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 Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Ariosto and Spenser . . . are hurried on with a *boundless, impetuous* Fancy over Hill and Dale, till they are both lost in a Wood of Allegories, – Allegories so *wild, unnatural, and extravagant*, as greatly displease the Reader. This way of writing mightily offends in this Age; and 'tis a wonder how it came to please in any.

Blackmore, "Preface," *Prince Arthur*

Blackmore's 1695 complaint snappishly declares what many readers since the Renaissance have disliked about allegory. Evidently unnatural, made-up and extravagant, allegory is an affront to the realist, empiricist bent of early modern and modern English culture from the end of the sixteenth century to the present. Yet whatever else it is, the story of Spenser and Ariosto lost in a "Wood of Allegories" is a brief allegorical vignette. Few readers in Blackmore's time or ours would fail to recognize this allusion to the opening scenes of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Faerie Queene*: much as Dante in the middle of his life finds himself lost in a wood, so do Una and the Red-crosse Knight become lost in the wood of Error.¹ Although Blackmore does not mention Error, it is hard not to imagine this "wild, unnatural, and extravagant" figure as the unindicted co-conspirator of his complaint. Even if this allusion is supposed to be parodic, the resonances it sets in motion work for allegory, not against it. Picture Spenser and Ariosto lost in a wood and you create a persuasive emblem of the allegorical tradition that reminds readers why people read, or once read, allegory.

Scholars have long insisted that similar objections, which become commonplace in English culture by the late seventeenth century, mark the end of allegory as a viable symbolic mode. The reasons given for this cultural event include: the replacement of Platonic "realism" by the nominalist conviction that "Truth" and "Justice"

are names, not ideal universals; a sharp decline in literary allusions to myth and biblical typology; the dissolution of the system of aristocratic patronage which had supplied learned readers who knew how to read arcane allegories and emblems; the Protestant and Puritan animus against complex or learned emblems and allegorical interpretations of the Bible; and arguments in favor of verisimilitude and a “plain style.” Under the collective pressure of these cultural shifts, it has been claimed, allegory is forced out by the standard-bearers of modernity: empiricism, historiography, realism (in the modern sense), and plain, rational speech.²

I agree that these shifts produced the end of allegory as a symbolic mode based on Platonic ideas, Christian theology or syncretic versions of these and other belief systems. My argument in this book concerns rather the allegorical impulse in modernity that persists despite Blackmore’s effort to write its epitaph and a chorus of similar objections from the late English Renaissance to the present. If allegory is evidently alive and well in recent critical theory and metafiction, it is so because it has managed to survive in modernity’s fundamentally hostile climate.³ That hostility is especially intransigent in the English literary and philosophical tradition, which rightly supposes that allegory is a key metafigure for the role of abstractions in thought.⁴ It assumes a fully canonical shape when English Romanticism casts out allegory in the name of the symbol. Throughout much of the twentieth century, the figure of allegory as a lackluster literary remainder has been a staple of Anglo-American literary criticism. The same figure lives on in the cultural mainstream.⁵

This book asks two related questions: why does allegory survive modernity and what does modernity (still) have against it? The answers I give emphasize English literary culture, whose critique of allegory casts its modern character into sharp relief, and within this tradition, the internal conflicts in Romanticism which allegory dramatizes. I argue that allegory survives after the Renaissance, against pressures that ought to have done it in, by making border raids on the very categories that have been presented as its contraries: realism, mimesis, empiricism, and history. The claim that allegory should be set apart from history and realism has for too long masked the degree to which all three terms are implicated in questions about knowing and representability that permeate modern culture. In opposition, as it were, ever since the Renaissance, allegory

maintains a shadow ministry by encroaching on and mimicking those in power. Like the forced “marriages” between different cultural zones in Doris Lessing’s *Canopus in Argos*, allegory makes unexpected alliances with historical and realist particulars to insure its status as a resident alien in modern culture. For this reason, it is an important modern site for what W. J. T. Mitchell calls “literary theorizing as an activity scarred by history.”⁶

