The Vitality of Allegory

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IN 1959 Edwin Honig wrote that “Opinion about allegory in literary histories is fairly unanimous: most agree that it is dead but disagree about the date of its demise” (5). Nearly forty years later Theresa Kelley pronounced similarly on the fate of allegory: scholarly objections to allegory, “which become commonplace in English culture by the late seventeenth century, mark the end of [it] as a viable symbolic mode” (1). Even E. D. Hirsch has recently advised that “Allegory . . . has more or less gone away” (“Transhistorical” 551). By far the most entertaining obituary for allegory comes from the poet Billy Collins in “The Death of Allegory”:

I am wondering what became of all those tall abstractions
that used to pose, robed and statuesque, in paintings
and parade about on the pages of the Renaissance
displaying their capital letters like license plates.

Truth cantering on a powerful horse,
Chastity, eyes downcast, fluttering with veils.
Each one was marble come to life, a thought in a coat,
Courtesy bowing with one hand always extended,

Villainy sharpening an instrument behind a wall,
Reason with her crown and Constancy alert behind a helm.
They are all retired now, consigned to a Florida for tropes.
Justice is there standing by an open refrigerator.

Valor lies in bed listening to the rain.
Even Death has nothing to do but mend his cloak and hood,
and all their props are locked away in a warehouse,
hourglasses, globes, blindfolds and shackles.

Even if you called them back, there are no places left
for them to go, no Garden of Mirth or Bower of Bliss.
The Valley of Forgiveness is lined with condominiums
and chain saws are howling in the Forest of Despair.

Here on the table near the window is a vase of peonies
and next to it black binoculars and a money clip,
exactly the kind of thing we now prefer,
objects that sit quietly on a line in lower case,

themselves and nothing more, a wheelbarrow,
an empty mailbox, a razor blade resting in a glass ashtray.
As for the others, the great ideas on horseback
and the long-haired virtues in embroidered gowns,

it looks as though they have traveled down
that road you see on the final page of storybooks,
the one that winds up a green hillside and disappears
into an unseen valley where everyone must be fast asleep. (27–28)

These thoughtful and entertaining obituaries notwithstanding, critics
have never quite managed to retire allegory—or any particular instance of
it. While it is certainly true that a very particular kind of didactic-religious-
personification composition from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance has
mostly faded from the best-seller lists and from our collective critical con-
sciousness, to say more globally that allegory is dead is manifestly untrue,
and Honig, Kelley, Hirsch, Collins, and others of their leaning understand
of course that they greatly exaggerate the rumors of allegory’s death. 1
They do so, I think, partly for rhetorical effect—there is something impressive about

1. Collins even has a poem in the same collection that revives one of those “tall abstrac-
tions” parading around in capital letters. In “The Lesson” Collins writes of “. . . History / snoring
heavily on the couch. . . .” (6).
breathing life into an entity previously thought dead—and partly to under-
line a claim about the multiple meanings that inhere in the term “allegory”; it is perhaps dead if we only think of it as the kind of didactic composition peopled by upper-case abstractions, but not if we allow ourselves to recon-
ceptualize, redefine, or rehabilitate it.

In short, allegory has not died, despite the passage of centuries since its popular zenith and despite the attempts of a number of influential critics (most notably Coleridge) to kill it. Certainly no contemporary writers whom the academy values pen allegories of Christian salvation along the lines of The Pilgrim’s Progress or The Divine Comedy, but even so these earlier works survive and continue to make themselves heard in the grand conversation of literary history; in that sense they are as vital as ever. Yet allegory has also been kept alive because readers and critics apparently have too much at stake to let it fade completely away and because writers continue to find pro-
ductive ways to incorporate allegorical elements into their fictions. We find ourselves tending to allegory—especially when it seems severely wounded—because allegory embodies something about the literary experience that we value highly. This, I think, is the only way to explain the constant lure of a much-maligned literary phenomenon.²

My aim in this book is to explore the ways in which allegory—or the ghosts of allegory—continue to haunt narrative fiction. Primarily, I intend to demonstrate that allegory can be present in a narrative to different degrees and in different ways and to argue that the presence of allegory can produce a variety of results within a fictional narrative.³ I contend that many of the problems we face in dealing with allegory stem from the limits imposed by our common, conventional conception of the term and from our gen-
eral insistence on applying the conventional designation “allegory” or “alle-
gorical” only to entire works. As Edwin Honig claims in Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory, “The form of an allegory must also be the form of the medium (prose or poetry, drama or novel) conveying it. But in whatever medium, it is a form that characterizes the allegory as a totally achieved liter-
ary creation” (14). This claim—and in particular its emphasis on totality—compels Honig to see allegory only as a genre. While we certainly do find entire works of fiction that are allegorical and that, taken together, might constitute a kind of genre, this does not exhaust the potential of allegory. My

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² I will explore the trope of the death of allegory more fully in chapter 1.

³ Ralph Flores makes a similar claim when he argues that since the late 1970s we have seen “a plethora of studies on allegory, and in the writings especially of Rosemond Tuve, Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, allegory has been detected in surprising places and discovered to have uncanny powers of renewal. Or perhaps allegory did not really die but remained at play in texts—as the enigmatic textuality of texts” (4).
aim is to broaden our conception of allegory by acknowledging not only this kind of complete narrative work but also the many narratives that are not really allegories in Honig’s holistic and generic sense but that have traces or hints of allegory in them.

The challenge I have set before myself is to devise a theoretical approach to allegory that will account for both the generic conception of allegory favored by the majority of critics and the fact that we often find evidence of allegory in literary texts that—taken as a whole—do not seem allegorical in the final analysis. I am convinced that the path to this theoretical solution I seek must take us back through allegory’s rhetorical roots. So, I will begin there, move toward a novel generic conceptualization of allegory, and finally show how that conceptualization can also accommodate the presence of allegory in nonallegorical narratives.

