

A RETROSPECTIVE FORWARD: INTERPRETATION, ALLEGORY, AND HISTORICAL CHANGE

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- i. Interpreting the history of interpretation*
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i. Interpreting the history of interpretation

An ‘insane’ activity, the ‘refuge of unskillfulness’—that is how one Protestant scholar, commenting in the seventeenth century, described allegorical interpretation in some of its most prominent forms.¹ He was not the first to express his disenchantment. A century earlier Luther had called allegory a ‘beautiful harlot who fondles men in such a way that it is impossible for her not to be loved.’ But he announced that he had escaped her embrace: ‘I hate allegories.’² More recently, a German scholar described allegorical interpretation in antiquity as a kind of ‘weed’ proliferating over the intellectual life

¹ For the principles of annotation in this chapter, including references to times of publication and ‘prior versions’ of recent studies, see the introductory note to ‘Works Cited’ at the end of the chapter.

For the Protestant scholar (Sixtinus Amama), see *Annotata ad librum psalmodum* in Pearson et al. 1698, vol. 3, column 668: ‘Fuitque insanum illud studium asyllum imperitiae.’ It is possible to translate *imperitia* as ‘ignorance,’ and the index of the 1698 edition, citing this discussion of allegory, specifically uses the phrase ‘asyllum ignorantiae.’ The term *insanus*, of course, has a range of meanings (not only a ‘medical’ one); compare the reference to ‘madness’ in n. 3 below. An allusion to Amama’s comment in a loose translation appears in Allen 1970, p. 244, although he refers to the 1660 edition of Pearson et al., which as far as I have been able to determine does not include the passage. Amama’s own practice is less hostile to ‘allegory’ than his comment might suggest. See, e.g., his Christological treatment of Psalm 2 in vol. 3, column 12, and compare the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century treatments of the ‘literal’ sense of psalms cited in note 23 below.

² For Luther’s comments, see Allen 1970, p. 240.

of the Roman Empire.³ In a reverie I sometimes imagine myself writing an extended interpretation of the figures of speech by which critics describe allegorical interpretation. But the reverie always ends abruptly with someone protesting that it is 'unskillful,' if not 'insane,' to subject the figurative language of such critics to allegorical interpretation in turn.

Not everyone, of course, has been so critical of allegorical interpretation. Many of the most important commentators in antiquity and the Middle Ages regularly practiced it, and even during the past century, some have argued that it is quite a normal thing for interpreters to do. Admittedly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was rare to find any expression of this attitude, even in the loose use of the term by G.K. Chesterton: 'There can be no doubt among sane men that the critic should be allegorical.'⁴ In the closing decades of the century, however, an increasing number of scholars suggest that allegorical interpretation is a form of critical balance, a way in which individual interpreters and whole communities seek to 'make sense' of old or strange texts in new or familiar circumstances. From this perspective, a host of civilizations developing from the Middle East to western Europe and beyond it have made allegorical interpretation inseparable from their very sense of rationality itself.

Perhaps each of these positions has its point. For the turn to allegorical interpretation repeatedly marks civilizations trying to keep—or in danger of losing—their intellectual and spiritual equilibrium. Already in early antiquity, allegorical interpretation helped to preserve a formative cultural idiom, the discourse of Greek mythology, as belief in that mythology began to fail. By the Hellenistic period, it helped to provide a framework for Greco-Roman philosophic tendencies within a different religion, Judaism, and at nearly the same time, to promote inside Judaism a revolutionary movement toward a new religion, Christianity. In the Middle Ages, it reoriented critical approaches not only to foundational works, but to the world at large, sometimes provoking fundamental conceptual and social crises within the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic communities. By the Renais-

³ See Lamberton 1992, p. 133, where the scholar is not named. Compare the earlier comment of the nineteenth-century scholar August Friedrich Gfrörer on Philo of Alexandria's allegorical orientation: 'It is madness, but there's a method in it'; cited by Ginzberg 1955 (prior version 1901), p. 130.

⁴ See Chesterton 1907, p. xi. I owe this reference to Morton Bloomfield.

sance, it provided radical methods to realign a range of texts and signs from different times and settings into systems of 'universal' knowledge and 'scientific' inquiry. From the Enlightenment to the 'postmodern' period, it has passed from an underlying, sometimes unconscious source of new ideological and imaginative forms into the foreground, even the fashion, of critical analysis.⁵

Yet despite the persistent importance of allegorical interpretation, no one has written a systematic history of it from antiquity to the modern period. There are reasons for this omission. One is the sheer vastness of such a project. To attempt a history of allegorical interpretation in the West would almost be to attempt a history of Western cultural change itself. It would require close acquaintance with over two thousand years of interpretive theory and practice, a host of regions and peoples, and a variety of genres and languages, including Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and the Romance and Germanic languages. Even then there would be pressing practical problems. From antiquity, for example, some of the most important writings of prominent Greek and Christian allegorists have been lost. It has been remarked that of 291 books of commentaries by the prolific Christian interpreter Origen alone, 275 have been lost in their original Greek versions, with little remaining in Latin.⁶ Even from the Renaissance, a number of significant interpretive works have never received contemporary critical editions, with detailed notes, indices, and commentary. As widely influential a text as Vincenzo Cartari's *Imagini de i dei de gli antichi* has acquired a modern edition only during the past decade.⁷ No single scholar could master more than a small portion of such a complex and elusive array of subjects. Yet histories of Western culture, even histories of 'civilization' as a whole, however dated in fashion and deficient in conception, have been attempted. The sheer expanse of allegorical interpretation is not the sole reason for the limits of its investigation.

There is another reason for the lack of such a history, 'internal' to the notion of allegory itself. Allegorical interpretation is not exactly a single 'kind' of interpretation. To engage 'it' seriously is to encounter

⁵ For these developments, see my more extensive account in chapters 2 and 12 below.

