

Introduction

ALLEGORY is a protean device, omnipresent in Western literature from the earliest times to the modern era. No comprehensive historical treatment of it exists or would be possible in a single volume, nor is it my aim to fill even a part of this gap. Hoping instead to get at the essence of the mode, I have outlined a theoretical, mainly non-historical analysis of literary elements.

Whereas a full-scale history would entail numberless small observations of changing literary convention, a theoretical treatment of allegory will succeed by opposite means: it must keep to a plane of generality. We have to account for an even wider variety of materials than with categories like “satire,” “tragedy,” or “comedy.” Only the broadest notions, for example the modal concepts of “irony” or “mimesis,” embrace so many different kinds of literature. Given this range of reference, no narrowly exclusive stipulated definition will be useful, however desirable it might seem, while formal precision may at present even be misleading to the student of the subject. What I have attempted, therefore, is to balance the claims of general theory and simple induction: what follows is a preliminary description intended to yield a model of allegory. I have gone through some initial mapping stages of criticism and have asked, in a spirit of theoretical discussion, what sort of characters are called allegorical heroes, what sort of things they typically do, what their style of behavior is, what sort of images are used to portray their actions and

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character. In brief, I have asked what is the mode of an allegorical fiction.

In the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another. It destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words “mean what they say.” When we predicate quality x of person Y , Y really is what our predication says he is (or we assume so); but allegory would turn Y into something other (*allos*) than what the open and direct statement tells the reader.¹ Pushed to an extreme, this ironic usage would subvert language itself, turning everything into an Orwellian newspeak.² In this sense we see how

¹*Allegory* from *allos* + *agoreuein* (*other* + *speak openly, speak in the assembly or market*). *Agoreuein* connotes public, open, declarative speech. This sense is inverted by the prefix *allos*. Thus allegory is often called “inversion.” E.g., ed. Thomas Cooper, in Thomas Elyot, *Bibliotheca Eliotae: Eliotes Dictionarie* (London, 1559): “*Allegoria*—a figure called inversion, where it is one in woordes, and an other in sentence or meaning”; Edward Phillips, in *The New World of English Words* (4th ed., London, 1678): “*Allegory*—Inversion or changing: In Rhetorick it is a mysterious saying, wherein there is couched something that is different from the literal sense.” Sometimes the term *inversio* may be taken in its original sense of *translation*, while *translatio* is but the Latin equivalent of the Greek *metaphor*. On translation as an exegetical device, see R. M. Grant, *The Letter and the Spirit* (London, 1957), 34. Jules Pépin, in *Mythe et allégorie* (Paris, 1958), 87–88, finds Plutarch the first critic to use the word “allegory” instead of its older Greek equivalent *hyponoia*, also the first to use the verb “to allegorize.” The political overtones of the verb *agoreuein* need always to be emphasized, insofar as censorship may produce devious, ironical ways of speaking.

²Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, tr. Rex Warner (Penguin ed., 1954), III, ch. vi, provides the first major discussion of newspeak in Western history. Describing the revolution in Corcyra, Thucydides shows that “the love of power, operating through greed and through personal ambition,” created a new linguistic climate in which language itself was corrupted, as by a plague, the same plague which is a synecdoche, or perhaps a metonymy, for all the ills of the Peloponnesian war. Such was the inauguration of the Big Lie. “So revolutions broke out in city after city. . . . To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one’s unmanly character; ability to understand

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allegory is properly considered a mode: it is a fundamental process of encoding our speech. For the very reason that it is a radical linguistic procedure, it can appear in all sorts of different works, many of which fall far short of the confusing doubleness that made Orwell's newspeak such an effective brainwashing device.

An allegorical mode of expression characterizes a quite extraordinary variety of literary kinds: chivalric or picaresque romances and their modern equivalent, the "western," utopian political satires, quasi-philosophical anatomies, personal attacks in epigrammatic form, pastorals of all sorts, apocalyptic visions, encyclopedic epics containing *summās* of true and false learning, naturalistic muckraking novels whose aim is to propagandize social change, imaginary voyages like Lucian's *The True History*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Verne's *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*, or Henri Michaux's *Voyage en Grande Garabagne*, detective stories in both the genteel whodunit and the hard-boiled Hammett-Chandler styles, fairy tales (many of which are "cautionary tales"),³ debate poems like the anonymous medieval "The Owl and the Nightingale" and Yeats's

a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self defence. . . . These parties were not formed to enjoy the benefits of the established laws, but to acquire power by overthrowing the existing regime; and the members of these parties felt confidence in each other not because of any fellowship in a religious communion, but because they were partners in crime. If an opponent made a reasonable speech, the party in power, so far from giving it a generous reception, took every precaution to see that it had no practical effect" (*Peloponnesian War*, 209). Since Thucydides' semi-fictional speeches present the ideology of the Greek city-states, this passage gives us a theory of political revolution; he is making the same point Orwell made in his essay "Politics and the English language." With almost religious belief in the truth-value of individual words and phrases, Orwell asserted that "the present political chaos [at the end of the Second World War] is connected with the decay of language, and . . . one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end." *Homage to Catalonia* attacks the press for causing this verbal corruption.

³See Karel Čapek, "Towards a Theory of Fairy Tales," *In Praise of Newspapers*, tr. M. and R. Weatherall (New York, 1951), 49–89.