I understand allegory as belonging to the extended family of tropes. Thus, allegory bears some resemblance to figures such as synecdoche, metonymy, simile, and metaphor. Each of these figures of speech asks readers to understand or to see one thing in the terms of another; they are all substitutive in nature. The classical rhetorician Quintilian was one of the earliest to insist on a close association between allegory and other tropes that rely on an implied or explicit comparison or substitution. For Quintilian, allegory in its most common form actually depends upon and consists of metaphor, which he considers by “far the most beautiful of tropes” (427):

Allegory, which people translate *inversio*, presents one thing by its words and either (1) a different or (2) sometimes even a contrary thing by its sense. (1) The first type generally consists of a succession of Metaphors, as in

> O ship, new waves will take you back to sea: what are you doing? Be resolute, make harbour,

and that whole passage of Horace in which he represents the state as a ship, the civil wars as waves and storms, and peace and concord as the harbour.

(451)

If we view allegory from Quintilian’s perspective, it amounts to something close to extended metaphor, and this is a view that has held considerable sway over the intervening centuries.

I contend, on the other hand, that we need to recognize a significant and qualitative distinction between metaphor and allegory. We can begin
to reveal this distinction by first thinking about the resemblances between metaphor and the other tropes closely related to it: synecdoche, metonymy, and simile. As I claimed above, this group of figures of speech operates on the premise of substitution—take $x$ for $y$, or see $x$ in terms of $y$. Synecdoche and metonymy substitute one thing for another based on contiguity while simile and metaphor encourage substitutions based on comparison, or similarity. These latter two tropes require a different kind of interpretive work because they force the reader (or auditor) to recognize the common ground between the two terms or concepts being compared. For Quintilian, allegory is more or less an extension of metaphor.

But pronouncements about allegory are complicated by the fact that it has a dual nature, both aspects of which are captured by Quintilian’s example. First, when we speak of allegory we might refer to an individual textual element—an allegorical figure such as Horace’s ship. As Quintilian notes, however, this figure of speech—the state implicitly compared to a ship—is essentially a metaphor. And we can produce countless other examples of the same phenomenon. If we encounter a narrative, for instance, that describes a character who “has a cross to bear” we have what amounts to a metaphorical reference to Christ, though we might be tempted to call this an allegorical character. If there is no substantial difference between calling this figure a metaphor and calling it an allegory, then why do we need the term allegory at all? Why not simply call metaphors—whether they occur individually or in series—metaphors?

The answer to this question lies in what Quintilian’s example implies happens when we get a series of this kind of coordinated metaphoric figuration in the context of a narrative. All of the metaphors that Quintilian uses as examples from Horace’s poem—the state as a ship, “the civil wars as waves and storms, and peace and concord as the harbour”—work in concert to produce an effect that differs, certainly in degree but also perhaps in kind, from the effect of any single metaphor. Using the term “ship” to refer to the “state” on its own invites readers to understand the latter term through those aspects that it shares with the former (the ground for the comparison); this enterprise, viewed from the perspective of the author, amounts to a strategy for description. But when that author adds metaphoric plot elements (storms as civil wars) and metaphoric states of affairs (safe harbors as times of peace) we have moved from the realm of description to the realm of narrative, which is the second fundamental aspect of allegory. The series of metaphors that Quintilian cites, in other words, constitutes a figural narrative that enacts the transformation of some phenomenon, in this case an idea about governance.
Precisely how this kind of transformation occurs may not yet be clear, so a brief example might prove helpful. Consider the well-known parable of the fox and the grapes from Aesop: “A famished fox, seeing some bunches of grapes hanging from a vine in a tree, wanted to take some, but could not reach them. So he went away saying to himself: ‘Those are unripe.’” There would likely be near-universal agreement that this kind of animal parable constitutes an allegorical narrative. However, a close examination of the parable reveals that it does not constitute a series of metaphors, as Quintilian would argue. If this were so, then the fox would have to be a metaphor for humankind, the grapes would be a metaphor for anything humans desire but cannot obtain, and the tree would be a metaphor for some obstacle that frustrates our attempts to get what we want. If we evaluate these instances of figurative language on their own—outside of the context of the brief narrative in which they occur—they fail as metaphors; at best, they are paralogical metaphors, or metaphors with no substantial ground connecting the tenor and the vehicle. What, for example, is the intrinsic similarity between the fox and humans? Why not use a dog, or a goat, or a pig? It seems to me that the author could achieve essentially the same result with any number of different animals, a fact that argues against the claim that the fox is a metaphor for humankind. And we could easily make similar arguments against calling the tree and the grapes metaphors. The fox, the grapes, and the tree do act as substitutes (and herein lies the rationale for calling allegory a kind of trope) for humans, desires, and obstacles, respectively, but I would not call those substitutions metaphorical ones. The substitutions in this parable do not depend on similarity; instead, they result from the author’s need to realize his rhetorical purpose (to satirize humankind’s remarkable ability to rationalize our failures) via a narrative. Thus, the tropes that he uses function as elements of a figural narrative, but they do not necessarily work well as individual figures of speech, nor do they need to.

If one remains committed to defining allegory through the concept of metaphor, then he or she might claim that the parable as a whole functions as a metaphor. In this scenario, the narrative acts as the vehicle and the author’s rhetorical purpose acts as the implied tenor. Even this proposal—which seems plausible at first blush—strains the logic behind metaphor. There is no common ground between the narrative, strictly speaking, and Aesop’s message; the similarities surface only after we have interpreted the

4. As a counterexample, consider a textbook case of the Homeric simile: Homer uses a lion as a metaphorical figure for Achilles, and to substitute a gopher for that lion would destroy the effect he seeks to produce. Similarly, one could argue that a fox does resemble a human more than does some other animal in terms of the capacity for rationalization, but I am not convinced by this. The ability to rationalize our decisions strikes me as distinctly human, and in that sense no other animal would work well metaphorically here.
story, only after we have decided what the message is. To say, therefore, that the story of the fox and the grapes is a metaphor for humanity’s penchant for explaining away our shortcomings is tantamount to making the tautological claim that the author’s meaning is a metaphor for his message. In reaching this point in the hermeneutic process, we have actually recognized but not articulated the fact that the figural elements in the parable are the result of the author’s desire to narrativize his rhetorical purpose.

