IN THIS STUDY I have attempted to bring together some information about what the discovery of Greek and Latin symbolical and allegorical interpretation taught the Renaissance. It is obvious that what was learned from classical sources simply enforced what centuries of biblical exegesis had established; however, the piety of the sacred explicators prevented them from reading either the Old or the New Testament as myth. Until recent times, myth crouched at the gates of Paradise without hope of admittance.

To some extent, myth is allegory; or, perhaps, allegory is myth; but both modes of imaginative thought are little more than one or more symbols with positive or negative value attached to some natural object and provided with a predicate. A lion absolutely static stands for several nominative or adjectival virtues and vices, although in the area of physical reading a lion has no moral or theological value. When the same animal companions another beast or attends a human being, one or more of its symbolic attributes rubs off on its associate. The other creature may alter the lion's quality as easily as the lion changes that of the other creature. The meaning may be also shifted by posture, color, ornament, implement, garment, or the fashion in which garments are worn. When to this individual or group motion is applied, allegory begins; and when some other symbolic figure or figures are the object of this motion, allegory merges into myth. At this point since sustained allegory cannot be maintained for long, literalism enters and myth is created.
The humanists with whom I shall deal did not talk this way, because they relied principally on what the new study of classical texts added to the medieval practices of biblical and literary allegory. When the Republic of Plato and the Symposium of Xenophon were discovered, men learned that the earliest term for “the sense beneath” was “hypnoia.” In his essay on listening to poets, Plutarch testified to the antiquity of this expression by writing, “now we say allegorical interpretations.” But Plutarch, contrary to some etymological records, was not the first to use the word “allegory”; Cicero equates it with “translatio” or “the connection of many metaphors so that one thing may be said and another understood.” In the Rhetorica ad Herennium, attributed by the sixteenth century to Cicero, allegory is “permutatio,” a form of speech in which one thing is said by the words, another by the meaning. The ancient term is recalled when the rhetorician Demetrius of Phaleron defines “allegory” as something that hides (hyponooumenon) the real meaning. Definitions of “allegory” appear in Strabo and Longinus, but it was Quintilian who supplied the locus classicus for Renaissance rhetoricians of all countries.

For Quintilian, “allegory” or “inversio” is to mean something more than the words of a statement suggest or to mean something which is absolutely opposite to what the words convey. The second half of this definition also covers what Quintilian calls “ironia” or “illusio.” To exemplify his definition of allegory, Quintilian uses the ship metaphor in Horace’s fourteenth ode. He probably misread Horace’s literal intent, but nonetheless he brought this metaphor into almost every full-scale Renaissance account of allegory and made the ship a figure that never stays long in any poetical port. Quintilian also distinguished what might now be called “historical allegory” from the other kinds. To illustrate it he points to the real persons masquerading in Virgil’s tenth eclogue. Using his critical razor with reasonable care, he decides that a continued metaphor becomes an allegory, whereas a continued trope is a “figura.”

As definite as Quintilian is about the meaning of “allegory,” he is indefinite about “enigma” and “symbol.” For him “symbol” is “nota” and “enigma” is an “obscure allegory.” He warns his students, as Aristotle had warned his orators, against a too great use of metaphor; it wearyes the audience and makes one’s language “allegorical and enigmatic.” For the Renaissance, Quintilian represented the most modern of classical opinions, although his authority was not that of Aristotle; nonetheless, if humanists looked for clearer distinctions in Quintilian’s
Greek predecessors, they must have received cold comfort. When these ancients talk about something more obscure than the clear literal, or something obscure in the literal, they use “mystery,” “enigma,” and “hyponoia” with about the same emphasis. Heraclitus of Pontus, who allegorized and symbolized all of Homer, will after summarizing the literal append the hidden meaning with “Here Homer philosophizes.” Although the Renaissance most frequently used “symbol” in the legal sense, when it employed the word otherwise, it thought of it as a motionless “sign” which the eye transfers to the brain for an agreed meaning that had been established by a long literary or theological tradition. One could not invent a symbol. Allegory which made use of symbols the way a noun uses adjectives had wider possibilities and could be invented by an artist or found by the interpreter. It was not likely to be continuous, and the interpretation having the most logical adjustments of parts to whole was the best. The custom of symbolical reading was so general that Thomas Nashe warns the readers of *Summers Last Will and Testament* not to “wrest a never meant meaning” from his book.

II

A half dozen years ago in *Image and Meaning*, and to a certain degree in the earlier *The Harmonious Vision*, I attempted to demonstrate that some understanding of what the Renaissance knew about allegory and symbol might help modern readers understand the poetry of that period. To this end I traced as well as I could the meanings of myths and signs as they moved from Greek poetry into the literatures of western Europe. I felt definitely that there were many occasions when myths and signs were not mere decorations but emphasized, or even revealed, the poet's intent. I also felt that modern man, who has abandoned allegory and invented his own private symbols, might not easily understand an imaginative mind of three centuries ago unless he knew its traditional symbolism. I hoped to establish a balance between the modern readers of this literature who insist that its meaning is superficial and nothing more and those free-wheeling interpreters ignorant of tradition who concoct inadequate and absurd readings of their own. These earlier books are my examples; this book is my reason. I have put the cart before the horse.

Twenty years ago I had intimations of what was happening but I saw through the glass darkly. In the following ten chapters I shall try to
clear the glass, but I am afraid it is still fairly cloudy. During this period, historians of biblical interpretation—Wolfson, Daniélou, and Lubac—have made the Christian process apparent. There is no need to prove that it was working hand in glove with secular interpretation. Two decades ago, with the exception of a few special monographs and papers, the knowledge of Greek allegorists had not gone much beyond Decharme’s study; but in recent years the fine investigations of Pépin and Buffière provided me with a running start.

In the course of the following chapters I have attempted to explain how the arguments of the apologists of the first four centuries were revived by men of the Renaissance, eager to find Christian theology and sacred history in pagan documents. With the discovery of the allegorical and symbolic readings of Homer written by his Greek apologists, men of the sixteenth century were given new reason to take up the deeper reading of Virgil, Ovid, and the mythology which had been passed on to them by medieval men. The discovery of the Egyptian remains only added to the general conviction that something essentially mysterious—philosophy, history, theology, and scientific lore—was just beneath the surface of the remnants of the past. The antiquities from the Nile were not on parchment, and the teasing nature of what they seemed to be saying turned the eyes of men toward the equally dumb remains of Greece and Rome. This passion for deciphering mystery had much to do with the efforts of painters to create mystery, and it seems only natural that men of letters should follow in their steps. It is my impression that they did, but that in this as in everything else there was a slow evolution so that the eventual alteration of attitude toward both myth and allegory had a definite effect on literature.

I am aware that I have skated over the surface and made no arabesques. I have ended up with an annotated bibliography or a thinly masked Grundriss. I have presented the facts as I got them—the hard way. I have no theories to offer although I have read many of the moderns who have speculated about myth and symbol. Since I am without thought I do not need interpretation. Endurance is all that is required.

At this point I want to thank the American Philosophical Society for a summer grant in 1965 and the Huntington Library for a gift of several weeks in that remarkable collection. Most of this book was written during 1967–68 when I was a fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

D. C. A.