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“Dialogue of Self and Soul,” complaints like Alain de Lille’s *De Planctu Naturae* and Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (incongruous as the juxtaposition may seem). All these and more, with one genre sometimes merging into another, may be termed allegorical or partly allegorical works—by which we mean primarily that as they go along they are usually saying one thing in order to mean something beyond that one thing. There is no reason why allegories should not be written entirely in prose, entirely in verse, or in a mixture of the two, as in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, a typical anatomy.⁴ There is no reason why allegory must always be narrated; it can be used in the drama, whether ancient (*Prometheus Bound*), medieval (the moralities), Renaissance (the *autos sacramentales*⁵ and the masques), or modern (the surrealist drama of Ionesco or Beckett, the “epic theatre” of Brecht). Besides drama and narrative fiction, lyrical poetry is available to convey the “extended metaphor,” as for example in certain Imagist poems (Pound’s “Papyrus,”⁶ Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”),⁷ and more familiarly in the conceits of Metaphysical verse, above all through its excesses (Clevelandism).

This variety is an advantage for the theorist, as well as a challenge, since he can be checked by many other readers, all of whom have special areas of interest and many of whom will have particular com-

⁴Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, with its dialogue form, its verse interludes and its pervading tone of contemplative irony, is a pure anatomy, a fact of considerable importance for the understanding of its vast influence” (Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* [Princeton, 1957], 312). See Frye, 308–314, on the genre in general.

⁵On the *autos* of Calderón, see Frye’s *Anatomy*, 282–284; also A. L. Constandse, *Le Baroque espagnol et Calderón de la Barca* (Amsterdam, 1951), *passim*; A. A. Parker, *The Allegorical Drama of Calderón* (London, 1943); Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. W. R. Trask (New York, 1953), 205, 244. Edwin Honig has especially interested himself in Calderón. See his article, “Calderón’s Strange Mercy Play,” *Massachusetts Review*, III (Autumn 1961), 80–107; his translation of and introduction to *Four Plays* (New York, 1961).

⁶In Ezra Pound, *Personae* (New York, 1926), 112.

⁷Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York, 1954), 92–95.

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petence in genres the theorist can know only superficially. Frequently we can refer a theory of allegory to works we read for entertainment—the western romance, the imaginary voyage of science fiction, the melodrama based on fictional “case histories”—all of which are direct descendants of a more sober ancient tradition. The reader is often perhaps not aware that these works, mainly romances, are at least partially allegorical. In the middle ages, we can guess, the priest’s homily did not strike his hearers as a blank, abstract, boring exordium, perhaps not even as particularly symbolic.⁸ The listeners, however, could return home from church to meditate systematically on the hidden meaning of the parable, if they chose, and doubtless in times of plague and civil strife they did precisely that. While allegory in the middle ages came to the people from the pulpit, it comes to the modern reader in secular, but no less popular, form. The modern romance and the detective story with its solution also carry double meanings that are no less important to the completion of their plots than is the *moralitas* to the preacher’s parable.

The older iconographic languages of religious parable now need a good deal of interpretation,⁹ because their worlds are remote from

⁸See G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1933), chs. i, iv–vii. The interpretation of Holy Writ was continually enlivened by “vivid illustration, lively anecdote, homely portraiture, witty and ruthless satire” (55). Satire, as in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tristram Shandy*, was later turned against the purely routine publication of any and all sermons. With the sermons of Donne exegesis becomes a structural device for the development of dramatic, sometimes even forensic, speech.

⁹Besides the formal obscurity that inheres in enigma, there is also a historical barrier between modern and medieval contexts. Thus James Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York, 1916), I, 327b: “Allegory is almost always a relative, not an absolute conception, which has nothing to do with the actual truth of the matter, and for the most part springs from the natural desire to conserve some idea which, owing to its age, has come to be regarded as sacred.” Also Roger Hinks, *Myth and Allegory in Ancient Art* (London, 1939), 16–17: “It is the mark of allegory that its *dramatis personae* are abstract concepts; they have no separate existence or legend, such as the characters of myth enjoy; and as a rule they are created *ad hoc*, to suit a particular occasion.” The occasion gone, the symbolism loses its meaning. On

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our world, which would explain why medieval allegory seems so obviously allegorical to us, while modern allegories (if I am right in so extending the class) may not be read as fables. The degree of familiarity with the old and new iconographies is the varying factor.¹⁰ Even though the twentieth-century reader has no actual experience with detectives and murderers, he understands the world of the “private eye,” and the same holds for other kinds of stereotype. The lack of a similar familiarity with medieval religious symbolism makes the modern reader think that what he reads for pleasure and what the preacher preached must be different in kind. But the whodunit demands a solution to a riddle, making it a member of that oldest allegorical type, the *aenigma*.¹¹ The western of Zane Grey has a different affinity: instead of the allegorical riddle, a surface texture of sublime scenic description is the carrier of thematic meaning. The western scenery in Grey is always more than a tacked-up backdrop. It is a *paysage moralisé*,¹² and Grey’s heroes act in

Christian and Philonic exegesis, see R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (London, 1959), where the central subject is Origen; Grant, *The Letter and the Spirit*; H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956); Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge, Mass., 1947); Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie*; Jean Daniélou, *Philon d’Alexandre* (Paris, 1958). These are among the texts which have been useful to me; the literature on the subject is of course extensive.

¹⁰ On the term “iconography,” see Erwin Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art,” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York, 1955), first published in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, 1939).

¹¹ See W. H. Auden, “The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict,” in *The Critical Performance*, ed. S. E. Hyman (New York, 1956): “The interest in the thriller is the ethical and eristic conflict between good and evil, between Us and Them. The interest in the study of the murderer is the observation, by the innocent many, of the sufferings of the guilty one. The interest in the detective story is the dialectic of innocence and guilt” (302). Auden intends a slightly mocking tone.

¹² Auden has a major poem to which he gave this title, *Paysage Moralisé*, in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York, 1945), 47–48. See the discussion of this poem in J. W. Beach’s *Obsessive Images: Symbolism in Poetry of the 1930s and 1940s* (Minneapolis, 1960), 104–113.