So, what we end up calling allegorical figures can be recognized as such only after we determine how they function in the context of a narrative. Sometimes a metaphor is just a metaphor, but sometimes it does become allegorical. We must also recognize the existence of a more ambiguous middle ground, an interpretive realm in which we might not be sure whether a figure is “merely” metaphorical or whether it is allegorical. Some examples of figuration—including the Christ reference I used above—immediately evoke such powerful and well-known narratives that we often jump to the conclusion that they must be intended as allegories. When a character becomes a Christ figure or a Satan figure, or when a garden appears Eden-like, the whole Christian narrative of humanity’s Fall gets activated and we tend to read these figures as allegorical ones because we assume that the text in which they appear is a transformation of that prior cultural narrative into a new story. We might be wrong in jumping to this conclusion, but the fact that we do so often make the leap to the allegorical in cases such as these helps to illustrate my larger point that allegory, unlike metaphor, is a concept that we can apply only within the context of a narrative. Quintilian succinctly defines a trope as “a shift of a word or phrase from its proper meaning to another” (425), but allegories need more time and space to develop than what is afforded by a single word or phrase. Thus, I contend that allegories are figures of narrative more than they are figures of speech, taken in the traditional sense. For this reason, among several others, I will be proposing a theory of allegory that is predicated on a rhetorical approach to narrative.

If allegory does belong to the family of tropes, then a rhetorically inflected approach to allegory must pay heed to the root meaning of the term “trope”—that is, “to turn.” If we want to identify a genre of allegory, then this tropological foundation strikes me as a good starting point. Rather than by virtue of the more traditional generic markers such as form, technique, or

5. This distinction between figures of speech and figures of narrative is meant only to convey the idea that allegory tends to work on a larger scale than do most (other) figures of speech, which often are indeed confined to a single word or phrase. Figures of speech and figures of narrative both apply to “verbal” utterances, but I want to stress that allegory entails the kind of extension characteristic of narrative; when we find allegory, we find not just words, but also (at least) agents, events, and often narrators, not to mention authors who tell stories to achieve some rhetorical end.
subject matter, the individual texts that comprise the family of allegorical narratives resemble one another primarily through the distinguishing feature of the authors’ intention to transform something (turn something) into something else. When we are dealing with allegory, the “something else” in this formulation is always a narrative that is highly figural. Aesop, to return to the example of the fox and the grapes, has as his ultimate aim the satirizing of humankind’s penchant for rationalizing our failures; to achieve this purpose he transforms his observation about humans into a narrative that relies on figuration—things representing or standing for other things. Generalizing from this particular case, I suggest that we define allegory as that class of works that fulfills its rhetorical purpose (whatever that purpose might be) by means of the transformation of some phenomenon into a figural narrative. Paying close attention to the author’s rhetorical purpose, which I maintain is the governing principle behind allegory, will allow us to account for both the whole-text type allegories on which critics such as Honig focus and the various textual manifestations of allegory on which I want to shed more light.

In the first section of this book, I deal with the kinds of texts that most readers most closely associate with allegory—those complete narratives that readers interpret, often confidently and relatively unproblematically, as entirely allegorical. I situate these texts on a continuum, ranging from what I call strong allegory (the subject of the next chapter) to weak allegory (chapter 2). I use the terms “strong” and “weak” in a value-free way; I do not intend to privilege the strong over the weak, or vice versa. Rather, as will become clear, these terms simply designate degrees of allegoricalness that we can measure, however roughly, on a narrative scale. Approaching allegory in this way will allow us to talk productively but not reductively about allegory while also allowing us to understand how some texts that are not clearly allegorical (that are not “strong” allegories, in other words) elicit very strong allegorical readings.

While developing the criteria by which to establish a continuum of allegorical narratives can help us to understand and appreciate entire works of fiction—those narratives that Honig calls “totally achieved literary creations”—we also need to be aware that allegory can be present in a narrative without being the defining aspect of it; indeed, allegorical narratives can be present in a larger work of fiction that is not itself an allegory. Thus, in the later sections of the book I move to a discussion of what I call “embedded allegory,” subdividing this category into “independent,” “dependent,” and “interdependent” embedded allegory (chapter 3). Next, I examine further manifestations of allegory in narrative fiction. Chapter 4 addresses “thematic” allegory (a work that presents allegory as one of the themes of the narrative),
and chapter 5 lays out a theory of “ironic” allegory (an allegorical narrative that the reader is not meant to take seriously, or to accept at face value).

I realize that such a taxonomic approach to allegory might make it appear as though I am implying that all instances of “allegory” will fit neatly into one of these categories or subcategories and that I can provide clear-cut criteria that we can use to classify these instances. I am not; many, if not most, examples of allegory offer some resistance to this process. I recognize, therefore, that the model I am proposing needs to provide some flexibility and that the borders between different kinds of allegory are somewhat amorphous. Moreover, several of what at first glance appear to be binary oppositions within my schema (most notably strong or weak and interdependent or non-interdependent) might actually work better if we think of them on a continuum rather than as categories with fixed and impermeable boundaries. Similarly, I readily acknowledge that many allegories will be combinations of the categories I have devised—weak independent embedded allegories or strong ironic allegories, for example.

The complexity that becomes apparent as we analyze contemporary instances of allegory will make clear the value of the heuristic I am developing, a heuristic designed not to forge Procrustean categories but rather to provide a flexible schema for recognizing and analyzing the varieties of allegory in what many assume to be an age that is inhospitable to allegory. My aim throughout this book is to provide what I think are good examples of the basic categories I have described above while at the same time acknowledging that some cases are less clear-cut than others. I find this more invigorating than threatening. In my penultimate chapter (chapter 6) I devote my full attention to a very complex story—“Click” by John Barth—that serves as a good test case in the sense that it does not fall neatly into any one area. As we will see, though, even such an evasive narrative will reveal the utility of the rhetorical approach to allegory that I am proposing.

To begin examining in more detail how allegory works, I want to return to my definition of allegory (that class of works that fulfills its rhetorical purpose by means of the transformation of some phenomenon into a figural narrative) in order to parse it; I explicate the key terms in the order in which they appear in my definition.