⁶ See the assessment of J. Quasten, cited by Runia 1993, p. 172, n. 78.

⁷ See the edition of Auzzas et al. 1996; on early editions of the *Imagini* (the title of which varies in form), see pp. 601-18, with the discussion of Mulryan 1981 about early versions of the work in different languages.

not just a system of beliefs or a set of conceptual ‘norms,’ but a series of critical negotiations. Acts of interpretive allegory are transactions between fluctuating critical communities and formative texts. While these transactions regularly draw upon shared interpretive methods, they are situated in times and places, marked by tensions and polemics, that are specific to each historical community and its developing canon. It thus produces very limited results to try to outline the allegorization of a single text (for example, Jewish Scripture—which for Jews is the principal ‘reading,’ the *Mikra*, but for Christians, only part of the principal reading, and for Moslems, a partial misreading) or to try to isolate a single ‘form’ of interpretation (for example, cosmological, or psychological, or ethical analysis). The complexity of the problem is dramatized when allegorical interpreters expressly deny to others a ‘form’ of interpretation that they apparently defend for themselves. When the classical philologist Johannes Geffcken composed an encyclopedia article near the beginning of the twentieth century on ‘Allegory, Allegorical Interpretation’ (devoted almost exclusively to antiquity), he found himself ‘bewildered’ by an antique ‘confusion of terms’; early Christian Apologists opposed pagan allegory but themselves used allegorical interpretation, while the pagan Celsus attacked Christian allegory yet was ‘an allegorist himself.’ For Geffcken, in any case, allegorical interpretation betrayed a deeper confusion about texts. Both parties, he complained, ‘Greeks as well as Christians, tread the same erroneous path.’⁸

This expression of displeasure suggests a third reason limiting the study of allegorical interpretation. For much of the past several centuries, such interpretation has frequently been approached with conspicuous unease. In part this unease is the result of Reformation and Romantic arguments that ‘allegory’ violates the historical particularity and imaginative integrity of texts. By the nineteenth century, when philologists and other historians were applying to a host of subjects massive efforts of historical ‘recovery,’ allegorical interpretation was frequently conceived as a procedure alien to the principles of proper philology itself. Alternative approaches to historical recovery in post-Romantic ‘hermeneutics,’ emphasizing the effort to understand the conditions under which a text was created, found allegory scarcely less alien a procedure. Dilthey considered it an apologetic device, ‘an art as indispensable as it is useless.’⁹ But beyond its uneasy recep-

⁸ See Geffcken 1908, p. 330.

⁹ See Heinemann 1981 (prior version 1950–1), p. 248.

tion in recent centuries, the very notion of *allēgoria*—a disparity between the apparent sense of speaking (Greek *agoreuein*) and some ‘other’ sense (Greek *allos*)—has long implied a certain dissonance, even for those who have endorsed it. The *alieniloquium* (‘other-speaking’), Isidore of Seville called it in his seventh-century Latin, and long afterwards, the notion of *alienus*, the ‘other,’ recurs explicitly in the definitions of allegorical interpreters.¹⁰ Even today, when it has become fashionable again to speak of the ‘other,’ to *encounter* it in allegorical interpretation remains somewhat jolting. Not everyone will be persuaded by the Hellenistic Jewish exegete Philo that the biblical injunction not to eat the fruit of trees for three years (Leviticus 19:23) suggests that the fruit of instruction remains intact throughout the threefold division of time into past, present, and future.¹¹ Nor will everyone be convinced by the early medieval Christian mythographer Fulgentius that the shipwreck at the opening of the *Aeneid* signifies the dangers of childbirth.¹² Such readers may sympathize with a remark made already in antiquity by Basil the Great while interpreting Genesis, a text that by his time had been extensively allegorized. ‘I know the laws of allegory,’ he sighed, but ‘for me, grass is grass.’¹³ Part of the difficulty of assessing allegorical interpretation is that such an assessment is itself an interpretive act, inescapably situated—comfortably or uncomfortably—in the very history it seeks to assess.

ii. *Perceptions of the past over a generation ago*

This suggests that any critique of allegorical interpretation is also an implicit commentary on the critic’s own interpretive positions. To put those positions in perspective, it might be helpful to compare attitudes toward the subject over a generation ago with more recent points of view. If someone writing prior to one of the conspicuous turning points in the development of much recent criticism, the late

¹⁰ For Isidore, see Whitman 1987, p. 266. Compare the twelfth-century interpreter of Christian Scripture, Hugh of St. Victor, on *alieniloquium* (cited on the same page); the fourteenth-century mythographer Boccaccio on what is ‘alien’ or ‘different,’ cited in Allen 1970, p. 217; and the sixteenth-century Reformation theologian William Tyndale on ‘strange speaking,’ cited in Allen, p. 242. More generally, see Whitman 1981, p. 63.

¹¹ See Philo, *De Plantatione* 27, 113–16, pp. 270–3 in the translation of Colson and Whitaker 1930.

¹² See Fulgentius, trans. Whitbread 1971, p. 125.

¹³ See Horbury 1988, p. 770.

1960s, had tried to construct an outline of allegorical interpretation from antiquity to the modern period—as far as I can tell, no one did try—how would the analysis have proceeded?

Though an analysis in the mid-1960s ('extending' as far as 1967) would have been able to draw upon a number of detailed studies exploring diverse aspects of allegorical interpretation in different periods, it would have been extremely difficult to integrate this material. Perhaps something of the difficulty can be suggested by a select list of some of the principal works then available, grouped according to broad categories and arranged within those categories according to the successive historical periods (for example, antiquity, the Middle Ages) on which they concentrate. In several cases only brief forms of the original titles with their initial publication dates are given here. The list of 'Works Cited' at the end of this chapter provides information about dates and titles (for example, English translations) of some later versions.

