In the beginning of every discussion of allegory is the word, which is itself already ambivalent, and none the less so for all the twentieth century's critical quarrels about what constitutes word or text or meaning, or the meaning of meaning.

Rather than engage in that always inconclusive discussion, I propose here the literary-critical equivalent of a plain-language text: as straightforward and unfraught an investigation of how allegory works as my language is capable of. My one uncompromising critical position is that I think language in general and the English language in particular are capable of a great deal, starting with clear connotation and building up to any number of multiple connotations and complex denotations. Inescapably, as I enter allegory, I will have to refer to several theoretical isms, but I'll do everything I can to keep those excursions minimal and to remain focused on allegory itself. For the balance of this chapter, I have to ask your willing suspension of disbelief, as I try to outline what lies before us in this investigation.

So let's start with the word: allegory, other-speaking, a way of saying one thing and meaning another. That's its oldest, most minimal definition, and just about the only thing about allegory that everyone agrees on. From the earliest beginnings of literary study other-saying has been allegory's hallmark, with equal emphasis placed on the two wings of the definition: the "one thing said" must be clear, coherent, and intelligible in itself, and the "other meant" must be itself coherent or intelligible and also distinct and different – i.e., it must be genuinely other. So, as in the most modern of relationships, every allegory worthy of the name needs a significant other.

That may not seem to be saying much, but look again: it unequivocally excludes personification texts such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* or *Everyman* from the category of allegory. That is, the texts all we Anglophones have been taught to regard as paradigm allegories aren't allegories, can't be allegories, by the oldest, most basic definition of the form (or mode, or genre, or whatever it may be), because they don't possess any genuine "other meaning" in any significant way different from their primary narrative or dramatic statements. Everyman represents every man, and Christian is a representative Christian, and however minimally or maximally individualized those characters may become, nothing they do or say points beyond their basic identification. Their meaning is in no sense other, but completely co-extensive with their names and actions – so personification texts can never be allegories. Surprise! In both the definition of allegory and in personification, the words mean what they say. And lesson one about allegory: always pay attention to the most literal sense of what is being said, in allegory and/or about it.

I am not here playing any smart-ass game of one-up to show that I can be cleverer than everybody else, which is one of the chief reactions people, especially scholars, have to something that challenges their most basic assumptions. The other most common reaction is to ask if allegory isn't personification, then what is it? – which is an excellent question, and the perfect starting point from which to begin finding out just what allegory is. This distinction of allegory from personification is crucial – absolutely fundamental to understanding the entity – and I am not the first to make it.[1] In fact, it is one of the oldest, earliest things we ought to have known about allegory. Ancient writers, who observed the distinctions of grammar, rhetoric, and logic with keener precision than we are accustomed to, firmly distinguished allegory from personification by placing them in utterly different categories. Personification was for them a figure of speech intensifying emotion and meaning, making it more powerful and explicit. Allegory on the other hand they linked with devices such as irony, riddle, and enigma – devices that obscure meaning rather than reveal it.

That is a very telling distinction and one that bears emphasizing: personification and its related devices drive meaning home – thus their steady employment in didactic and propagandistic works from *Everyman* to *Animal Farm*. Allegory goes the other way, creating puzzles and tantalizing with meaning that is not at all explicit, often not even implicit, and that may very well be the opposite of what is said, just like irony. Of this, much more later: right now, it gets us ahead of ourselves.

In the pages that follow, I hope to show that allegory fundamentally designates a narrative or drama of multiple, complex, perhaps incompatible, often overlapping, and therefore non-paraphrasable meaning(s), a story or play whose words and events are simultaneously coherent, analyzable literal statements in themselves and also signals (signs, "metaphors," veils) of meaning(s) beyond or more complex than those that can be conveyed by ordinary literary devices (simile, metaphor, symbol, etc.). In the most extreme formulation, I will argue that allegory constitutes/creates a non-linear language or meaning system, one of extreme sensitivity to initial conditions, displaying characteristics of self-similarity across scale, alternations of order and disorder arising from the same principles, and seemingly infinite possibilities of signification (all of which it remains for me to demonstrate in subsequent chapters, as well as to explain why I'm using language that echoes chaos theory).