“Rhetorical Purpose”

This phrase denotes an author’s intended effect(s). As I mentioned earlier, the author’s rhetorical purpose is the governing force behind allegory. This question of authorial intention (and whether it is knowable or something
that should be sought) is of course a central concern in the theorizing of literature, especially since the mid-twentieth century. I do not intend to add to the debate that surrounds that issue; instead, I take it as a given that authorial intention is a crucial component of allegory. I concede that we might never know definitively what an author wants to convey through his or her work, but a rhetorical approach to allegory operates under the premise that an author has hermeneutic intentions and necessitates that we make an effort to figure out what these are. This process is not complete guesswork; indeed, the author’s intention becomes knowable through the details of the text and its construction. A text progresses in one way as opposed to another, and that fact provides readers with valuable hermeneutic information.

“Transformation” and “Phenomenon”

By “transformation,” I mean a change in form, either from nonnarrative to narrative or, if the phenomenon transformed is itself a narrative, from that narrative into another. As a means of supporting this aspect of my definition of allegory I turn here to a rather unlikely source, the historiographer Hayden White. In *The Content of the Form*, White makes the provocative and somewhat contentious claim—at least for other historians—that all narrative works of history must be considered allegorical because the process of transforming literal events into a narrative requires “tropes and figures of thought” (48). We should avoid, White cautions, “mistaking a narrative account of real events for a literal account thereof. A narrative account is always a figurative account, an allegory” (50). While I would stop short of labeling all works of narrative history allegories, I do think that White has the right idea regarding how allegory works. It metamorphoses a real (possibly historical) phenomenon into a narrative structure. If we are to understand allegory, we must recognize it in these terms.

Arguing that allegory is a transformation emphasizes what I see as its “progressive” nature—something happens in allegory, and by that I mean something fundamentally different from what we mean when we say that something happens in a realistic narrative. In this latter instance, we refer to the incidents of the narrative, or the plot, when someone asks us what happens in the work; in the former, we refer to the kind of transformation that occurs as some “thing” is repackaged in a narrative structure. Thus, for example, if I ask someone what a novel such as Richard Ford’s *Independence Day* is about, a response along the lines of “a man, struggling with middle age, the death of a child, and the dissolution of his marriage, takes a trip with his adolescent son” will generally suffice. I would be less satisfied, on the
other hand, if someone were to tell me that Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is about pigs in conflict. Although accurate in the most literal sense, this response fails to capture what most readers would consider the essence of Orwell’s novel. Judith Butler’s formulation of allegory as “a way of giving a narrative form to something which cannot be directly narrativized” perhaps overstates the case slightly (I will argue that the “something” can indeed be and often is narrativized directly); it does, however, capture the idea that in allegory some thing (that “thing” that a synopsis of the literal Orwell story misses) is transformed into a narrative and that that indirect way of achieving some rhetorical purpose has merit (369).

The phenomenon—the “something”—that is transformed in an allegory could be nearly anything—an idea, a historical event, a lesson or moral, a situation or predicament, or even a previous narrative. The transformation of the phenomenon can be understood as occurring on four levels. In the first level, the phenomenon exists as the allegory’s main object of “imitation.” Aesop, in his fable of the fox and the grapes, wants to represent a particular human foible—our habit of rationalizing our failures, of devaluing those desires we are unable to attain; this is his phenomenon. At the second level, he constructs a literal narrative (the one with the fox and grapes) that illustrates the phenomenon and provides a bridge to the third level. In the third level, the reader infers the figural intent behind the literal narrative: the fox is a stand-in for any human and the grapes for something the human strongly desires. That inference, in turn, allows us to move to the fourth level, the recognition of Aesop’s rhetorical purpose: using satire to goad his readers into recognizing this particular human failing and to reflect on it.

It is my contention that this quadripartite structure—including the object or phenomenon to be represented and transformed, a literal narrative that enacts the transformation, a secondary narrative that emerges from the figural interpretation of the literal narrative, and the author’s intention—characterizes all allegorical narratives. To further illustrate how this struc-

6. I anticipate that this idea of the “phenomenon” will prove to be the most contentious component of my definition of allegory; it does, I concede, raise some legitimately thorny questions: Is the category “phenomenon” too broad to be of any real help? Does a reader have to know the phenomenon before reading the text in order to “get” the allegory? Does, therefore, allegory depend on an “elite” readership? Is a text (still) an allegory if it is misread or “under-read”? Can a text be an allegory if the author did not have a particular phenomenon in mind when he or she composed the work? Recognizing that they present serious challenges, I will address these questions in the chapters that follow, and even more directly in the concluding chapter. At this point, though, we should note that many of the issues that lie behind these questions—meaning, intention, reception—pertain not just to my conception of allegory, but to the interpretation of most any narrative; indeed, these issues have animated hermeneutics for centuries. This takes us back to a basic tenet of my approach to allegory—that is, the recognition of its narrative nature.
ture functions and how the four levels intersect, we can look at Jean de La Fontaine's reworking of the fable of the fox and the grapes. In his version, La Fontaine makes a slight but significant addition to the opening lines:

A starving fox—a Gascon, Normans claim,
But Gascons say a Norman—saw a cluster
Of luscious-looking grapes of purplish luster
Dangling above him on a trellis frame. (205)

The rest of the story remains largely unchanged from Aesop's telling of it, but La Fontaine's decision to note that the fox's identity—as determined by its geographical and ancestral heritage—changes depending on who does the observing allows us to look freshly at this fable as an example of allegory. The slight change that La Fontaine makes to the literal narrative of the fox and the grapes does not change the basic way that we read the parable; we recognize the same hermeneutic clues and perform the same interpretive maneuvers toward the same end of discovering his purpose. The observation of the human tendency to rationalize our failures also remains a constant in La Fontaine's version; however, the "name calling" element of the later variation of the story forces a reexamination of the particular phenomenon that the author seeks to narrativize. In addition to bringing to light a particular human tendency, La Fontaine adds another dimension to it: we see this tendency as an existential failing and understand that groups of people are more likely to notice and point out this failing in others than they are in themselves. In other words, La Fontaine shares Aesop's purpose of asking his audience to confront a human weakness, but he adds a wrinkle to that purpose by making it difficult for us to say that the weakness exists in others but not in ourselves. La Fontaine's observation about the human character might be summed up as "humans are quick to ascribe faults to others that they do not recognize in themselves." In a general sense, La Fontaine's rhetorical purpose is quite similar to Aesop's: to force readers to confront a human foible. The particular weakness, however, or the "phenomenon" represented, is slightly different in the two versions of the story.