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harmony with or in violent opposition to that scenic tapestry.¹³ Furthermore, the conflicts of the cowboy hero and the bandit villain, as in the detective thriller, are drawn according to a dualism of good and evil—a defining characteristic of the mode from the earliest period of Occidental literature. It is with fictions of this familiar, popular, unassuming sort that we can equip ourselves in determining whether any particular theory of allegory is adequate. Whatever applies to our favorite romances will apply with even greater force to the major examples of tradition, let us say, *The Faerie Queene* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

An objection needs to be met here, namely that all romances are not necessarily allegorical. A good adventure story, the reader will say, needs no interpolated secondary meaning in order to be significant and entertaining. But that objection does not concern the true criterion for allegory. The whole point of allegory is that it does not *need* to be read exegetically; it often has a literal level that makes good enough sense all by itself. But somehow this literal surface suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention, and while it can, as it were, get along without interpretation, it becomes much richer and more interesting if given interpretation. Even the most deliberate fables, if read naïvely or carelessly, may seem mere stories, but what counts in our discussion is a structure that lends itself to a secondary reading, or rather, one that becomes stronger when given a secondary meaning as well as a primary meaning.

Nevertheless, we must avoid the notion that all people must see

¹³ *Black Mesa*, ch. ix: “The Desert of Bitter Seeps, all stone and baked earth, retained the heat into the fall. Each succeeding day grew drier, hotter, fiercer. . . . Paul, too, was wearing to a disastrous break. He realized it, but could not check the overpowering forces of the place, the time, and whatever terrible climax seemed imminent. . . . Belmont, too, was plotting. His deep and gloomy thought resembled the brooding of the wasteland. The subtle, almost imperceptible change of the last few weeks now stood out palpably, Belmont was under a tremendous strain, the havoc of which he did not suspect. His greed and lust and love of the bottle seemed to have united with the disintegrating influence of Bitter Seeps.”

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the double meaning, for the work to be rightly called allegory. At least one branch of allegory, the ironic *aenigma*,¹⁴ serves political and social purposes by the very fact that a reigning authority (as in a police state) does not see the secondary meaning of the “Aesop-language.”¹⁵ But someone does see that meaning, and, once seen, it is felt strongly to be the final intention behind the primary meaning. Perhaps naïve readers do not see the erotic allegory under the surface action of a Zane Grey romance, but then in discussing allegory we are not much concerned with naïve readers. We are talking about sophisticated readers and what they read *into* literature. There is on the other hand no harm in admitting that stories can move the reader by sheer plot, action, and surprise. But these stories are much rarer than one would expect. It is commoner to find a veneer of action laid over a moralizing intent. Finally, whether one thinks there is such a thing as pure storytelling, or only degrees of abstract thematic structure (Aristotle’s *dianoia*) underlying every fiction, the main point is surely that in discussing literature generally we must be ready to discern in almost any work at least a small degree of allegory. All literature, as Northrop Frye has observed, is from the point of view of commentary more or less allegorical, while no “pure allegory” will ever be found.¹⁶ There is therefore no harm in draw-

¹⁴Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (London, 1593; reprinted Gainesville, Fla., 1954): “Aenigma: a kind of Allegorie, differing only in obscuritie, for Aenigma is a sentence or forme of speech, which for the darknesse, the sense may hardly be gathered” (27). This figure is usually identified with *riddle*, e.g., George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Willcock and Alice Walker (London, 1589; reprinted Cambridge, 1936): “We dissemble againe under covert and darke speaches, when we speake by way of riddle (*Enigma*) of which the sence can hardly be picked out, but by the parties owne assoile” (188). See below, chapter 7, on the political uses of allegory.

¹⁵See Alan Paton’s article “The South African Treason Trial,” *Atlantic Monthly*, CCV (Jan. 1960); also, more general, E. S. Hobsbawm, *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels* (Glencoe, Ill., 1959), ch. ix, “Ritual in Social Movements.”

¹⁶For dramatic proof that commentary, especially when carried to an extreme, is perforce allegorical we have nothing better than certain parodies, e.g., Theodore Spencer’s “new critical” reading of “Thirty Days Hath Sep-

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ing instances from borderline cases. Even *The Divine Comedy*, which most readers would assume to be the greatest Western example of allegory, seemed to Coleridge, and has more recently been

tember" (*New Republic*, Dec. 6, 1943). Spencer showed that the New Criticism, while it attacked allegory in theory, still used the mode in practice, by conscientiously over-reading the text.

Equally revealing are some entries in a *Church Times* contest for absurdly serious interpretations. The contest was entitled "Hidden Meaning." The readings were to be based on the children's stories of Beatrix Potter. I give five of these parodies, in part or in full.

On Beatrix Potter's *Tale of Johnny Town Mouse*: "The resignation of both the principals to their own lot, and their half-hearted sampling of each other's, mark this as a sharp study in organized social frustration, of the little man subject to gigantic and compulsive forces. Consider the hamper. . . . The little man may choose to move by it from one pattern of frustration to another: by boarding it he *votes*—here we may note that the hamper 'goes to the country': thereafter he is the prisoner of his decision, taking no part in shaping events until the next arbitrary decision to send the hamper to him. . . ."

Another Beatrix Potter fable for children, concerning Jeremy Fisher, is called "a deeply mystical allegory which, reduced to its simplest terms, resolves itself into an arresting tract against reliance upon the material. The dominant motif concerns obsession with a physical element, and for Freudians it is significant that this recalls the environment of the embryo."

An even more scholastic reading was made of *The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher*: "It reflects sadly on modern scholarship that the true anthropological significance of this work should not have been more widely recognized. To those attuned to the overtones of narrative, this is clearly yet another restatement of the myth of the Fisher King, whose immolation and subsequent rebirth restores fertility to an otherwise waste land; the processes of sacrifice and renewal being here represented by ingestion and regurgitation.