On the allegorical interpretation of early mythology and philosophy, fundamental studies by 1967 included Félix Buffière, *Les Mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque* (1956), Jean Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie: les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes* (1958), a range of works from the 1930s to the 1960s by Pierre Courcelle, among them 'Les pères de l'église devant les enfers virgiliens' (1955) and *La Consolation de philosophie dans la tradition littéraire* (1967), a series of articles from the 1950s and 1960s by Édouard Jauneau (later collected in his '*Lectio philosophorum*' [1973]), including 'L'Usage de la notion d'*integumentum* à travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches' (1957), Jean Seznec, *La Survivance des dieux antiques* (1940), Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958), and Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (1959).

On the allegorization of Christian Scripture, basic analyses and overviews included Erich Auerbach, 'Figura' (1938), Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (1956), Jean Daniélou, *Sacramentum futuri: Études sur les origines de la typologie biblique* (1950), Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* (1959–64), Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (1940), M.-D. Chenu, *La théologie au douzième siècle* (1957), A.C. Charity, *Events and Their Afterlife* (1966), Gerhard Ebeling, 'Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutik' (1951), S.L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (1963), Robert M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation*

of the Bible (1965), and James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., eds., *The New Hermeneutic* (1964).

On allegory in Jewish and Islamic interpretation, important studies included Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo* (1947), Isaak Heinemann, 'Altjüdische Allegoristik' (1936), *The Methods of the Aggadah* (1949, Hebrew), and 'Die wissenschaftliche Allegoristik des jüdischen Mittelalters' (1950–1), Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koran-auslegung* (1920), Henry Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire* (1952–4) and *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (1964), George F. Hourani's introduction to *Averroes: On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* (1961), Julius Guttman, *Die Philosophie des Judentums* (1933), Leo Strauss, 'The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*' (1941), Shlomo Pines's introduction to his translation of *The Guide of the Perplexed* (1963), and Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941) and 'The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism' (1956).

Finally, on critical theories of allegory, valuable discussions included Reinhart Hahn, *Die Allegorie in der antiken Rhetorik* (1967), Friedrich Ohly, 'Vom geistigen Sinn des Wortes im Mittelalter' (1958–9), Johan Chydenius, *The Theory of Medieval Symbolism* (1960), Robert L. Montgomery, Jr., 'Allegory and the Incredible Fable: The Italian View from Dante to Tasso' (1966), E.H. Gombrich, 'Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought' (1948), Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950*, vols. 1–2 (1955), Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), and Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (1964).

It should be stressed that many other important studies of these subjects were available by 1967, including works by J. Tate, Hugo Rahner, Simone Viarre, Erwin Panofsky, C. Spicq, R.P.C. Hanson, Herman Hailperin, Edmund Stein, Richard McKeon, Karl Giehlow, and a host of others. The list above only suggests some of the studies that framed the study of allegorical interpretation over a generation ago. Drawing upon such studies, an outline in the mid-1960s might have proceeded along something like the following lines.

1. Allegorical interpretation begins in Greek antiquity with the philosophic interpretation of Homer and Hesiod during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. Interpretation of this kind aims to give a 'scientific' or 'ethical' rationale to mythological stories. With Stoic analysis of the Hellenistic period, ranging from philosophers such as

Chrysippus to the first-century-C.E. commentator Cornutus, allegorical interpretation develops into a sweeping transformation of mythological figures into physical or moral principles. By late antiquity, Neoplatonic interpreters such as Porphyry and Proclus are giving a more 'spiritualized' or 'mystical' reading to mythological texts, treating them as accounts of the passage of the soul through different levels of the cosmos.

2. Already in the Hellenistic period, Greek allegorical methods are adapted to the exegesis of Jewish Scripture by philosophically inclined, Hellenized Jews, especially Philo of Alexandria (first century B.C.E. – first century C.E.). More programmatically philosophic than midrashic forms of interpretation developing in the Land of Israel, these Alexandrian methods are in turn adapted to the Christian Bible, especially by the 'esoteric' commentators Clement and Origen (second – third centuries C.E.) of the Alexandrian school. In more diffused forms, such strategies are employed by late antique Christians at large, who also use them, at first tentatively, to Christianize pagan mythology and to spiritualize natural phenomena. Whereas allegorical techniques of this kind frequently tend to devalue the literal and historical sense of texts or phenomena, Christians as early as Paul promote a kind of interpretive transfer that preserves the literal sense in the special case of sacred Scripture. In such 'figural' or 'typological' interpretation, even the provisional figures of the 'Old' Testament (as well as their spiritual 'fulfillment' in the New Testament) are treated as historical and foundational. In contrast to the school of Alexandria, the late antique school of Antioch stresses this typological approach to sacred history, which deeply informs the later development of Christian scriptural exegesis.

3. In late antiquity and the Middle Ages, such overlapping strains of interpretation are consolidated by Christians such as Cassian, Gregory the Great, Bede, and later interpreters into 'multilevel' methods of scriptural exegesis. In one of the most popular of these systems, the 'fourfold' method of exegesis, an event like the Exodus can be simultaneously understood 1) 'literally' or 'historically,' as the departure of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land; 2) 'allegorically' (with special reference to the typological fulfillment of 'Old' Testament figures in Christ or the Church), as the redemption of Christ; 3) 'morally,' as the conversion of the soul to grace; and 4) 'anagogically' ('leading up' to the other world), as the passage of the soul to eternal glory. Some late medieval Christian mythographers

even develop multidimensional systems of meaning for pagan mythology, arguing (along the lines of the antique interpreter Euhemerus) that imaginative fables about the gods originate in historical facts about human beings. More broadly, by adapting Neoplatonic notions of cosmic hierarchy from the Pseudo-Dionysius (turn of the fifth and sixth centuries) and other philosophers, medieval Christians transform natural phenomena at large into coordinate expressions of a multi-level cosmos.