"Figural"

The addition of the adjective "figural" is meant to designate the transformation of the phenomenon from level two to level three: we recognize that a literal narrative stands in for another, usually more general, narrative. In this sense, the figuration is implicit in the literal narrative, as it is imbued with
the authorial purpose. When encountering an allegorical narrative, readers who remain with its literal components are underreading—they remain stuck at the second level of the allegorical transformation. Because allegory is figurative in nature, it bears some resemblance to metaphor, a trope that, as we have seen, some critics actually use to define it. In their *Handbook to Literature*, for example, Holman and Harmon contend, echoing Quintilian, that allegory “may be thought of as an elaborate metaphor in which the tenor is never expressed, although it is implied” (288). While it can be helpful to think of the real phenomenon or rhetorical purpose in my definition as a kind of “tenor,” I do not think it is adequate to conceive of the figural narrative that emerges after the transformation as a “vehicle,” because that conception does not account for the radical change in form—the narrativization—that is fundamental to allegory. Allegory does more than compare—whether implicitly or explicitly—two “things”; it changes, as I tried to show with my reading of Aesop’s fable involving the fox and the grapes, one “thing” into something else.

Still, like metaphor, allegory is figurative or symbolic, and this serves to distinguish it from mimetic fiction. In mimetic narratives, real phenomena are frequently incorporated into a narrative structure—as themes or settings, for example—but this incorporation differs from the kind of transformation that I see operating in allegory. As Scholes and Kellogg note in their landmark study *The Nature of Narrative*, “Allegory is distinguished from other forms of fictional narrative by the illustrative character of its imagery” (109). This illustrative aspect of allegory necessitates a typological approach that often comes at the expense of mimetic representation. I would argue for a continuum, however, stretching from the most obviously allegorical to the most determinedly mimetic rather than trying to fix a clear line of demarcation between the two.

“Narrative”

Critics have long recognized a close association between allegory and narrative. The congruence of allegory and narrative is obvious in cases of narrative allegories—allegorical stories or narratives, in other words. Gay Clifford, for example, claims that literary allegory “is distinguished by its reliance on structured narrative” (14). Speaking to the now well-rehearsed distinction between allegory and symbol, Clifford goes on to argue that “It would be

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7. I use the term “narrative” here, but I do not want to limit the scope of my project to literary narrative exclusively. There are certainly narratives in other media (film, painting, sculpture, etc.) that could be allegorical.
ridiculous to say that symbolism is impossible without narrative: of allegory it would be true” (14). Narrative is essential for allegory because allegory entails “some form of controlled or directed process” (15), and narrative is the vehicle through which such a process is both represented and structured. The idea of process clearly invokes concepts connected to narrative, concepts such as plot and temporal progression. It is not surprising, then, that Clifford understands allegory as a “kinetic” mode.

But the connection between allegory and narrative runs even deeper than the coincidental convergence that we see in narrative allegories. Indeed, even Paul de Man, a theorist who focuses on allegorical signs within a work of fiction rather than on entire narratives, finds that allegory rests on a structure that is inherently narrative. Subsequent to an interpretation of one of Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems, de Man argues that the structure of allegory manifests itself “in the tendency of the language toward narrative” (Blindness 225). De Man’s larger aim is to contrast irony and allegory, and he does so through the issue of temporality. Irony is synchronic, allegory diachronic. Even in a lyric poem, what de Man identifies as allegory entails duration, and duration in the context of a literary work implies narrative more than it does lyric, for example.8

As a side note, and with the understanding that I will return to de Man in more detail in chapter 2, I want to acknowledge here that in one important way I am following the direction set by de Man when he began the process of rehabilitating allegory in the 1960s by reemphasizing its rhetorical nature; however, de Man’s use of “rhetoric” differs markedly from the idea of rhetoric as the “art of persuasion.” De Man focuses much of his attention on what he calls the “allegorical sign,” which he holds in opposition to the concept of “symbol.” Temporality, as I showed above, distinguishes the two; whereas symbol functions synchronically, de Man argues, allegory operates diachronically:

In the world of the symbol it would be possible for the image to coincide with the substance, since the substance and its representation do not differ in their being but only in their extension: they are part and whole of the same set of categories. Their relationship is one of simultaneity, which, in truth, is spatial in kind, and in which the intervention of time is merely a matter of contingency, whereas, in the world of allegory, time is the originary constitutive category. The relationship between allegorical sign and its meaning (signifié) is not decreed by dogma. . . . We have, instead, a rela-

8. Robert L. Caserio arrives at a different conclusion regarding de Man’s ideas concerning narrative. See his “A Pathos of Uncertain Agency’: Paul de Man and Narrative.”
tionship between signs in which the reference to their respective meanings has become of secondary importance. But this relationship between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority. (*Blindness* 207)

In keeping with his deconstructionist predilections, de Man clearly favors allegory because of its failure to have signifier and signified coincide. As Jim Hansen points out, in de Man’s approach, “... in opposition to symbol, allegory consciously points to its own temporality and, in so doing, embarrasses its own claims to truth” (672). And it is of course precisely this kind of embarrassment that the deconstructionist seeks in and from a text. The value of de Man’s approach lies in his recasting of allegory as a rhetorical figure; this move opens up significant possibilities for recognizing the variety of ways in which allegory can figure into a narrative text even if it does not finally define the generic or ontological status of that text. These kinds of texts will be the central concern of chapters 3–6.

In the first section of this book I intend to address the kinds of narrative texts that reveal the most obvious gap in de Man’s rhetorical approach: its apparent lack of concern for complete narratives that not only contain “allegorical signs” but that seem to be—or even insist on being—allegories. Northrop Frye calls such works “actual” allegories, which we have, he explains, “when a poet explicitly indicates the relationship of his images to examples and precepts, and so tries to indicate how a commentary on him should proceed” (90). Because de Man focuses exclusively on texts that are not typically considered allegorical in this sense, it is unclear how such a narrative would fit into the de Manian schema. Readers of actual allegories, I contend, usually find that the allegorical signs succeed pretty well in representing something, no matter what a critic practicing what Hansen calls de Man’s “relentless strain of deconstruction” might argue to the contrary (665).