Although the cultural shifts that accompany allegory’s passage into modernity occur throughout the West, they are especially marked in English culture after the mid seventeenth century, when theories of knowledge and language – from simple to complex – are used to justify Restoration arguments in favor of a plain rhetorical style that rejects extravagant figures like allegory. Behind this philosophical occasion I believe there is another – the partisan use of allegory before, during, and after the English Civil War to vilify assorted oppositions. Thereafter, the Neoclassical objection to allegorical agents in the epic and the Romantic polemic against allegory register different interpretations of its figural power. Arrayed in opposition to the cult of the particular, the historical, and the phenomenally real, allegory becomes the abjected “other” to be cast out in the name of modernity. At the high end of nineteenth-century French realism, “A Real Allegory” – the key phrase in Courbet’s subtitle for *The Painter’s Studio*, – limits allegory to the picture space created by this painter and his aesthetic objects.

Though I grant the factitious, provisional character of terms like Renaissance, Neoclassicism, and Romanticism, they are essential to the story I tell about allegory’s role in the cultural and political temper of modernity.⁷ For if Neoclassicism is not exclusively the age of empiricist epistemologies, it is an era in which a preference for observable phenomena works against allegory. Although not all writers of this era assent to these views, those who do assume that the truth value of empirical evidence is superior to that of fabulous allegorical narratives.

My approach to this topic is selective and textual, not encyclopedic. I emphasize moments in English culture when its resistance to allegory is strongest: the iconoclast critique of allegory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the Neoclassical attack on allegorical poems and paintings; the Romantic ambivalence toward allegory; Victorian efforts to sustain the division between allegorical and realist narratives; and the return to allegory in twentieth-century

critical theory and recent fiction. The philosophical framework I give this argument moves beyond the limits of English culture to assess what is at issue at key moments in allegory's modern survival. Four writers anchor my discussion of those moments.

The first is Spenser, an exemplary allegorist who nonetheless assents to the iconoclastic critique of emblems and allegorical narratives. I contend that this paradox, textually inscribed in *The Faerie Queene*, is an instructive site for recognizing how the theory of allegory becomes in modernity "an activity scarred by history." The second is Milton, an anti-royalist, anti-allegorist who, in *Paradise Lost*, serves up allegorical figures that trouble later efforts to separate allegory from particularity and history. The last two are Hegel and Benjamin, who specify allegory's conflicted appeal in Romantic and post-Romantic English culture. Hegel assumes that allegory is what Neoclassical writers had said it was – excessively fantastic, not very interesting, rigidly abstract, or by turns all of these. In practice however, he imagines allegory in two ways: as a rigid system of figural reference and as an unstable, prolific circulation of external, "sensuous shapes" that overpower or diversify inner, ideal content. Different versions of this hidden ambivalence infiltrate the Romantic preference for symbol over allegory and extend the logic of Romantic experiments with visual and verbal figures.

For Benjamin, who inaugurates the modern critical return to allegory, it occupies a world where Hegel's hoped-for alliance between inner spirit and outward form has given way. In its place are melancholy or exuberant allegorical figures that are brilliantly reinventive. Whereas Hegel's analysis of Persian and Indian polytheist art dramatizes the lure and danger of allegory, Benjamin's theory of allegory looks backward, then forward to a post-industrial understanding of material forms in a feverish pursuit of receding spirit or essence.

The weight of this study falls on the Romantic era, when early modern and modern thinking about allegory enters a new, more explicitly theoretical phase whose effects are still being felt in contemporary criticism. Romantic writers give a definite (and at times indefinite) shape to apprehensions about allegory that had been brewing in England since the Renaissance. Though they insist on the priority of the symbol over allegory, they nonetheless make remarkable use of allegorical figures. Until recent decades, this Romantic ambivalence went unrecognized, probably because it

existed below the threshold of the critical discourse Coleridge inaugurates concerning the symbol as the capable figure for the containment of meaning in a translucent form. Twentieth-century critics who have been persuaded by Coleridge's preference for the symbol conclude that allegory has no significant role to play in the modernist aesthetic, whether realist or symbolist.⁸ I argue to the contrary that allegory does play such a role, for reasons that follow from its modern character as a mode of figured speech with compelling narrative interests.