Allegory so understood – real allegory as opposed to the personification pieces so often miscalled allegory – exists primarily as a mode rather than as a genre, in that it is not wedded to any particular form of writing other than narrative in the broadest sense. (I have not yet, for instance, encountered an allegorical lyric.) The bond to narrative and occasionally dramatic form probably results from (and is certainly the cause of my fudging a bit by describing allegory as "primarily a mode") allegory's coming into being not through any extraordinary or unique literary or linguistic device, but by means of a pervasive, basic operation of literalization. That is what lies behind my initial insistence on so literally adhering to the definition of allegory itself as "other saying."

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[1] For instance, Rosamund Tuve's still underesteemed *Allegorical Imagery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) says so explicitly.

I hope to show that in (what I consider) the greatest allegories, this basic literalization combines with the accumulation and exploitation of any or all of the conventional devices of allusion and figuration, pursued until the verbal equivalent of "critical mass" (a phrase I cannot help relishing) is achieved and conventional figuration no longer yields conventional meanings. At that point, the text transforms itself **in the comprehension of the reader** into an open-ended, self-bordering meta-text, i.e., into allegory. All of this, too, remains for me to demonstrate.

This multiplex sense of allegory is, I believe, both its oldest and its newest, because allegory is – always – an entity in evolution: the means by which its multiple, apprehendable-but-unstated (and perhaps unstateable) significances are achieved alter with the conditions of each culture in which allegory is attempted. Allegories of the Middle Ages and the Modern period are alike in their achievement, in their "saying other"; they differ markedly in the ways in which they manage to establish that "other" – perhaps I should say "Other."

This is as near as I can come to a concise definition of allegory. It comes closest, I think, to the sorts of ideas about allegory that seem to underlie both key theoretical documents – e.g., Spenser's letter to Raleigh – and the actual practice of working allegorists – e.g., *The Faerie Queene*. Significantly, it and they preclude the identification of allegory with personification or any other single device, insisting rather on a multiplicity of signifying means or figures and a consequent multivalence of signification. It and they restrict personification and related devices of specificity to subordinate roles within the literary construct, roles that may actually violate the normally consistent behaviors of such figures.

Within the precincts of allegory, readers become co-authors: they have no choice about it, because no allegory gives itself away. Every allegory makes its readers work for what they get.[2] Other kinds of writings may have whole-meaning structures, designs and patterns that control and channel meaning, usually by means of a reduced-scale "completeness," by closure and exclusion. Such structures yield the "silences" and "voids" and "fissures" that post-structuralist criticism makes so much of as evidence of the failures of authorial control or inadequate ideologies.

But allegories are different. They are open forms, open writings. Allegories are paradoxically incomplete structures, *gestalts*, whole entities incorporating gaps and voids within themselves, and it is the reader's task to fill those gaps. You, the reader, need to put the pieces of the allegory together for yourself in your own way. This is so, at least in part, because of the sheer multiplicity of the pieces: no allegory is a single, univocal text. Readers must construct their own allegory or allegories out of the materials the author, the text, and their own minds provide. Nobody ever reads anybody else's allegory. Never. More than that: allegory, like Heraclitus' river, is always the same and always different. It exists in a constant state of linguistic flux. You never step twice in the same river: you never read the same allegory twice –

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[2] This process differs in its dynamics, however, from the way Bloomians and deconstructionists understand the relation of reader and text: allegory doesn't lock its readers into a struggle for supremacy, a contest of wills in which the fascinatingly personified text or personified-in-the-text author seek to impose their vision upon the resistant will of a perversely adversarial reader. Rather, within the precincts of allegory, author and reader and text are co-conspirators.

and you never read allegory twice the same, nor does the same you ever read an allegory twice, since at each reading you change with the text you read. Allegory constitutes an extreme of the subjective literary experience, objectively structured.

Critics need scalpels, tools for cutting in, taking apart, laying out: in short, analysis. But allegory is a poet's tool: it's used for putting together, binding up, connecting: synthesis – creation – in short. Allegory doesn't undo meaning: it makes meaning, and it makes its reader complicitous in that creation. Specifically, allegory exploits precisely the multiplex "treachery" (as some criticism has it) of language, both to create other meanings – many of them – and to create meaning-as-other, within the mind of its reader. As literary device or mode or what you will, allegory is simply – as the most ancient critics so succinctly put it – *saying other*. And othersaying is accomplished not *in* the text, but (as our discussion of Dante's letter to Can Grande will show) *through* the text, not by the writer, but in the reader. That othersaying, the apprehension of meanings beyond our quotidian vocabulary and powers of ordinary speech, that creation of other-as-meaning and meaning-as-other, within another: that is allegory, and demonstrating that is what this book is about.