Clearly, a refocusing of allegory through a narratological lens such as I am proposing requires, in addition to a definition of allegory, a clear articulation of what I mean by narrative. My approach to reading narrative—including allegorical narratives—borrows from the work of James Phelan, who proposes a rhetorically inflected version of narratology in a series of five works:
*Worlds from Words, Reading People, Reading Plots, Narrative as Rhetoric, Living to Tell About It,* and most recently, *Experiencing Fiction.* In each of these works, Phelan starts from the premise that “narrative itself can be fruitfully understood as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (*Living* 19). As for analyzing and interpreting such a rhetorical act, Phelan “locates meaning in a feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader-response. In other words,” Phelan continues, “for the purposes of interpreting narratives, the conception assumes that texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways, that those designs are conveyed through the language, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as the genres and conventions readers use to understand them, and that reader responses are a function, guide, and test of how designs are created through textual and intertextual phenomena” (18).

I find two aspects of Phelan’s approach to be particularly useful. One is his recognition of the multifaceted nature of narrative. This recognition allows him to transcend the textuality of narrative and to view narrative as an act whose primary manifestation is as a text. Such an approach necessitates the reintroduction of authorial intention (or “agency”) and reader response, issues that can be easily overlooked in the textually oriented incarnation of narratology that had its origins in Russian Formalism and French Structuralism. The second point of Phelan’s that I find helpful as I wrestle with allegory is the “feedback loop” as a heuristic for explaining the phenomenon of meaning in narrative. We can see the utility of this approach for my purposes by looking forward to the question that I will claim ultimately decides how critics have approached allegory; that is, to what entity should we turn in order to decide whether a narrative is or is not allegorical? I will posit three possible answers: 1) genetic issues, including the author, his or her intention, and the context of composition; 2) the text itself; and 3) readerly concerns. These coincide neatly with Phelan’s tripartite hermeneutic feedback loop consisting of “authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader-response” (18). Rather than aligning myself with any of the three broad allegorical camps I have described above, I am going to argue that each of these entities plays an important role in allegory and that we cannot reduce allegory to a single, primary cause or essential feature. I want to be faithful to what I see as the complexity and variety of actual instances of allegory by offering an approach to allegory that remains flexible. This flexibility can come from something like Phelan’s feedback loop because it (the feedback-loop idea) locates meaning in a recursive relationship among a variety of crucial features of the narrative act.
Rather than identifying one particular feature of an allegorical narrative or its origins as the source of its ontological status, I will argue that allegory emerges from a complex interaction among authorial intention, the nature of the narrative text in question, the rhetorical situation that gave rise to that text, and the reader’s response to it. This conception of allegory understands it as a kind of gestalt, and it differs significantly from the ways in which critics have traditionally treated this subfield of literary studies. To illustrate how a narrative-rhetorical approach offers a new perspective from which to view allegory, I would like to turn to an exemplary text, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. I have chosen this novel because it is so widely known and so widely accepted as an allegory; beginning with such a text will relieve me of the task of “proving” that it is an allegory and allow me to focus instead on examining two issues that are central to my concerns in this book. The first of these is the question of how critics usually determine whether a text is allegorical, and the second is why we can achieve consensus about some texts, such as *Animal Farm*, but not about others. My hypothesis is that lingering questions about the allegorical status of some works of fiction point to problems with the usual means we employ to assign that status and that these are problems that a narrative-rhetorical approach can mitigate, if not eliminate completely.

**Allegory and Genetic Concerns**

**A. Authorial Intention**

Broadly speaking, we can classify the different conceptions of and approaches to allegory that we find in twentieth-century literary criticism according to how they answer one key question: to what entity should we turn in order to decide whether a narrative is or is not allegorical? Traditional conceptions of allegory give deference to the author; allegory is an intentional act. This remains the dominant idea for a number of contemporary critics and probably for a majority of contemporary readers; for people of this inclination, the intentions of the author are of paramount importance and are the compelling force behind the interpretive act.

If genetic considerations are the standard for judging allegoricalness, then the case for Orwell’s *Animal Farm* would seem to be fairly clear-cut, even if authorial intention is the only piece of evidence we have. From his own writing on the subject of this novel, we know that Orwell felt that the Russians had perverted the socialist ideal and that he was “convinced that
the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if we wanted a revival of the Socialist movement” (405); he apparently intended his narrative to be a means for achieving a larger political end. Indeed, in the preface to the Ukrainian edition of the novel, Orwell confesses that, following a trip to Spain,

I thought of exposing the Soviet myth in a story that could be easily understood by almost everyone and which could be easily translated into other languages. However, the actual details of the story did not come to me for some time until one day (I was then living in a small village) I saw a little boy, perhaps ten years old, driving a huge cart-horse along a narrow path, whipping it whenever it tried to turn. It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat.

I proceeded to analyze Marx’s theory from the animals’ point of view. To them it was clear that the concept of a class struggle between humans was pure illusion, since whenever it was necessary to exploit animals, all humans united against them: the true struggle is between animals and humans. From this point of departure, it was not difficult to elaborate the story. (405–6)

Such an explicit pronouncement from the author concerning both the genesis of his work and his aims in writing it cannot be dismissed lightly and must surely influence the ways in which readers engage the narrative. This pronouncement, in other words, provides the basis for an interpretive hypothesis that the reader can then test against the details of Orwell’s text. If Orwell claims that he intends his story to expose the reality of Soviet-style socialism, then it behooves his readers, on some level (an ethical one, I would argue), to read it in such a way that they take that claim seriously and as if it were made in good faith, at least until other evidence emerges that might call into question Orwell’s professed intention.10

9. This quotation, and those that follow from Orwell, are from his own preface to the Ukrainian edition of Animal Farm. It is reprinted in The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell.