"In the close web of allusion and cultural cross-reference that forms the fabric of the text, the names even of the guests at the final dinner (a thinly-disguised vegetation ceremony) have deep symbolic significance. 'Sir Isaac Newton' sets the myth in its proper context of the space-time continuum; while Mr. Alderman Ptolemy Tortoise, in his predilection for salad, is a clear link with Ancient Egyptian fertility rites.

"Serious students would do well to consult the recently published *Der Weltschmerz und die Frau Potter*, by Professor Ludwig Schwartz-Metterklume (Leipzig: 1905). . . ."

On *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*: "The focal point in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* is the Woodshed, which, as all psychologists know, is

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shown by Auerbach, to be a quasi-allegorical work.¹⁷ With such a major example in mind one cannot help wondering if borderline cases are not going to be the norm.

the universally accepted symbol of the Fascination of Evil. With a few deft strokes the authoress sets the scene, and almost at once the dreadful Woodshed begins to exert its magnetic spell. The Primrose Path, while not directly mentioned in the text, is delicately suggested in the superb illustrations. Half unaware, the heroine is drawn onward at an accelerating pace, which develops from an initial waddle, through a run, into precipitate flight. This is true insight.

“So much for the dynamic angle. From the static angle, the approach to the Woodshed is handled with equal mastery. Always by the Woodshed is the Fox (Deception, the invariable concomitant of Evil), and concealing the Fox are the beautiful Fox-gloves. As the Bard said, ‘O, what a goodly outside Falsehood hath!’”

On *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*: “This poignant allegory pinpoints the tragic dilemma of adolescence. Youth emerges from its safe childhood (the underground burrow) to choose between dull respectability and the mysterious forbidden territory, the unlawful El Dorado—Mr. McGregor’s garden!

“By a brilliant stroke Miss Potter epitomises her hero’s descent into crime, as he squeezes *under* the gate. At first the rewards come easily, and lettuce-gorged Youth sheds his inhibitions (coat and shoes), until he comes face to face with his great Foe, the destroyer of his father and the enemy of all his tribe.

“Dramatically the atmosphere changes. The fatal Garden, easy to enter, is hard to escape from. An undercurrent of sadism suggested earlier in the sinister ‘made into a pie,’ becomes explicit in the terrors of the rake, the sieve and the waiting cat.

“While certainly not light reading, this grim book with its ruthless message can be recommended to readers over twenty-one.”

¹⁷ Coleridge, *Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (London, 1936), 151: “The Divina Commedia is a system of moral, political, and theological truths, with arbitrary personal exemplifications, which are not, in my opinion, allegorical. I do not even feel convinced that the punishments in the Inferno are strictly allegorical. I rather take them to have been in Dante’s mind quasi-allegorical, or conceived in analogy to pure allegory.” The *Miscellaneous Criticism* is sprinkled with commentary on the nature of allegory, not only with respect to major allegorists like Bunyan, Dante, and Spenser, but also with borderline authors like Rabelais, Sterne, and Defoe. Coleridge’s “quasi-allegorical” reading is confirmed by Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, tr. Ralph Manheim (Chicago, 1961).

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Besides the scope of the literature involved, certain areas of critical disagreement may be mentioned, because they suggest the main trouble we have to contend with: our psychological and linguistic uncertainty as to what is going on when language is used figuratively. Figurative language is not understood at the present time in any final way. The tortuous subtlety of William Empson and Kenneth Burke, both of them major critics, suggests that no simple formulas are possible, given our limited knowledge of the psychology of speech.¹⁸ Terms like “tenor” and “vehicle” have been helpful, but are only labels.¹⁹ I. A. Richards’ recent interest in communication theory and in scientific pedagogy has not carried his revolutionary notions of metaphor much beyond the earlier position reached in *Practical Criticism* and *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Another important treatise, Rosemond Tuve’s *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, gave the study of rhetoric a close historical analysis, but in spite of references to certain modern poets, Tuve remained essentially concerned with a single period, the Renaissance.²⁰ In his *Fearful Symmetry* Northrop Frye displayed what may be the most brilliant exercise of allegorical interpretation on record, but about this particular

¹⁸Empson would place allegory in his third type, in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1930; reprinted New York, 1955). Kenneth Burke’s discussions of allegory are mainly concerned with its political uses, e.g., in Part III of *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York, 1950), entitled “Order.” Like Empson, Burke is interested in “symbolic action” as a means of coping with social and political tensions.

¹⁹“Tenor” and “vehicle” were introduced by I. A. Richards in his lectures, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London, 1936). See his recent *Speculative Instruments* (Chicago, 1955), for examples of his interest in pedagogic, communication problems (translation, for example). See Max Black on Richards’ Terminology: *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, 1962), ch. iii, “Metaphor.”

²⁰Miss Tuve’s *casus belli* was the misunderstanding in twentieth-century criticism of the rhetorical techniques presupposed by poets like Donne, Drayton, and Herbert. Her chief object of study was “Renaissance Poetics,” revealed in both the theory and practice of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period.

