series of complicated and rich debates, varied lines of thinking, and several precursors to crucial later developments in the history of the interpretive urge in literary criticism.

Michel Foucault writes in his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” that “Genealogy is grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of tangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times.” While I hope that I have been meticulous and patient, I would alert the reader that the other portions of Foucault’s characterization may apply to some of the following pages as well. The debates covered here take us into territories that are sometimes unfamiliar. Though these contestations focus on concerns and questions from a remote past, argued for their own idiosyncratic purposes, they nevertheless have more than antiquarian interest. They have something to say for the visions that inform contempo-

20 INTRODUCTION

rary thinking about literature. Mindful of Cicero's charge, however, I have tried as much as possible to remain faithful to the thoughts and arguments of the ancient critics themselves and to refrain from reading into their debates current issues that may have only tangential bearing on the ancient ones. A faithfulness to particularity is crucial lest we reduce the past to the role of precursor for some as yet unimagined future. This approach has necessitated a good bit of context building and a reliance on the work of many other scholars. But in my estimation, there is something more to be gained from a look at the large assemblage of evidence from many fields. I will have undoubtedly made mistakes, but with luck they have not effaced the main points: the interpretive urge in literary criticism has deep classical roots and the *telos* of this view points toward the divine. What we will find here are only the early stages of an enduring hope that lingers in many ages: the hope that we might find in poetry some palpable trace, at last, of the transcendent.