10. Readers of Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene face a similar dynamic. In a letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, Spenser writes: “Sir knowing how doubtfully all Allegories may be construed, and this booke of mine, which I have entituled the Faery Queene, being a continued Allegory, or darke conceit, I have thought good as well for avoyding of gealous opinions and misconstructions, as also for your better light in reading therof, (being by you so commanded,) to discover unto you the general intention and meaning, which in the whole course thereof I have fashioned, without expressing of any particular purposes or by-accidents therein occa-
In making this kind of prefatory pronouncement, Orwell arouses in his readers certain expectations concerning the kind of narrative they are going to encounter. Although I have resisted adopting an exclusively generic approach to allegory, the concept of genre is nevertheless relevant to our discussion. Rather than thinking of genre as a kind of literature, we need to understand it, following E. D. Hirsch, as “a type of meaning” (Validity 72). Although Hirsch largely restricts his discussion of genre to a section of his book devoted to explaining verbal meaning, what he says has definite implications for our discussion of the interpretation of narrative. This is especially true in the case of allegorical narratives because the author of an allegory writes with a specific purpose in mind and with the intention of transforming some phenomenon that the reader is meant to recognize. For Hirsch, the concept of genre is central to the successful realization of such a purpose, and it applies more to the interpreter than to the speaker of the text because, as he explains, “the details of meaning that an interpreter understands are powerfully determined and constituted by his meaning expectations. And these expectations arise from the interpreter’s conception of the type of meaning that is being expressed” (72). Generic expectations, then, are expectations concerning what type of meaning a speaker (or an author) intends, and such expectations are often critical in the process of interpretation. Rather than trying to argue for allegory in all of its various manifestations as a genre with commonly identifiable characteristics, we might more profitably argue that some authors, including Orwell in the case of Animal Farm, intend their works to mean something identifiable on a figurative level. In other words, Orwell’s preface prepares us to respond to a narrative that meets my definition of allegory: the fulfillment of a rhetorical purpose by means of the transformation of some phenomenon into a figural narrative. The phenomenon, as Orwell makes clear, is the Soviet implementation (or perversion) of Marxist theory, and the fabulist story, of course, is the figural narrative. Once the reader knows that this is what the author

11. In his later work, The Aims of Interpretation, Hirsch puts forward a fairly persuasive argument against a model of interpretation that relies heavily on applying the concept of genre to literature entirely or to some subset of it. Critics who pursue this angle, according to Hirsch, “assume that literature as a whole or some sub-genre of it has a definable essence or telos which can govern the formulation of criteria. But we may be permitted to be skeptical so long as that essence is not satisfactorily defined. According to Aristotle, the essence of any class is that system of characteristics which are shared by all its members, and which are not shared by things outside the class. Thus, a true class requires a set of distinguishing features that are inclusive within the class and exclusive outside it; it requires a differentia specifica. That, according to Aristotle, is the key to definition and to essence. But, in fact, nobody has ever so defined literature or any important genre within it” (120–21). This applies to allegory.
has in mind, the act of mapping correspondences between narrative and the historical phenomenon (Napoleon the pig = Stalin, for example) becomes a fairly straightforward process. This is the work that needs to be done if one is to “get” the allegory.

The question of Orwell's intentions raises an important issue regarding the interpretation and evaluation of a work of literature: aesthetic merit. In fact, we can attribute directly to this issue a significant portion of the “death wish” that some critics have harbored for allegory. If we hold Orwell to the standards that have dominated literary studies over the past two centuries and that have been at least partly responsible for the negative connotations that allegory has carried during that time, then we might incline toward a negative evaluation of *Animal Farm* as an aesthetic object—as a fictional narrative, some might argue, it is too contrived and its meaning is too obvious. Moreover, as his preface makes clear, Orwell's primary intention might have been to produce political results (“exposing the Soviet myth in a story that could be easily understood by almost everyone and which could be easily translated into other languages”), an aim that some might see as being at cross purposes with more “purely” aesthetic objectives. And, indeed, many critics have focused almost exclusively on the political aspect of *Animal Farm*. Witness the perspective of Richard Rorty:

Orwell was successful because he wrote exactly the right [book] at exactly the right time. His description of a particular historical contingency was, it turned out, just what was required to make a difference to the future of liberal politics. He broke the power of what Nabokov enjoyed calling “Bolshevik propaganda” over the minds of liberal intellectuals in England and America. He thereby put us twenty years ahead of our French opposite numbers. They had to wait for *The Gulag Archipelago* before they stopped thinking that liberal hope required the conviction that things behind the Iron Curtain would necessarily get better, and stopped thinking that solidarity against the capitalists required ignoring what the Communist oligarchs were doing. Whereas Nabokov sensitised his readers to the permanent possibility of small-scale cruelties produced by the private pursuit of bliss, Orwell sensitised his to a set of excuses for cruelty which had been put into circulation by a particular group—the use of the rhetoric of “human equality” by intellectuals who had allied themselves with a spectacularly successful criminal gang. (“The Last Intellectual” 141)

This evaluation of the novel does not privilege complexity or ambiguity or even beauty as much as it does clarity of vision and descriptive efficacy. Orwell provided a new way of seeing a particular historical situation, and his
intention was to make this as clear as possible.

But should the political and didactic aims of Orwell’s novel—even if those aims are undeniably met—automatically engender a harsh aesthetic judgment? Or, perhaps we simply and necessarily have a lower standard of aesthetic merit for works whose genesis is political and whose intentions appear to be didactic? A rhetorically oriented approach to allegory can help us with these seemingly intractable issues by providing a more solid ground from which to offer an aesthetic judgment. Rather than beginning with some ineffable standard of aesthetic merit to which a particular work either mysteriously (and sometimes inexplicably) rises or fails to, the rhetorical critic starts by asking what an author’s purpose in writing that work might have been. Phelan explains that “our question is whether the work under consideration is a high-quality example of how to achieve [some] purpose whatever that purpose happens to be” (*Experiencing* 142). Once we have made a hermeneutical determination concerning the author’s purpose, Phelan continues, “we can then proceed to judge the quality of the work within the terms appropriate to that kind” (142). Proceeding in this manner allows the critic to value *Animal Farm* as a work of art that aims for very specific ends and that achieves those ends in a way that speaks to the author’s mastery of his aesthetic craft. Orwell, in other words, does not have to write *Madame Bovary* in order to produce a novel that has artistic merit, because he was aiming for a different target than was Flaubert.12