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procedure his theoretical views were not, I think, greatly advanced in the even more remarkable *Anatomy of Criticism*.²¹ There Frye observed that allegory is a type of thematic “counterpoint,” encountered most often in romances, and that a high degree of thematic content in any piece of literature probably implies allegorical techniques at work.²² Given this rather broad conception of the term, theory would have been left in an impressionist stage, had not Edwin Honig’s general treatise, *Dark Conceit*, laid down some of the major lines of inquiry.²³ This book is to my knowledge the pioneer work on the subject in modern times. My own disagreements with it are a matter of some detail, and where they are large-scale disagreements, I prefer to leave them to a more objective comparison than my own. I had the pleasure of attending Mr. Honig’s lectures on the subject of allegory given during the evolution of *Dark Conceit*, and I was doubtless influenced by them in ways that I cannot now see. Honig’s book seems to me to be concerned chiefly with accounting for the *creative* aspects of allegory. Honig wants to show how allegory comes into being, what are the cultural determinants *from without*. My own approach, despite the chapter I devote to the psycho-

²¹ Frye, on allegory: *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton, 1947), 115–117 and the final chapter, “The Valley of Vision”; also *Anatomy of Criticism*, 89–92; “The Typology of *Paradise Regained*,” *Modern Philology*, LIII, 227–238; “Notes for a Commentary on *Milton*,” in *The Divine Vision*, ed. V. de Sola Pinto (London, 1957).

²² Frye, *Anatomy*, 90. The summary treatment of the whole range of allegory, pp. 89–92, is a marvel of compactness, and perhaps therefore criticism is unfair.

²³ Honig, *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory* (Evanston, 1959). I have been unable to consult Abraham Bezankis, “An Introduction to the Problem of Allegory in Literary Criticism” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1955). Among briefer general accounts, see “The Allegorical Method,” in Rex Warner, *The Cult of Power* (London, 1946); Edward Bloom, “The Allegorical Principle,” *Journal of English Literary History* (hereafter abbreviated as *ELH*), XVIII (1951), 163–190. C. S. Lewis devotes a chapter to this general subject in *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1936), 44–111, where he emphasizes the *psychomachia*. Lewis is himself the author of several fables, *That Hideous Strength*, *Perelandra*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

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analytic theory of allegory, is less genetic, and more formal. I am not so much concerned with individual authors or individual periods as with the form that any given allegory will be likely to present to a sophisticated reader, regardless of the ways by which it came into being. In that sense I am attempting an account rather unlike *Dark Conceit*.

While there is still need for an analysis of the figurative nature of allegory in rhetorical terms, there are certain special historical confusions that can be avoided if we formulate a theory cutting across historical lines. The first of these is the controversy over the difference between “allegory” and “symbol.” This unhappy controversy, which begins with Goethe’s distinction between the two terms, has had its fair share of critical attention.²⁴ It is a primarily historical matter, since it concerns romantic conceptions of the mind, and of “imagination” in particular. The psychology of the imagination would have to be dealt with in any full historical treatment of the development of allegorical literature. Goethe’s concern with the allegory-symbol distinction has especial value in the light of his evolving attitudes toward the Faust legend, and yet, though such origins of modern critical theory have historical interest, they rather lead us to reconsider the means we shall take to describe allegory for present-day students of literature. As critics, we of the twentieth century come out of a climate, well described by M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, in which there is a gradual sophistication of the psychological part of critical theory.²⁵ We live in an age of

²⁴René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism* (New Haven, 1955), I, 200; also Honig, *Dark Conceit*, 39–50. Goethe, *Maximen*, as tr. by Wellek (I, 211), says: “There is a great difference, whether the poet seeks the particular for the general or sees the general in the particular. From the first procedure arises allegory, where the particular serves only as an example of the general; the second procedure, however, is really the nature of poetry: it expresses something particular, without thinking of the general or pointing to it.

“True symbolism is where the particular represents the more general, not as a dream or a symbol, but as a living momentary revelation of the Inscrutable.”

²⁵With the development of psychology into the fields of Gestalt, behaviorist, and psychoanalytic theory, the concept of “imagination” has been overlaid by

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psychological and psychoanalytic speculation, and we need to return periodically to earlier stages of that speculation, where perhaps we can find the starting point for both our more profitable and our more dubious explorings. Perhaps a closer attention to the history of nineteenth-century criticism would prevent unfortunate oversimplifications such as are likely when we speak loosely of concepts like the “romantic imagination” or the “*symbolisme*” of the French poets. The word “symbol” in particular has become a banner for confusion, since it lends itself to a falsely evaluative function whenever it is used to mean “good” (“symbolic”) poetry as opposed to “bad” (“allegorical”) poetry, and in this way it clouds distinctions that are already difficult enough to make.

The same objection against a leveling critical language may be made against a more recent tendency to praise “myth” at the expense of allegory. Thus, a critic may say of *The Castle* or *The Trial* or *The Metamorphosis* that they are “mythic,” and then proceed to read them, perhaps employing Freudian symbols, as the purest sort of allegory. The basis of “myth criticism” is a search for certain recurrent archetypal patterns (e.g., the dragon-slaying myth) at the heart of stories which would present a more complex appearance to another critic who did not think in terms of archetypes.²⁶ The arche-

complicating factors. I. A. Richards is the chief theorist to follow Coleridgean leads; M. H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953) is chiefly historical.

²⁶ See W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1957). There is to be a chapter on “myth criticism” in Wellek's forthcoming sequel to Volume II of his *A History of Modern Criticism*. The major influence on these critics is Carl Jung, whose theory of archetypes may be found summarized in Jolande Jacobi, *Complex/Archetype/Symbol*, tr. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1959). Typical Jungian studies are Jung, “The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious,” in *Collected Works*, IX (New York, 1952–1961); “The Paradigm of the Unicorn,” *ibid.*, XII; with Karl Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, tr. R.F.C. Hull (New York, 1949). Also, Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (New York, 1955), and *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (New York, 1954); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York, 1949). These works lean away from literary criticism, toward anthro-

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typal pattern is the form in which the deepest psychic significance of the hero's or heroine's action is expressed. Probably such irreducible patterns are present in storytelling of all kinds.²⁷ But a curious development takes place in "myth criticism." What began as unprejudiced description in terms of archetypes becomes a valuation of only those works where the archetypes are clearly discernible. When the critic uses the word "mythic" to describe Kafka or Faulkner, we need to be sure it is not a covert term of praise. It seems to be descriptive, but in fact it often evaluates. The term "myth," when used in this way, seems to be the heir of "symbol" in the older controversy over allegory and symbol. It has simply become richer in connotations, owing to its significance for cultural anthropology. What was localized in time and space as a pregnant moment, under the Goethean rubric of Symbol, may now be universalized as a manifestation of a supposed "collective unconscious." We have indeed to go back one stage before the advent of Myth on the critical scene.