4. The movement toward mystical or philosophic 'levels' of interpretation also develops, more controversially, in medieval Islamic treatments of the Koran and medieval Jewish interpretations of Hebrew Scripture. In Islam, early efforts to construe forms of 'inner meaning' (*bāṭin*) in Koranic passages and to associate such an investigation with the reader's inner progression of consciousness emerge in several interpretive settings, including 'non-orthodox,' Shiite circles, and continue long after the Middle Ages. More strictly 'philosophic' interpretations of the Koran in the Islamic community at large repeatedly encounter charges of heterodox reading and receive their last methodical defense in the late twelfth century, with the Aristotelian commentator Averroes. In Judaism, allegorical exegesis, promoted especially by the twelfth- and early thirteenth-century philosopher Maimonides and his immediate followers, circulates extensively during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; among many commentators during the same period, however, this kind of analysis is frequently either sharply opposed as an approach to scriptural understanding or broadly subordinated within fourfold systems of Kabbalistic exegesis. Such Kabbalistic systems finally stress not the expositions of philosophy, but the intuition of divine life in the very words and letters of the scriptural text.

5. By the late Middle Ages, Christians increasingly sense that despite their invocation of the scriptural *historia*, their own multilevel method tends to break the biblical narrative into isolated passages of schematic analysis. Countering this tendency are a number of Christian scholastics from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, including Andrew of St. Victor and Nicholas of Lyra. Drawing upon Jewish exegesis of scriptural history and upon Aristotelian critiques of ambivalent language, this late medieval scholastic movement gradually redirects interest to the historical continuities of the literal sense. Within the late medieval Jewish community, even the most wide-ranging philosophic or Kabbalistic speculation rarely involves a denial of the

literal sense of biblical history or the legal specifications of Scripture, and during this period and long after it the study of Jewish law (*halakhah*) remains central to Jewish intellectual and institutional life.

6. Late medieval Christian concerns about the allegorization of Scripture anticipate sixteenth- and seventeenth-century critiques in the Protestant Reformation. Reformers such as Luther broadly repudiate 'allegory' according to the fourfold method and invoke a 'simple' or 'literal' sense of Christian Scripture, the spiritual dimensions of which become increasingly clear over time. From this perspective, typological significance itself belongs to a single meaning that develops over the continuum of history.

7. Allegorical interpretation continues to flourish in the Renaissance treatment of ancient mythology, culminating in the vast, mid-sixteenth-century mythographic encyclopedias of Giraldi, Conti, and Cartari. This interpretive movement overlaps with iconographic programs for displaying and decoding conspicuously allusive images, ranging from the enigmatic pictograms of hieroglyphics to the intricate designs of emblems. Even in the treatment of non-sacred texts and images, however, counterstrains are developing. The sixteenth-century humanist revival of Aristotle's *Poetics* increasingly inclines critical theorists to seek the organizing principles of imaginative plots not in 'allegory,' but in 'credibility,' and related concepts of the conventions of representation tend to qualify Neoplatonic emphases on iconic mystery. Efforts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to specify the ancient origins of myths, either by Euhemerist methods or by the argument that Hebrew Scripture is the source of pagan stories, gradually encourage an early 'historicist' approach to mythology.

8. By the eighteenth century, the Christian Bible is increasingly approached from a 'rationalist' perspective that seeks to explain scriptural narrative not by typological interpretation but by a 'historical-critical' investigation of the text's origins and development. At times such investigations tend to consign biblical stories to the realm of early mythological expression. The study of Greek and Roman mythology itself increasingly turns from allegorical interpretation to 'historicist' and comparative analysis in the work of Fontenelle, Fréret, and later critics who seek to codify the linguistic, anthropological, and social features of 'primitive' beliefs. In literary theory, Neoclassical norms of clarity and propriety tend to reduce mythological allusions and 'allegorical' figures to the status of imaginative ornaments to a poem's rational design.

9. The growing critique of allegory since the late medieval period becomes particularly sharp in the nineteenth century. In Christian biblical study, the movement toward cultural analysis rather than allegorical exposition intensifies, as the historical-critical method expands in range and influence. From a different perspective, a more general 'hermeneutics' promoted by Schleiermacher and others treats understanding itself not as the specification of a text's 'point' but as the reader's own reconstruction of the creative consciousness from which the text emerges. In Romantic literary theory, critics such as Goethe and Coleridge devalue the very term 'allegory,' applying it to a schematic, even arbitrary technique of signification. By contrast, they argue, a 'symbol' substantially belongs to the whole that it evokes; it is not displaced by what it reveals. Similar attitudes inform the study of mythology. For Schelling, a mythological figure is itself inseparable from its overall significance; to allegorize it is to violate its integrity.

10. Though such nineteenth-century views continue well into the twentieth century, strains gradually appear in their theoretical and practical designs. Shortly after the formulation of one of the programs issuing from various 'historical' and 'hermeneutical' investigations of Christian Scripture, Bultmann's proposal to 'demythologize' scriptural narrative, some commentators are suggesting that such 'demythologization' resembles ancient Alexandrian allegorization. In critical theory, Romantic notions of the abiding spiritual value of the 'symbol' come under forceful attack by Benjamin, who counters that 'allegory' exposes the very historical process which disrupts any such effort to unite ephemeral objects with eternal ideas. Benjamin's critique, however, does not circulate widely until considerably after the middle of the twentieth century. More broadly, drawing upon the psychological and anthropological theories of Freud, Jung, and Frazer, critical theorists frequently turn 'symbols' and 'myths' themselves into hidden, explanatory structures underlying texts, a tendency regarded by some critics as too close to allegorization. Certain theorists invoking such latent structures, including Northrop Frye (1957) and Angus Fletcher (1964), argue that 'all' commentary is in some measure 'allegorical,' but by 1967 (the closing date of this composite overview), it is unclear to what degree this claim will be accepted. Despite the apparent devaluation of 'allegory' for centuries, by this date the very destiny of both the term and the kinds of transfer that are assigned to it remains ambiguous.