Allegory provides a way for a poet to screen his audience, to allow his "fit audience though few" to select itself. This aspect of allegory is quite openly acknowledged in the earliest criticism. The allegorist is like the priest of a mystery religion, veiling the sacred truths from the rabble, who would debase them, and preserving them for the elite, who will, with conscious effort, work through the enigmatic words of the allegory to a comprehension of the treasure it contains. The allegorist also employs his "darke conceit" to express ideas that are otherwise inexpressible, to reveal what otherwise could not be seen – whether because of its darkness or its brilliance does not matter.[3] All these usages turn allegory and the experience of reading allegory into an initiation rite, a *rite de passage* of which allegory is at once the goal and the obstacles to the goal, the impediments and the passage. Only by entering the allegory can you learn it. Only by passing through it can you comprehend it. Readers must respect the rights of the passages they read – respect the autonomy of text as much as they revere their own autonomy – before they will get the passage right. You can only understand an allegory – or, for that matter, allegory – if you have come to understand it. Allegory is not product but process, and the process of comprehending allegory is allegory. To borrow from John Barth: "The key to the treasure is the treasure." Every reader of allegory passes through this process, and you, as a reader of this text, are about to begin that allegorical initiation. It is important at the outset that you dismiss impatience, that you however grudgingly and provisionally suspend your disbelief, that you "bear free and patient thoughts."

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[3] For a very good discussion of these aspects of allegory, see Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory: Some Notes Towards a Theory of Allegorical Rhetoric in the English Renaissance* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969). For the place of this sort of attitude toward literature in the classical period, as a parallel and contrast to the Aristotelean formalist approach, see also Peter F. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004). Struck makes a very persuasive case for the existence of a tradition of literary interpretation dependent on the concept of enigma prior to and then co-existent with the Aristotelean stance that we so widely accept as classical literary critical orthodoxy.

I must ask you to extend the courtesy of your patience and understanding to my language as well as to the ideas I am trying to make it express. By its very nature, allegory cuts across most of the live fields of contemporary critical concern. By its very nature, allegory draws into its own orbit ideas and language proper to a number of competing, in some cases even antithetical, critical vocabularies and dialects. In working through the phenomenon that is allegory (more rightly, the phenomena that are allegory), I have had to deal with – "to come to terms with" – structuralism and deconstruction, formalist and semiotic ideas, traditional rhetorical and critical stances and newer reader-response criticism. I have wrestled with and learned from J. Hillis Miller and Angus Fletcher, Wolfgang Iser and Jean Genette and Mikhail Bakhtin and Tristan Todorov – not to mention or forget Gaston Bachelard and Maureen Quilligan and Roland Barthes, Rosemond Tuve and Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Julia Kristeva and Edward Said and Northrop Frye: these names signal just some of the varieties of literary opinion intersected by the pursuit of allegory.

The study has been humbling. It has taught me the utter vanity of dogmatism and the severe limitations of wholeheartedly or wholemindedly adopting any single point of view, no matter how attractive or logical its theoretical premises. I have learned to hold no position exclusively and to dismiss no position entirely, to honor the efforts and integrity of persons but to disagree with their ideas passionately and occasionally rudely (and always, I hope, with a degree of rhetorical panache: nobody says that learned disputes can't be fun). I have found, in those writers I named above – and many more – and in the schools of thought or renegade sects of thought they represent, numerous hints and ideas that have illuminated for me some aspect or aspects of allegory. Often I have found some notions, some phrases, some terms, similar-and-different enough from what I recognize in allegory to demand consideration, argumentation, distinction, differentiation.[4] Had I responded to every occasion and provocation, and in the writers' own terms, this book would have been an interminable, unreadable monster. It may be so still, but if it is, the fault is clearly mine, for I have chosen to cut the Gordian knot of competing critical dialects by writing what is as close to the critical equivalent of a plain-English contract as I and the subject are capable of. I have tried to use the simplest possible terms for even the most specialized and recondite aspects of allegory, and wherever I have been forced to technical terms, I have tried to use them in a manner as close as possible to their bare, literal meanings. Further, I've tried to separate my actual wrestlings with what I understand to be the real problems of allegory from more distant-from-any-single text grapplings with differing critical or theoretical positions: Part I of this study tries to focus as tightly as possible on literary texts, and Part II takes up the critical justification for the strategies Part I employs.