Coleridge makes a natural starting point for an analysis of allegorical practice, since he is at the center of the disputation which has so obscured the problem.

For Coleridge the definition of allegory was an important matter because it allowed him once again to make the distinction between "organic" and "mechanic" form,²⁸ and to provide a major instance

pology. They tend to collapse literary distinctions, but are extremely suggestive for the study of allegory as well as myth. Less psychoanalytic, more clearly literary in emphasis is Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination* (London, 1934; reprinted New York, 1958).

²⁷ See *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. T. A. Seboek (Bloomington, 1958), chapters by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Lord Raglan, Stanley Edgar Hyman, and Stith Thompson, on mythic patterns. Also the pioneer work of Lord Raglan, *The Hero* (London, 1936; reprinted New York, 1956); and Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Svatava Pirkova-Jacobson, tr. Laurence Scott (Bloomington, 1958). The latter is a classic of Russian "formalist" criticism.

²⁸ Coleridge, "Lectures on Shakespeare," "Recapitulation, and Summary of the Characteristics of Shakespeare's Dramas," in S. T. Coleridge, *Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists* (Everyman

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of literature created out of a compromising relationship between the imagination and the logical powers of reason.²⁹ Such a compromise could not give rise to the highest art, but it was precisely what was required for that mixture of theme and image we call allegory. Coleridge made his criticism of allegory implicit in his distinction between symbol and allegory, as well as in his definition of allegory. To take the distinction first:

The Symbolical cannot perhaps be better defined in distinction from the Allegorical, than that it is always itself a part of that, of the whole of which it is representative.—“Here comes a sail,”—(that is a ship) is a symbolical expression. “Behold our lion!” when we speak of some gallant soldier, is allegorical. Of most

ed., London, 1907), 46: “The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material;—as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fulness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form.” What Coleridge says of mechanic form is also implied by the theory of *figura* and *impresa*. Erich Auerbach, “*Figura*,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (New York, 1959), 13: “It should be borne in mind that Varro, like all Latin authors who were not specialists in philosophy endowed with an exact terminology, used *figura* and *forma* interchangeably, in the general sense of form. Strictly speaking, *forma* meant ‘mold,’ French ‘*moule*,’ and was related to *figura* as the hollow form to the plastic shape that issues from it.” On *impresa*, see Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth Century Imagery* (London, 1939), I, ch. i, “Emblem, Device, Epigram, Conceit,” and the Appendix, “Emblems and Devices in Literature.”

²⁹“Now an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a symbol . . . is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative. The other are but empty echoes which the fancy arbitrarily associates with apparitions of matter, less beautiful but not less shadowy than the sloping orchard or hill-side pasture seen in the transparent lake below” (Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd [New York, 1875], 437–438).

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importance to our present subject is this point, that the latter (allegory) cannot be other than spoken consciously;—whereas in the former (the symbol) it is very possible that the general truth may be unconsciously in the writer’s mind during the construction of the symbol; and it proves itself by being produced out of his own mind,—as the Don Quixote out of the perfectly sane mind of Cervantes, and not by outward observation or historically. The advantage of symbolic writing over allegory is, that it presumes no disjunction of faculties, but simple dominance.³⁰

By identifying Symbol with synecdoche, Coleridge is assuming a sort of *participation mystique*³¹ of the Symbol with the idea symbolized. The Symbol is furthermore given directly in the act of perceiving the ship. With Symbol the mind perceives the rational order of

³⁰ *Misc. Crit.*, 29. Coleridge here echoes the Goethean maxim: “True symbolism is where the particular represents the more general, not as a dream or a shadow, but as a living momentary revelation of the Inscrutable” (quoted by Wellek, *History*, I, 211). Coleridge likewise follows the Goethean distinction between allegory and symbol: “Allegory changes a phenomenon into a concept, a concept into an image, but in such a way that the concept is still limited and completely kept and held in the image and expressed by it (whereas symbolism) changes the phenomenon into the idea, the idea into the Image, in such a way that the idea remains always infinitely active and unapproachable in the image, and will remain inexpressible even though expressed in all languages.” The final point here made is that allegory is a kind of translatable jargon, whereas symbol is a universal language impervious to local limitations. One cannot, in Goethe’s sense, “translate” the Cross, since by itself this symbol is supralinguistic.

³¹ The term, now somewhat questioned by anthropologists, is Lévy-Bruhl’s. See his *L’Ame primitive* (Paris, 1927); also his *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Paris, 1910). Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, tr. F. Hopman (New York, 1954), 205: “All realism, in the medieval sense, leads to anthropomorphism. Having attributed a real existence to an idea, the mind wants to see this idea alive, and can only effect this by personifying it. In this way allegory is born. It is not the same thing as symbolism. Symbolism expresses a mysterious connection between two ideas, allegory gives a visible form to the conception of such a connection. Symbolism is a very profound function of the mind, allegory is a superficial one. It aids symbolic thought to express itself, but endangers it at the same time by substituting a figure for a living idea. The force of the symbol is easily lost in the allegory. So allegory in itself implies from the outset normalizing, projecting on a surface, crystallizing.”