Admittedly, any effort to reduce 2500 years of interpretive activity to ten brief reference points is almost as risky an enterprise as trying to reduce the regulations of the Bible to ten commandments. It would be possible of course to include other distinctions and developments, to vary the emphases and nuances, and, more broadly, to reconceive the general structure of the analysis. My concern at the moment, however, is not that this outline, projected 'backward' to 1967, is too sketchy, but that it is too 'developed,' too smoothly *au courant*, with too much of the present projected into it. (As one 'hermeneutic' claim has it, such is the inevitable 'fore-understanding' by which contemporary readers situate themselves with regard to past developments.) In 1967, for example, it would have been hard to find a study of allegorical interpretation that concentrated on more than one or two historical 'periods' (usually antiquity and the Middle Ages); that sustained a systematic comparison among different 'spheres' of interpretation, including scriptural exegesis, mythographic writing, and critical theory; that devoted even one chapter out of ten to medieval Jewish and Islamic developments (unless the study concentrated on one of those subjects, in which case the problem would have been reversed); or that treated the Romantic theory of the 'symbol' as considerably less revolutionary than 'evolutionary.' The need to construct this general outline 'retrospectively' itself suggests such problems of orientation over a generation ago.

This is not to say that these problems have been resolved in the current generation. On the contrary, as I have suggested, fundamental difficulties in coordinating and comparing the diverse developments of allegorical interpretation still (perhaps necessarily) mark contemporary scholarship. Nor is it to say that the basic organization of this retrospective outline has been largely superseded. In fact, a considerable part of its design remains 'normative' today. Its interest for the study of interpretation, however, lies not just in its explicit arrangement of previous interpretive movements, but in its own implicit attitudes toward them. In most of the critical works on allegorical interpretation reflected in this outline, allegory is an intriguing subject of historic importance and a fascinating topic of scholarly investigation, but a rather strained, even arbitrary approach to textual understanding. There are exceptions to this attitude, as in the work of writers like de Lubac committed to certain institutional developments of the Church and writers like Frye inclined to argue for latent structures in texts at large (though even Frye, as I suggest below, is perhaps not as accommodating to 'allegory' as he might

seem). But in general scholarship several decades ago treats not just allegorical composition, but allegorical interpretation itself, as a kind of *alieniloquium*, a somewhat 'alien' form of discourse. At times the critical expression of this attitude is far more conspicuous than it is in this outline. Allegorical interpretation, it is often maintained or implied, is interpretation 'imposed' upon a text; it is 'abstract' in conception; it tends to 'close' the range of interpretive possibilities; it is 'ahistorical' in orientation. It may not be a 'harlot' or a 'weed,' but in the 'skillful' state of scholarship, how 'sane' would it be to apply it to the present?

iii. Passages to the present

In the last few decades, however, something of the 'alien' seems to have passed out of the *alieniloquium*. For an increasing number of critics theorizing about encounters with 'other' texts and times, 'other-speaking' seems to speak their language. To try to 'explain' this change in attitude would be like trying to 'explain' historical change as a whole. But there are ways to situate the change, which, like every development in the interpretation of interpretation, is likely to change in turn.

It can be argued, for example, that general notions about allegorical interpretation like those just indicated—the notions of allegory as 'imposed,' 'abstract,' 'closed,' and 'ahistorical'—have changed with the transformation of critical attitudes at large since the late 1960s.¹⁴ To many, allegory no longer seems so peculiar a form of 'imposition' when a range of critical movements from contemporary 'hermeneutics' to 'reader response' criticism argue that readers at large regularly 'intervene' in the texts they engage.¹⁵ While it is still common to associate allegory with 'abstraction,' the association has been complicated by the argument that every form of discourse is 'figured' and that philosophic discourse itself exhibits 'literary' features of genre, plot, perspective, and style.¹⁶ If for some allegory remains a means of interpretive 'closure,' for others it is a way of opening

¹⁴ Compare my more extensive account in chapters 2 and 12 below.

¹⁵ For examples of how such movements have affected attitudes toward allegory, see Crossan 1976, pp. 264–78; Wittig 1976, pp. 333–40; and Copeland and Melville 1991.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Cascardi 1987; Marshall 1987; Lang 1990. Works by Jacques Derrida (e.g., 1974 [prior version 1967]) are a major influence upon such studies.

texts that would otherwise remain inscrutably closed, developing the conditions in which readers can encounter them.¹⁷ While it is still often argued that allegory is a form of ‘dehistoricization,’ some have suggested that ‘historicization’ has its own allegorical tendencies, correlating texts with the ‘spirit’ of the age or the ideology of the critic.¹⁸ From such perspectives, allegorical interpretation seems scarcely more alien than interpretation at large.

Attitudes toward allegory over a generation ago, however, have changed not only with broad movements in critical theory, but with intensive studies of the principles and practice of allegory from antiquity to the modern period. In the essays that introduce the two parts of this volume—‘Present Perspectives: Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages’ (chapter 2) and ‘Present Perspectives: The Late Middle Ages to the Modern Period’ (chapter 12)—I discuss some of the implications of recent research on topics ranging from ancient treatments of mythology to contemporary theories of signification. The distinct sections of these introductions broadly correspond to the subjects treated individually by the contributors to this volume. For the moment, in closing this ‘retrospective forward,’ I want only to call attention to some of the questions implied by one particularly prominent expression of changes in attitude toward allegorical interpretation at large.