As this description suggests, I situate modern allegory's differences from its predecessors within the domain of rhetoric, in part because Greek and Romantic rhetoricians were among the first in the West to theorize about allegory but more essentially because allegory's rhetorical nature persists throughout its long history. Even its modern detractors imply as much. Thus when Coleridge asserts that allegory is alien because it is so evidently made up, he recognizes a fundamental truth about allegory as a figure of rhetoric. Allegory *is* alien; its ancient rhetorical status as "other speech" survives all other adjustments. There is always an irreducible difference between allegorical representation and its referent, whether that referent is a Platonic idea or a prelapsarian world to which Christian allegorists harken back. Either way, allegory is "a genre of the fallen world."⁹

In modernity, allegory looks even more alien and monstrous because the lack of a stable referent for its "other speech" invites exaggeration of its extremes. At one extreme are its material agents – whether texts or images or real referents or all of these – on which allegory depends to convey what lies at its other extreme – the provisional, transcendent idea to which those agents putatively refer. For De Man, irony and deferral are figural markers for the distance between these two extremes. Both occur in earlier allegorical theory and practice. Quintilian defines allegory as a figure of irony and, as Freccero's readings of Dante's *Inferno* make stunningly clear, ironic deferral is a narrative constant in this medieval pilgrimage to eternity.¹⁰

As allegory enters modernity, its relation to rhetoric shifts ground in two ways: its figures and visual imagery become identified as the effective, because material, agents of allegorical meaning; and as its abstractions seem to become more material, they also become strategically linked to pathos, the rhetorical figure that accords human feeling to strong figures. Whereas the first reworks an ancient

rhetorical alliance between allegory and images, the second tempers its more emphatic and at times mechanical abstraction by returning to Longinus, who had argued that pathos justifies the use of hyperbolic figures, including allegory.

Whether it is a personified figure who acts, an emblematic scene or tableau, or a guiding figural impulse within a narrative, modern allegory reimagines its ancient philosophical proximity to *phantasia*, variously defined since Plato as image, imagination, phantasm, illusion, and fancy. Quintilian advises orators to become skilled in *phantasia* (literally “image-making”) because this figure depicts absent things as though they were present (*Institutio* 6.2.29). This advice, which later rhetoricians echo, specifies the logic of allegory’s reliance on images, whether imagined or visual. Medieval allegorists and commentators assumed that because words were imperfect guides to meaning, images might “at some ideal level of visual form” be transparent to higher truths.¹¹ For Protestant iconoclasts whose arguments against images, especially allegorical ones, are differently at work in Spenser and Milton, the medieval concept of ideal visual form seems to have dropped away. Since the Renaissance, allegory has been “beset by images” in the sense that its pictorialism is often taken to be a material agent in the production of allegorical meaning.¹² Thus Neoclassical writers who object to the hermeneutic complexity of traditional allegory argue that allegory ought instead to use highly simplified visual images or verbal imagery.¹³ So much for the medieval and neo-Platonic argument that allegories and emblems help readers imagine the ideal visual form or idea of their “other speech.”

The compressed visual wit of the allegorical emblem survives in modernity nonetheless, like the return of the repressed. It turns up, for example, in Freudian and post-Freudian accounts of the figurative logic of the dreamwork. Echoing Quintilian and Freud on *phantasia*, Ricoeur suggests that dream images work like words because “a figured language ... gives a contour or a visibility to discourse.”¹⁴ Like Freud’s dreamwork, allegory’s punning verbal (and visual) wit invites readers to work out its meaning by piecing it together from the figures and images at hand. In recent metafiction, including magical realism, science fiction, and cyberpunk, this allegorical disposition sponsors a near-riot of combinatorial possibilities in figures and in plots.¹⁵

This critical understanding of allegorical language and imagery

rejects earlier assertions that the literal text of an allegory is merely a “veil” which conceals its hidden, allegorical meaning from all but the initiated. Quilligan blames medieval exegesis or *allegoresis* for manufacturing this split, which Renaissance neo-Platonists also assert when they creatively misread Egyptian hieroglyphics as models for how the allegorical emblem hides philosophical secrets.¹⁶ Yet among late classical and medieval writers, the operative term seems not to have been “veil” but *integumentum*. Allegoresis, which “delivers up” the allegorical meaning, is that integument. As its skin or husk, the work of allegorical interpretation is to specify the outward shape for allegory’s “other speech.”¹⁷ Few recognitions are as prescient for modern allegory, where putative distinctions between narrators, readers or theorists, and allegory tend to dissolve. Thus, for example, Benjamin’s readings of late nineteenth-century Paris, Baudelaire’s poetry, or Baroque German tragedy are themselves allegorical, as are readings supplied by the narrators of Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, Hoban’s *Riddley Walker*, or Murdoch’s *The Sea, the Sea*.