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things directly, by an “unmediated vision,”³² without any logical extrapolation from the phenomena of our material world, whereas in allegory there is always (as Coleridge sees it) an attempt to categorize logical orders first, and fit them to convenient phenomena second, to set forth ideal systems first, and illustrate them second. This latter Platonic idea-image relationship can exist only when one is conscious of the philosophic status of the ideas one is conceiving. One need not necessarily be aware of one’s own private motives in constructing such ideal systems, but one does need to have a conscious, highly organized view of the interrelationships that bind the system into a unity. Coleridge emphasized the unconsciousness of the Symbolic process in a way that tempts a Freudian reinterpretation of his view.³³ Without actually saying that Symbol is an expression of the Freudian *Unconscious*—and therefore equivalent to dream symbol—we could speculate about Coleridge’s idea of the “disjunction of the faculties,” since in allegory there is clearly a disjunction of meanings. *Allegoria* manifestly has two or more levels of meaning, and the apprehension of these must require at least two attitudes of mind. When, for example, one witnessed a court masque with decor by Inigo Jones, one no doubt lavished considerable attention on the mere ornament of the play, on the costumes, the decor, the dancing, the music, and so on, and to shift from this kind of sensuous world to the world of ideas must have engaged a secondary train of thought. Yet Coleridgean theory goes only so far, and modern approaches will eventually replace it. Whether duplicity of meaning in all allegory follows necessarily from a splitting of *reason* and *imagination* is not a question that modern psychology would pose in Coleridgean terms.

However, Coleridge defined allegory in such a way as to make possible a double approach, a double attention to the surface of

³² See Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke and Valéry* (New Haven, 1954).

³³ M. H. Abrams has shown striking anticipations of Freud in both Hazlitt and John Keble. He quotes Hazlitt: “The imagination, by thus embodying and turning them to shape, gives an obvious relief to the indistinct and importunate cravings of the will” (*Mirror and the Lamp*, 143).

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works and to their psychic effects and significance, by a rigid adherence to both psychological and rhetorical theories.

We may then safely define allegorical writing as the employment of one set of agents and images with actions and accompaniments correspondent, so as to convey, while in disguise, either moral qualities or conceptions of the mind that are not in themselves objects of the senses, or other images, agents, actions, fortunes, and circumstances so that the difference is everywhere presented to the eye or imagination, while the likeness is suggested to the mind; and this connectedly, so that the parts combine to form a consistent whole.³⁴

Although in every case the terms are elaborated, and sometimes redefined, each chapter of the following discussion is devoted to a major element mentioned in this definition. Chapter 1 considers the central focus of narrative and drama, their agents, the people they show in movement. Chapter 2 considers the textural aspect of allegory, its tapestried surface of images. The vocabulary employed in these and subsequent chapters comes from various sources. The notion of the agent as daemon comes from comparative religion and from the history of Christianity.³⁵ (Frye has recently written of daemonic agency in his *Anatomy of Criticism*.)³⁶ The notion of

³⁴ Coleridge, *Misc. Crit.*, 30. We have on record two statements of this definition, the one quoted and another which accounts less well for the presumed mechanical effect of allegory, since it reverses the functions of mind and imagination (“with a likeness to the imagination but with a difference to the understanding”).

³⁵ On Defoe’s fabulous, daemonic style, see Coleridge, *Misc. Crit.*, 194. Coleridge regarded both *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and *Tristram Shandy* as partially if not mainly allegorical (“All Rabelais’ personages are phantasmagoric allegories, but Panurge above all”). He saw a tendency of certain narratives to become less allegorical as their agents became “too strongly individualized.” “This is often felt in the *Pilgrim’s Progress* where the characters are real persons with nick names” (*Misc. Crit.*, 33).

³⁶ See Frye, *Anatomy*, 147–150, on “demonic imagery.” Frye takes “demonic” in its standard, late-Christian sense of “diabolic.” I prefer a neutral definition, to include angelic powers

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kosmos, used for the allegorical image, does not come from the history of science, but from ancient rhetoric; I have tried to restore its original, very useful meaning. The term has not been much used for practical criticism, but it would form a bridge between anthropology (e.g., Mircea Eliade) and criticism (the New Critics or the historical scholarship of Rosemond Tuve). Chapter 3 considers action under the aspect of ritual, a concept validated chiefly in comparative religion and, rather differently, in psychoanalysis. Both views of ritual are relevant, and are employed. Further, ritual as a term for a “symbolic action” has become established in the criticism of Kenneth Burke. Since all stories are unified on some basis of probability or necessity, that is, according to some type of causal system, chapter 4 takes up this problem and employs the Frazerian anthropological concept of contagious and sympathetic magic to explain the causal sequences underlying events in allegories. Finally, to describe the thematic dualism of levels that Coleridge referred to as a “disguise,” chapter 5 invokes the psychoanalytic concept of ambivalence. But to approach this concept more easily I have related the “disjunction of the faculties” to that conflict of mind which Schiller and Kant found inherent in the sublime. Chapter 6 uses psychoanalytic theory to show the mental basis of allegory. Chapter 7 broaches the ultimate problem of aesthetic value and suggests both the limitations and the advantages of the mode. It shows how allegorists flex an inherently rigid control of intention, how by means of irony and digressive commentary they alleviate the burden of pure ritual, and we get what might be called a “good” literature.