Despite my best efforts, I'm sure my own customary ideas and stances have no doubt tinged my hopefully theoretically colorless language. Despite my efforts, particular words and phrases will inescapably bring with them their connotative clouds of glory, just as surely as even the most conscientious readers will approach even my most successfully literal statements with all

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[4] It may appear, in the chapters that follow, that I have devoted a disproportionate amount of space to deconstruction and its discontents. This is so for two reasons: 1) the importance of allegory as term and concept within deconstruction; 2) because many of the things I have to say about the workings of allegory are similar-but-different (vive la difference!) enough from what deconstruction holds of all writing to need thorough explanation and distinction.

their own mental baggage ready to supply the contexts I'm hoping to strip away. Nevertheless, it continues to appear to me that as close as I can get to nondenominational prose is the only possible way to proceed in this investigation and explanation. That being the case, I have no alternative at this point but to imitate the techniques I've found allegories themselves using to solve similar problems by trying, here at the outset, to sensitize my readers to both my and their own use of language.

Indeed, most of the difficulty readers encounter in "deciphering" allegories arises from the fact that allegories do not restrict themselves to, nor do they respond intelligibly to, a single code or paradigm of interpretation – and that relates directly to my very simple, very radical purpose in this book. I wish to modestly propose a wholly different paradigm of interpretation, in fact a whole set of them, paradigms that break with the essentially simplistic inside-outside relation that underlies most criticism of allegory: figure X is the outside, the envelope, the husk, but statement Y is the inside, the meaning, the kernel to be dug out. That dominant paradigm and all the logico-rhetorical criticism that flows from it or from which it arises are closed-end systems, essentially purely binary systems. A thing is either this or that, off or on, yes or no, one or zero. Allegory's paradigm (if it has only one) is neither bound by binary oppositions nor closed. Within allegory, a thing can both be and not in the same respect at the same time. Allegory is open-ended: its possibilities of meaning are theoretically infinite, even though the form that contains them is most definitely finite.

The best analogy for what I will be trying to describe is the subject studied by nonlinear dynamics or dynamic systems theory, popularly known as chaos theory: limited physical systems containing only a few variables and yet capable, by virtue of those few variables, of internally producing an almost infinite series of variations. In studying allegory, I am exploring the literary equivalent of those paradoxical systems.[5] I am going to try to present modes of interpretation that do not impose *a priori* assumptions about the validity or invalidity of particular codes, that embrace with equal fervor the objectivity of the text and the subjectivity of the reader, that accept – indeed, revel in – the fact that language conceals at least as much as it reveals, that words are rarely univocal and books less so. I am trying to introduce a criticism as genuinely open-ended as it must be open-minded. Because all currently available critical idioms are firmly tied (in practice, however much they may disclaim in theory) to simple binary opposition**,** clear language to describe what I have discerned in allegory and terminology by which to make it comprehensible have been major stumbling blocks for me and will be serious obstacles for the reader. Chaos theory provides a set of terms and ideas that describe physical conditions analogous to the intellectual conditions I have observed in allegory. Let me be quite specific about the limits of this language's and this analogy's utility: neither the

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[5] For a concise and readable introduction to chaos theory in layman's language, see James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (Viking Penguin; New York. 1987). For a different sort of application of this material to literature – and also another excellent introduction to chaos theory (in part corrective of Gleick), see N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1990). Other applications to literature can be found in Modern Language Studies' special science-and-literature issue (XX:4, Fall 1990). See especially David Porush's "Eudoxical Discourse: A Post-modern Model for the Relations between Science and Literature" (40 – 64) and Patrick Brady's "Chaos Theory, Control Theory, and Literary Theory, or A Story of Three Butterflies" (65 – 79). For the point of view of one of the pioneers of chaos theory, see David Ruelle, *Chance and Chaos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

language of chaos theory nor the analogy of chaos theory will clarify anything whatever about what any particular allegory means, but they will illuminate *how* allegory means, and they will most definitely point toward structural and interpretive paradigms that transcend mere either/ors.