Beginning with Neoclassical writers, modern critics of allegory have repeatedly objected to its abstraction or, conversely, to its presentation of abstractions that come to life. Among recent critics, Fletcher has noted the demonic agency of medieval and Renaissance allegorical figures that move compulsively toward reified abstractions. Mitchell wryly notes the loss of a reliable allegory with the demise of Communism in the old USSR: “the United States . . . has emerged as the undisputed heir to the crown of imperial dominatrix, when there is no longer an ‘Evil Empire’ to provide a kind of global moral allegory.” Hollander suggests that a deft poetic ekphrasis might “rescue the very personhood of allegory from captivity by the reductive language of its own inscriptions.”¹⁸ As these assessments and Spenser’s story of Malbecco make clear, allegorical abstractions have a tremendous undertow: they drag human particularity toward a fixed form and idea.

If, as Hagstrum argues, “a powerful, allegorizing strain *can* drain a conception of all visual and palpable reality,”¹⁹ modern allegory more typically uses images that reify abstraction. Confronted by such figures, readers become restive and testy. In Texas, tanned youthfulness (as a reality or faded vision) and Southwestern summers define a highly visible subculture. In the heat of one Texas summer, as I waited for a traffic light to change, I saw this sticker on a white convertible whose male driver was tanned, blond, and middle-aged:

“the occupants of this car may seem larger than life.” With all the *brevitas* of a Renaissance emblem,²⁰ this composite text of message, car, and driver suggests why allegory has a bad name in all but the most rarefied critical circles. Self-conscious and extravagantly fictitious in its appropriations of real objects and people, allegory may zoom into view then veer away into its own atmosphere, leaving ordinary mortals behind in the heat and dust.

Critical theory is hardly immune to this implicit tyranny of readers and texts. Consider this passage from a recent article in an academic journal: “Most of the famous modern agendas for history are allegorical – historiographic allegories, literary allegories. Hayden White’s tropological encoding of history slips into allegory . . . The Hegelian–Marxist agenda is perhaps the purest allegory . . . Equally allegorical . . . is the most optimistic of all models for conceptualizing history, the program of literary realism.”²¹ I have exaggerated the schematic vicegrip of this statement by omitting its descriptions of each theorist’s particular concerns. So reconfigured, the statement is both victim and perpetrator. Because this ironic self-consciousness matches the present critical climate, we are disposed either to find allegory everywhere or to pick up allegorical moves that earlier generations of readers missed. This disposition risks, though, grinding all texts into the mill of fixed, unyielding abstractions.

Whether it is identified with the German Baroque, nineteenth-century industrialism, or a Nietzschean will-to-power shared by critics and figures, this implied figural violence haunts modern theories of allegory. As Hertz observes, de Man’s “lurid figures” convey a violence that looks as though it might be real and material, not figural. Teskey argues that this violence is a metaphysical necessity inasmuch as allegorical abstractions are fundamentally hostile to human particularity.²² As a figure that both names and abstracts, allegory is prone to “forms of violence” akin to those imposed by a tribe or community on a victim who is punished in the name of, or instead of, everyone else.²³ In contemporary theory this violence takes the form of a temptation to invent abstract schemas.