This is the view that ‘all’ commentary or interpretation is basically ‘allegorical.’ In recent decades some variant of this view has appeared among scholars belonging to an array of different ‘schools’ and working on a range of different periods and fields—antiquity (e.g., A.A. Long); the Middle Ages (e.g., Morton W. Bloomfield); the Renaissance (e.g., Angus Fletcher and Maureen Quilligan); and contemporary theory (e.g., Fredric Jameson and Gerald L. Bruns)¹⁹—to give only a partial list of influential writers. This broad application of the term ‘allegorical’ still does not dominate scholarly practice as a whole, which normally does not apply the term to a range of interpretive procedures, from grammatical notes on an ancient text to historical background for a modern novel. For some (like myself),

¹⁷ See Bloomfield 1972; Bruns 1987, pp. 640–2; and Bruns 1992, pp. 85–6.

¹⁸ For suggestions of this kind from different perspectives about diverse acts of ‘historicization,’ see, e.g., Frei 1974 and 1986, and Jameson 1981; compare White 1973 on ‘emplotment’ in historiography.

¹⁹ See Long 1992, p. 43; Bloomfield 1972, p. 301, n. 1; Fletcher 1964, p. 8; Quilligan 1979, pp. 15–16; Jameson 1981, pp. 10, 58; Bruns 1992, pp. 15, 85–6, 215–16, 230–1, 241; compare the qualification on p. 102.

the recent expansive use of the term 'allegorical' is deeply questionable in both conceptual and historical terms.²⁰ But however the usage is evaluated, it is important to understand the conditions under which it has developed. To point to Frye, explicitly cited by many of those who broadly use the term, would be to expose only part of the issue. For Frye's position has its own history, and that history displays some of the deepest ironies in the interpretation of interpretation.

The most prominent and avid enthusiasts of what is normally called 'allegorical' interpretation, after all, did not share the view that 'all' interpretation is allegorical. Such a notion would have seemed strange to allegorists as diverse in intellectual and spiritual orientation as Philo, Heraclitus the Allegorizer, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, Cassian, and Proclus in antiquity; Gregory the Great, Bede, Raban Maur, Arnulf of Orleans, Hugh of St. Victor, William of Conches, and Pierre Bersuire in the Middle Ages; and Boccaccio, Landino, Petrus Lavinius, Natale Conti, Giovanni Fabrini, and John Harington in the Renaissance.²¹ For them allegorical interpretation displays some sense of a text that is 'other' than the apparent sense, whether the apparent sense is called 'literal,' 'historical,' 'external,' or something else. This is not to say that the character of this 'apparent' sense is identical for such writers; on the contrary, there is no single criterion by which all of them define the 'literal' sense.²² In fact, one of the most revealing aspects of the history of allegory is the way in which definitions of the 'literal' sense change, so that what is considered 'other' than it changes in turn. But for most of that history interpreters agree that it is one thing to explain the 'apparent' sense of a text, another to explain its 'allegorical' one.

While complications in this approach are sometimes noted in early interpretation, the approach as a whole begins noticeably to change in the late medieval and Reformation interpretation of Christian

²⁰ See, e.g., Whitman 1987, p. 7, n. 4; Whitman 1993a, pp. 31–2; and my remarks in chapter 12 (viii) below.

²¹ See the references to these writers in Whitman 1987, Smalley 1952, and Allen 1970.

²² For some historical variations in the notion of the 'literal' sense, see Preus 1969; Frei 1974 and 1986; Childs 1977; Burrow 1984; Kermode 1986; Tanner 1987; Copeland 1993; Greene-McCreight 1999; my remarks and references below in chapter 2 (viii); and A.J. Minnis's essay with bibliography in chapter 11 of this volume.

Scripture. By the late Middle Ages, such Christian interpretation increasingly tends to include senses once called ‘allegorical’ *within* the ‘literal’ sense itself, treated as the ‘basic,’ ‘normative’ Christian sense of the text. Thus, for Nicholas of Lyra in the fourteenth century, a passage in Chronicles is said ‘literally’ (*ad litteram*) of Christ. For James Perez of Valencia in the fifteenth century, a psalm is explained ‘allegorically’ (*allegorice*) about Christ, or to speak ‘more truly,’ ‘literally’ (*verius . . . litteraliter*). For Martin Luther in the sixteenth century, the complaint in a psalm is ‘literally’ (*ad litteram*) a complaint of Christ.²³ For William Perkins in the seventeenth century, expressing what by his time is a Protestant commonplace, there is but ‘one full’ sense of ‘every place of scripture,’ ‘and that is also the literal sense.’²⁴ To argue, along the lines of scholarship over a generation ago, that movements of this kind increase interpretive sensitivity to the ‘literal’ sense is to beg the question. At least in part what they do is to displace the *term* ‘allegory’ while assigning the ‘literal’ sense a limitless ‘spiritual’ scope.

Such notions of ‘literal’ discourse containing within itself ‘spiritual’ significance later help to inform Romantic theories of imaginative works of art. Already in the late eighteenth century Kant is arguing that in such imaginative works ‘language, as a mere thing of the letter, binds up the spirit’ as well. A variety of Romantic theorists tend to apply the term ‘symbol’ to writing considered to possess this self-contained quality, while relegating the term ‘allegorical’ to works that signify by denotation, pointing to something other than themselves. For Schelling the object of a ‘symbolic’ image does not merely ‘signify’ an idea; it ‘is that idea *itself*.’ For Coleridge a ‘symbol’ is a ‘medium between *Literal* and *Metaphorical*’; it is always ‘*tautēgorikon*’—not allegorical, saying something other than itself, but tautegorical, saying something identical with itself.²⁵ In post-Romantic theories of ‘symbolic’ expression, the significance attributed to the ‘symbol’ tends to shift from spiritual to more general notions of ‘meaning,’ and the-

²³ See Preus 1969, pp. 68–9, 105, 146. Compare the essay of A.J. Minnis in this volume. Preus’s argument that Luther gradually develops a stronger association between the ‘literal’ or ‘historical’ sense and the ‘Old Testament situation’ (p. 170) does not change the central conceptual and historical point here that ‘Christ’ remains the reference point of even this ‘situated’ ‘literal’ sense; see Preus, pp. 179–80.