I cannot describe to you these paradigms and the criticism they create, because that very act would close them. Each allegory embodies – encodes, if you like – its own interpretive paradigm or paradigms. Instruction in how to read any given allegory forms a major part of that allegory, and each allegory is different from every other. Reading lessons – the codes that tell you how to read each text – make up an integral part of the contents of each text. In what I am describing here as real allegory, then, there is no husk and no kernel, no division between manifest content and latent content, no disparity of declaration and description. Each allegory means what it says and says what it means – if you can understand it. It also says and means *how* it says and means in the way it says and means. To put it more simply, how allegory means coincides with how allegory says. Because all this is so, real allegory cannot be paraphrased.[6] For allegory, paraphrase is impossible because allegory means multiplexly simultaneously; its meaning is "nonlinear" and therefore not susceptible of translation. Allegory is the unitary act of othersaying and samesaying/onesaying.

All of this makes allegory exciting to read and impossible to talk about. (For a short course in madness, try leading a seminar in a subject that resists expression.) Even more discouragingly, the process of writing about allegory inescapably becomes the process of writing allegorically, as I discovered to my pain in the course of writing this study. One of allegory's nastiest surprises seems to be the revelation that the simplest expression – at least what was intended to be the simplest, clearest expression – turns out to be the most complex. Like the hierophant of the mysteries, I can only show what there are no words for: like Dante, patch together words and images for what is beyond speech and vision. Allegory is other-saying. It is saying what hasn't been said, what can't be said, what is always – even after it has(n't) been said – (un)said.

The priest at Eleusis, we think, at the apex of the mysteries simply showed the initiates a stalk of wheat. We know that in the early church the catechumens were obliged to leave before the consecration of the Mass, being unready to see the mystery of bread and wine transformed into divine flesh and blood – which no one saw. "I am unable," Freud said at the beginning of his narrative of the Wolfman's treatment, "to give either a purely historical or a purely thematic account of my patient's story; I can write a history neither of the treatment nor of the illness.... It is well known that no means has been found of in any way introducing into the reproductions of an analysis the sense of conviction which results from the analysis itself."[7]

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[6] Allegory resists the kind of false interpretation that Paul de Man rightly labels reduplication. Note that from three different points of view, New Criticism, deconstruction, and my "allegory theory" converge on this point of the non-paraphrasability of the text. For New Criticism, the poetic text is at stake; for me the allegorical text; for deconstruction, any text whatever. For New Criticism, paraphrase is impossible because the poem means uniquely. For deconstruction, paraphrase is possible but pointless: it doesn't expand meaning but merely replicates indeterminacy.

[7] From *The History of an Infantile Neurosis*, by Sigmund Freud, reproduced in *The Wolf-Man, by the Wolf-Man*, ed. Muriel Gardiner (Basic Books: New York, 1971), p. 158.

I have called this work *The Strangeness of Allegory* because of allegory's eerie, counterintuitive modes of procedure, its simultaneous exploitation and refusal – even negation – of conventional modes or signification and figuration. Allegory is strange in the sense of different, alien, weird, even uncanny (*pace* deconstruction). Allegory is strange too in its estrangement from conventional literature, which is fodder for its enormous appetite, the compost that feeds its roots, but rarely ever the garden in which it lives peacefully with its neighbors. Allegories are the great outsiders of letters, often misunderstood and never domesticated, admired but not often followed. Allegory, finally, is strangest of all in its creations of extra dimensions, extra meanings, extra resonances. It breaks out of all the categories, crosses all the limits, forces, herds, shepherds its readers out of the confines of their usual ideas and categories to create new spaces, new meanings, extraordinary places and ideas outside the boundaries of conventional literature's – and conventional thinking's – snug little boxes. In the convergent root senses of the words, allegory is extraneous and strange, xenophobe and xenophile, host and guest. Allegory is incommunicable apprehension communicated: to say it, if one could say it, would be to render it other – not in the sense of other-saying, but in the totally estranging sense of other than it is, a simulacrum of itself. Allegory is the thing *extra* itself: not a hermeneutic method, but hermeneutics. I only hope, in the pages that follow, that I can show it to you.