The role of pathos in modern allegory is one warrant for taking this risk. For without pathos, allegory might otherwise constantly reproduce the mechanization that Neoclassical critics hoped for (a mechanical allegory is at least safely dead), but which Romantic and post-Romantic readers have despised. A recent children’s film about appliances that come to life suggests how pathos redirects modern

allegory such that its abstractive powers are checked by feeling and particulars. Titled *The Brave Little Toaster*, the film puts pathos on show with a story about several home appliances, including the toaster-hero of the title, who leave an abandoned summer cabin to search for the boy who used to come to visit them. Once the appliances come to life, as it were, they look like a demented parody of Neoclassical complaints about allegorical abstractions that walk and talk. When the built-in air conditioner, whose grillwork looks like a real mouth and eyebrows, learns that the other appliances are about to leave the cabin as it cannot, it explodes with rage, its “mouth” and “eyebrows” violently contorted. After cracking the walls, it freezes over in an apoplectic fit. As a mechanical “face” that freezes in an expression of fury (and freon), the air conditioner dramatizes the compulsive rigidity of allegories that are so demonically propelled by the logic of the abstraction they represent that they become rigid, mechanical figures.²⁴ Like allegory’s will-to-power, visibly at issue when the abstraction represented is fury or rage, this appliance will brook no opposition.

Yet the pathos of the air conditioner’s predicament also disrupts this figure of mechanical anonymity. Left alone and trapped in the walls of an abandoned cabin, what else could it be expected to do but explode in a fit of impotent rage? When the other appliances are later rescued from a garbage dump by a warm, friendly man who takes them to his appliance repair shop, they barely escape vivisection. In the film’s last scene, the boy (*their* boy) finds the appliances just in time to save them from being crushed on a conveyor belt and thrown onto the scrap heap. *The Brave Little Toaster* dramatizes the internal contradiction within modern allegory. For if the film’s characters are on the one hand just appliances with interchangeable parts, they feel passionately and struggle heroically. Modern allegory gains its characteristic purchase by shuttling at least as awkwardly between human attributes and abstract ideas, as Neoclassical writers repeatedly complain. To make this shuttle work, to be believable as the appliances are believable, allegory needs what ancient rhetoricians call pathos, the strong feeling that justifies exaggerated, even monstrous, figures.²⁵ With its carefully sustained relay between feeling and mechanization, *The Brave Little Toaster* shows how modern allegory works along the border between pathos and abstraction.

In recent theories of allegory, pathos is more sharply at issue with the loss of a secure transcendent referent for allegory’s “other

speech.” As a narrative figure whose subject is technically absent because not literally represented in allegorical texts and images, allegory has long been a figure of desire, hence the erotic plots (sublunary and divine) of medieval and Renaissance allegories like *The Romance of the Rose*, Dante’s *Commedia*, and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Although it is differently marked in the work of Benjamin and de Man, their unrelenting critical desire for a lost or alien referent invites a strong readerly pathos for what allegorical figures do not or cannot contain, and even for the personhoods of these critics.²⁶

Modern allegory requires an enlivening, particular shape to get our attention. For if we still read it, we do so because of this unexpected convergence between particularity, strong feeling, and abstract ideas. In this sense allegory offers one way to reimagine the ancient debate between Plato and Aristotle about the relative importance of particulars and abstractions. Whereas Plato asserts the priority of universal ideas or abstractions over particulars, Aristotle argues that particulars direct our understanding of abstract principles. Nussbaum finds confirmation of Aristotle’s position in Plato’s teacher Socrates, whose unreformed desire for Alcibiades shows how a particular person animates eros, whereas the argument that all love objects are equally valuable does not.²⁷ Or, as Nussbaum argues concerning Sophocles’ *Antigone*, “it was one thing to ask Creon to describe his views about the family; it was another to confront him with the death of a son.” For Creon, the moment of tragic recognition is his son’s suicide, after which he can no longer take refuge in abstraction, generalities, or ideas as the work of the state. Such examples urge Aristotle’s claim that the adherence to principle must go through, not above, particulars.²⁸ In modernity, the force of allegory similarly depends on its capacity to animate and thereby particularize its figures, even when it careens toward the spiritual, the other-worldly and away from representations that seem so real you could touch them.

My argument here works in counterpoint to de Man’s theory of allegory. For though he insists that allegorical figures are forged in time and subject to decay, the cumulative effect of his readings is surprisingly transhistorical: allegory becomes the property of language in general, a plot of figures redone and undone that is “modernist” insofar as it echoes twentieth-century modernism’s sense that it is cut off from the past and thus outside history.²⁹ For this reason, the “rhetoric of temporality” he ascribes to allegory does