²⁴ See Lewalski 1977, p. 81.

²⁵ For these developments, see Todorov 1982 (prior version 1977), pp. 147–221, esp. pp. 190 and 209, and Whitman 1991, p. 168, with the bibliography on pp. 175–6, nn. 24–5.

orists develop an expansive vocabulary to describe how works of art evoke such meaning, from the 'sensuous forms' of a Neo-Kantian like Cassirer to the linguistic 'textures,' 'rhythms,' and 'structures' of the twentieth-century 'New Critics.'²⁶ By contrast, the term 'allegory' refers to the language of designation whereby images are translated into concepts.

The much-cited comment by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* that 'all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery,' is excerpted from his discussion of the 'theory of symbols.'²⁷ Near the start of this discussion, he writes that the principle that a literary work contains 'a variety or sequence of meanings' has seldom been 'squarely faced' in criticism since the Middle Ages, with its fourfold 'scheme' of meanings (p. 72). But certain aspects of the medieval approach need to be revised for critical theory, he observes; for example, the 'conception of literal meaning as simple descriptive meaning will not do at all for literary criticism' (p. 76). A poem 'cannot be literally anything but a poem' (p. 77); its meaning is 'literally' its 'pattern or integrity as a verbal structure' (p. 78). Poetic images 'do not state or point to anything, but, by pointing to each other, they suggest or evoke the mood which informs the poem' (p. 81). Explicitly invoking the 'new criticism,' he argues that he has now 'established a new sense of the term "literal meaning" for literary criticism' (p. 82 and Frye's note to l. 2). Commentary, he continues, is 'the process of translating into explicit or discursive language what is implicit in the poem' (p. 86). At last comes the influential statement: it is 'not often realized that all commentary is allegorical interpretation . . . ' (p. 89). To read this statement nearly half a century after it was written, in the context not only of Frye's larger discussion, but of hundreds of years of shifting approaches to the 'literal' and 'allegorical' senses, is perhaps to suggest somewhat different considerations that may be 'not often realized.'

For Frye's 'new sense' of the term 'literal meaning' is not quite as new as it might seem from his account. It is one more development in the radical fluctuation of the 'literal' sense since the Middle

²⁶ See, e.g., Cassirer 1971 (prior version 1944) and, among a host of 'New Critical' discussions, Ransom 1971 (prior version 1941).

²⁷ See Frye 1957, p. 89; see pp. 71–128 for the larger discussion. Compare Frye 1974 (prior version 1965), pp. 12–13.

Ages. In the Reformation, an interpreter treating what was once considered allegorical as a condition of the 'literal' sense might claim that there is nothing 'beyond' that normative sense. In the Romantic period, a theorist treating the idea as a dimension of the image might claim that the 'symbol' points to nothing 'beyond' itself. Frye's argument that poetic images do not 'point' to anything except themselves depends not only upon the 'New Criticism' that he explicitly acknowledges, but upon the Romantic theory that underlies such criticism. Yet Frye's 'literal' sense is at once more constricted to words than the Romantic 'symbol' and at the same time more open to interpretation. In fact, while Romantic theory tended frequently to treat the 'allegorical' as a kind of literature contrasted with 'symbolic' writing, Frye treats it in part as the process of commentary on literature, interpreting what is 'implicit' in the literal sense. The 'allegorical' act that had once been secondary to works of 'imagination' develops into the primary source of the autonomy of 'criticism.' It is no wonder that for Frye 'all' commentary is 'allegorical'; the only 'apparent' sense is as it were a transcript of the text. A poem 'cannot be literally anything but a poem' (p. 77). Having radically restricted the 'literal' sense to the words of the poem, he treats the 'allegorical' as anything else that is said about it. In the process, the polemic against speaking 'otherwise' that had developed from the late Middle Ages and the Reformation to the Romantic period turns into a popularization of speaking 'otherwise' in the modern period. And the more the 'integrity' of 'verbal structure' to which Frye appeals is itself challenged in this period, the more 'allegory' turns into a way not only to comment upon the text, but to construct it.

These reflections about a contemporary critical argument do not 'prove' or 'disprove' the argument. They rather suggest the critical importance of situating the very definitions of terms like 'literal' and 'allegorical' in the context of changing intellectual and polemical conditions. To analyze such conditions systematically it would be necessary to examine transitions not only in the theory of allegory but in its practice from antiquity to the modern period. Such an analysis would need to assess the far-reaching historical changes—linguistic, imaginative, ideological, institutional—that promote or constrain the realignment of specific texts with shifting interpretive communities. Questions central to such an investigation would include the following: By what criteria (for example, grammatical, generic, doctrinal, social) does an interpretive community assess the 'literal' sense of a

given text? Insofar as a community accepts the 'literal' sense, what forms (for example, intellectual assent, ritual orientation, legal obligation) does its acceptance take? In the process of 'allegorization,' which dimensions of a text are selected or rejected, foregrounded or backgrounded, and which features of the text resist such allegorization? At what point does an allegorization become so radical that it breaks down a previous cultural consensus and promotes a new interpretive community? Given the tendency for allegorized *texts* to remain canonical while allegorical *interpretations* pass out of currency, what continuities of idiom and orientation underlie historical change?