The terms of my description may suggest that allegory is closely identified with religious ritual and symbolism. This is not an accident. As C. S. Lewis has remarked, “it would appear that all allegories whatever are likely to seem Catholic to the general reader, and this phenomenon is worth investigation.”³⁷ Precisely this investigation

³⁷ *Allegory of Love*, 322. My subsequent argument will show precisely why this is so, on the grounds that allegory makes an excess of a behavior frequent enough

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has been one of my aims. Even without taking a psychoanalytic view, one can show the truth of Lewis' assertion; but psychoanalysis gives a strong reinforcement to it, in that we can show the close similarity between allegorical forms and so-called compulsive rituals,³⁸ and these rituals in turn are analogues to religious rituals. The various analogies that can be drawn between religious, literary, and psychoanalytically observed phenomena all point to the oldest idea about allegory, that it is a human reconstitution of divinely inspired messages, a revealed transcendental language which tries to preserve the remoteness of a properly veiled godhead.³⁹ To reach this traditional conclusion, however, a nonmetaphysical line of argument seems the best initial course, and that is the course I have followed. I have stayed away from the metaphysics of the subject. I have also stayed away from the history and theory of biblical exegesis because, in the words of a friend, "Biblical exegesis has as its aim and basis of argument the historical and theological defense of the Bible as the revealed word of God—in other words, a concern that is tangential to the scope of the present investigation." This is not to say that traditional readings of the prophetic books of the Old Testament and of the Book of Revelation are not relevant to the study of poems

in Catholic piety: "When Catholicism goes bad it becomes the world-old, world-wide *religio* of amulets and holy places and priestcraft" (Lewis, *Allegory*, 323).

³⁸ See below, Chapter 6, *passim*.

³⁹ The intermediaries in this process of divine revelation were spirits, the good and bad daemons who led or misled—Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, ed. J. J. Denonain (Cambridge, 1955), sec. 31, 42: "I doe thinke that many mysteries ascribed to our owne inventions have bene the courteous revelations of Spirits; for those noble essences in heaven beare a friendly regard unto their fellow natures on earth; and therefore beleeve that those many prodigies and ominous prognostickes, which forerun the ruines of States, Princes, and private persons, are the charitable premonitions of good Angels, which more carelesse enquiries terme but the effects of chance and nature." On the doctrine of inspiration, see also R.P.C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (London, 1959), ch. vii; also, H. W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1946), 160–198; John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion: Studies in the Life of Jeremiah* (1922; reprinted Cambridge, 1961), ch. x.

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like *The Divine Comedy* or *Piers Plowman* or *The Faerie Queene*;⁴⁰ indeed the conclusion of my remarks on value and function will dwell on the apocalyptic, visionary moments into which “mere allegory” sometimes emerges. The reader may, however, ask how often this emergence occurs. When an allegory becomes purely visionary, when for example *The Pilgrim’s Progress* shows us the Heavenly City, it does so *after* a struggle to reach that goal. The stage prior to final vision seems to be qualitatively unlike that final vision; the latter is a moment of liberation. The former is a sequence of difficult labors, often taking the form of the hero’s enslavement to a fatal destiny. The *psychomachia* and the progress are narrative images of this struggle. They are battles for, and journeys toward, the final liberation of the hero. If a temporary liberation occurs along the way, it is but the precursor of one final victory. If the poet wishes to show evil triumphing, he can take a totally ironic attitude toward good and evil; if the hero is a Jonathan Wild, he also journeys toward an apocalypse, but of death instead of rebirth.

Considered also as a nonmetaphysical semantic device, whether leading to apocalypse or not, allegory likewise appears to express conflict between rival authorities, as in times of political oppression we may get “Aesop-language” to avoid censorship of dissident thought. At the heart of any allegory will be found this conflict of authorities. One ideal will be pitted against another, its opposite: thus the familiar propagandist function of the mode, thus the conservative satirical function, thus the didactic function. The mode is hierarchical in essence, owing not only to its use of traditional

⁴⁰Bishop Hurd, whose criticism of Spenser attempts to justify his “Gothic” forms, is also author of *An Introduction to the Study of the Prophecies concerning the Christian Church, and, in Particular, concerning the Church of Papal Rome, in Twelve Sermons* (2d ed., London, 1772). This series of sermons not only sets forth the theological presumptions on which true prophecy is based, but in Sermons IX–XI gives a description of the “prophetic style.” Here, as with Spenserian criticism, Hurd is a somewhat romantic theorist, in that his remarks would sanction authors like Blake, Young, and Shelley.

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imageries which are arranged in systems of “correspondences,” but furthermore because all hierarchies imply a chain of command, of *order* in the secondary sense that is meant when we say “the general *ordered* his officers to command their *subordinates*.” Hierarchy is never simply a system giving people their “proper place”; it goes further and tells them what their legitimate *powers* are. Any hierarchy is bound to elicit sharp emotive responses toward these powers. We are therefore able to describe the mode from a dynamic point of view. Allegories are far less often the dull systems that they are reputed to be than they are symbolic power struggles. If they are often rigid, muscle-bound structures, that follows from their involvement with authoritarian conflict. If they are abstract, harsh, mechanistic, and remote from everyday life, that may sometimes answer a genuine need. When a people is being lulled into inaction by the routine of daily life, so as to forget all higher aspirations, an author perhaps does well to present behavior in a grotesque, abstract caricature. In such a way he may arouse a general self-criticism, and the method will be justified.

Both this satirical criticism and the apocalyptic escape into an infinite space and time tend toward high human goals. In both cases allegory is serving major social and spiritual needs. When we add to these the functions of education (the didactic strain) and entertainment (the riddling or romantic strains), we have a modality of symbolism which we must respect. Allegory, as I have tried to define it, seems to be a many-sided phenomenon. Its overall purposes are capable of many minor variations. I have tried to bring out these overall purposes, yet without damaging the minor subtleties. What follows is therefore in the nature of a mapping expedition, for which I have, in my notes, kept a running journal or sketchbook of the day’s events. The notes are not absolutely necessary to the overall map, but they will, I hope, usefully complement it with references to old and new scholarly works.