No single study, however expansive, could fully coordinate such wide-ranging developments. The questions themselves are still beginning to be asked. Even the most ambitious and valuable projects of recent years, like the festschrift for Friedrich Ohly edited by Hans Fromm, Wolfgang Harms, and Uwe Ruberg, *Verbum et Signum* (1975), the collection of essays edited by Walter Haug in *Formen und Funktionen der Allegorie* (1979), the conceptual and bibliographical survey in Hennig Brinkmann's *Mittelalterliche Hermeneutik* (1980), and Jean Pépin's retrospective anthology in *La tradition de l'allégorie de Philon d'Alexandrie à Dante* (1987), at times tend less to engage questions of this kind than to provide rich scholarly resources with which to conduct such an investigation.²⁸ Nor would the investigation itself be likely to yield a semiotic 'model' of interpretive strategies. There are irreducible differences not only in the historical settings in which interpretation takes place, but in the very status of diverse texts (sacred, legendary, recreational, prescriptive) for different individuals and communities.

In any case, the present volume does not aim to offer such a model, much less a 'history' of interpretation and allegory during a period of over two thousand years. Investigating major interpretive turning points in differing but overlapping cultures, it aims rather to provide a set of case studies of interacting critical drives and their relation to historical change. The subjects of the interpretive movements it examines include primal forms of mythology, conceived in terms ranging from ancient logic to Romantic poetics; foundational texts sacred respectively to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; and critical categories of visual and verbal art, among them the hieroglyph, the emblem, the symbol, and irony. The tensions discussed in the

²⁸ See, e.g., the review of *La tradition* in Whitman 1993b.

work involve conceptual encounters between figures central to prominent interpretive schools, among them Philo and Origen, Paul and Augustine, R. Akiva and R. Ishmael, Porphyry and Proclus, Avicenna and Averroes, Maimonides and Rashba, Nahmanides and Abulafia, Abelard and William of Conches, Bonaventure and Nicholas of Lyra, Dante and Boccaccio, Alciato and Valeriano, Bacon and Vico, Goethe and Schlegel, Benjamin and Freud, de Man and Jameson, and a host of others. The implications of such encounters extend far beyond the margins of individual texts; they concern the intellectual, communal, and spiritual complexions of diverse civilizations.

The volume has developed from a cooperative project based in Jerusalem with contributions of scholars from a number of different countries and disciplines. The academic specialties of these contributors range from ancient and modern literatures to comparative religion, art history, and the history of philosophy. The essays they have provided themselves both differ and overlap in their theoretical assumptions and practical attitudes. It is hoped that the differences, no less than the agreements, will contribute to the understanding of how earlier interpreters, from other places and times, have understood the works and worlds that they engage. The format of the volume, with its extensive cross-references, is designed to encourage such comparisons and contrasts.

It is easy enough to imagine other analyses or alternative structures for a study of this kind. Such a study might well devote greater attention, for example, to a number of subjects of allegorical interpretation in particular periods (e.g., the natural world in early medieval commentary);²⁹ a variety of critical methods partially related to allegorical procedures (e.g., 'etymological' interpretation);³⁰ a range of imaginative forms that overlap with interpretive allegory (e.g., the parable);³¹ and a multitude of developments in the approaches that it does consider (e.g., typology after the Reformation).³² More generally, such a study might include other categories of inquiry, or proceed along different theoretical lines, or But it might be best for me to end this particular reverie for the moment, lest I continue

²⁹ For overviews, see, e.g., Brinkmann 1980 and Ladner 1995 (prior version 1992).

³⁰ See, e.g., Klinck 1970, qualified by Grubmüller 1975.

³¹ See, e.g., Klauck 1986 (prior version 1978); Stern 1991; Wailes 1987.

³² See, e.g., Miner 1977; Lewalski 1979; Frei 1974; Prickett 1991; Bercovitch 1972.

with the reflection—to adapt the phrase of another writer—that in this work ‘there are so many things lacking that, if there lacked one thing more, there would not be any room for it.’³³

For the history of allegorical interpretation has a way of both fascinating and eluding its interpreters, whether they try to keep their distance from it or try to approach it. History—or is it allegory?—has taken its revenge upon the very Luther who proclaimed his independence from ‘allegorical’ interpretation and his commitment to one ‘literal’ sense. It has been observed that contemporary scholarship seeking the meaning of Luther’s work has found more than one ‘Luther’—the figure of inner psychic tensions, the figure of emerging class interests, the figure of diverse social audiences, and so forth.³⁴ Luther might have responded that he was not a character in Christian Scripture, but would he have been pleased at this apparent division of his ‘literal’ sense? It will be protested, of course, that this is not ‘allegory,’ not the kind of radical displacement whereby even a story like Jupiter assaulting Danae in a golden shower can be interpreted in the Renaissance as the winning of a woman with money.³⁵ And then the protester might calmly enter a classroom to inform a group of students that *Hamlet* is a drama of Oedipal frustration and *Paradise Lost* an epic of incipient capitalism.

An ‘insane’ activity, the ‘refuge of unskillfulness,’ that Protestant scholar in the seventeenth century called a range of allegorical interpretation, in a comment cited at the beginning of this essay. In retrospect, perhaps he was not completely right. But even if he was, perhaps one way for future interpreters to keep their sanity would be to deepen the study of that activity. It is hoped that the present study will be a retrospective forward of that kind.

³³ See the quotation from Macedonio Fernandez in Eco 1992, p. 40; I have substituted the word ‘work’ for the original word ‘world.’

³⁴ See Steinmetz 1986, p. 75.

³⁵ See Thomas Wilson (sixteenth century), cited by Sinfield 1984, p. 127; compare Isidore of Seville (sixth century), cited by Allen 1970, p. 212.