**B. Historical Context and the Author**

If we expand the range of genetic criticism beyond the author’s (explicitly stated) intentions and look as well at the historical circumstances in which Orwell wrote and at his own biography, some readers might conclude that Orwell’s work was bound to be allegorical, whether or not he consciously intended it to be. Fredric Jameson, in his work on postcolonial literary theory, adopts this kind of position regarding allegory. In “Third-World Lit-

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12. Simply recognizing the need to include the author’s purpose in any consideration of aesthetic value, however, does not eliminate the subjective aspect of this kind of judgment. Thus, we are unlikely ever to arrive at some universal standard of aesthetic merit. For a thorough treatment of this issue, and an interesting case of applied aesthetic judgment, see chapter 6 of Phelan’s *Experiencing Fiction*. Here Phelan describes four levels of aesthetic judgments, with the fourth allowing for the comparison of whole works even if they have different aims. Phelan comes to the conclusion that we will not find any elusive universal standards on which to base our judgments, but he does not find that this makes comparative evaluations impossible. They will, in all likelihood, be subjective, but this does not mean that they will be completely idiosyncratic.
erature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Jameson makes the sweeping
claim that “All third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical” (69). This is
so, Jameson maintains, because the historical, political, and material con-
text of third-world literature always makes the private story of an individual
(generally the stuff of novels) a statement about the collective whole. Thus,
when Jameson uses the term allegory he intends it in a particular way;
he believes that all third-world texts must be read as “national allegories”
because these works, “even those which are seemingly private and invested
with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension
in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is
always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture
and society” (69, emphasis in original). Jameson contrasts the situation of the
third-world text with that of the first-world text. In the case of the latter, we
Western readers have the “luxury” of accepting the private realm described
in literary texts as simply and exclusively private. This “view from the top,”
as Jameson describes it,

is epistemologically crippling, and reduces its subjects to the illusions of a
host of fragmented subjectivities, to the poverty of individual experience
of isolated monads, to dying individual bodies without collective pasts or
futures bereft of any possibility of grasping the social totality. This placeless
individuality, this structural idealism which affords us the luxury of the
Sartrean blink, offers a welcome escape from the “nightmare of history,”
but at the same time it condemns our culture to psychologism and the
“projections” of private subjectivity. All of this is denied to third-world
culture, which must be situational and materialist despite itself. And it is
this, finally, which must account for the allegorical nature of third-world
culture, where the telling of the individual story and the individual experi-
ence cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the expe-
rience of the collectivity itself. (85–86)

In this passage Jameson significantly attaches the adjective “allegorical” not
to “text,” “story,” or “literature,” but rather to “culture” itself. Thus, we must
recognize that in his view, the determining force behind allegory is culture
and its historical and materialist situation.13

13. For a trenchant critique of Jameson’s position on national allegory, see Aijaz Ahmad’s In
Theory: Class, Nations, Literatures. Ahmad’s arguments against Jameson include the assertions
that Jameson simply ignores many third-world texts that are not allegories and that Jameson
makes out all third-world writers to be inherently nationalistic. For more on the debate that
ensued as a result of the work of Jameson and Ahmad, among others, see On Jameson: From
Postmodernism to Globalization, edited by Caren Irn and Ian Buchanan. The essays “National
At first glance, this conviction that allegory can arise—perhaps even unbidden by a specific author—out of a particular historical situation might not seem to apply directly to Orwell. I think it does, however, for two reasons. First, in his famous essay “Shooting an Elephant,” Orwell’s thesis echoes what Jameson says, albeit from the perspective of the colonizer rather than the colonized. Orwell writes of his experience as a police officer in Burma during the time of British rule, and he makes it clear that everything he did and everything the native Burmese did reflected the political and historical realities of the context. The impetus for the essay, Orwell recalls, was “a tiny incident in itself” (Collected 2), but he comes to see it as revealing of “the real nature of imperialism—the real motives for which despotic governments act” (2). At issue in this case was what to do about an elephant that was “ravaging the bazaar” of a small Burmese village. Orwell, in his capacity as a security officer, was summoned to do something about the situation. With his rifle in hand, Orwell confronted the elephant before a crowd of more than two thousand interested Burmese. While he never intended to harm the elephant, Orwell comments that his position as an officer of the imperialist power and his possession of “the magical rifle” made it so that he would have little choice in the matter. “And suddenly,” he writes,

I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward irresistibly. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man’s dominion of the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd—seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. . . . He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it. (5)

Orwell feels deeply his position here, apparently having internalized the larger political struggle in which he plays only a minor role. Moreover, Orwell’s acute consciousness of the plight of the native people and his developing sense of the insidious folly of the British imperial project predispose him to recognize the allegorical potential of this “tiny incident” with the elephant.

Using Orwell’s expository essay as background material, we might rea-
sonably draw some conclusions about how Orwell views himself and his position in the world. In particular, we can say with some confidence that Orwell was the kind of person for whom certain historical contexts were also “rhetorical situations.” When I refer to the rhetorical situation, I do not mean simply the setting of the narrative proper, but rather the context of its actual composition. Following Lloyd Bitzer, we shall define the rhetorical situation as “a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about significant modification of the exigence” (386). Clarifying his terminology, Bitzer explains that an “exigence” constitutes “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (386). “Shooting an Elephant” is essentially an essay describing Orwell’s epiphany concerning the true nature of colonialism and its impact on both the colonizer and the colonized; this is the exigence that his work seeks to unmask. Such exposure of the exigence might, we can hope, lead to an eventual change in the situation.

Turning back to the fictional Animal Farm, the reader will certainly recognize a similar rhetorical dynamic: a writer recognizes a situation that is “other than it should be” and he sets to writing about it in such a way to effect some change. As Rorty argues, rhetorical acts—or “redescriptions”—that “change our minds on political situations . . . are the sort of thing which only writers with very special talents, writing at just the right moment in just the right way, are able to bring off” (143). Rorty makes a good case that Orwell is one of the writers with these special talents, and I would contend that his ability to translate historical contexts into rhetorical situations is chief among them. When we view the author of Animal Farm in this way the allegorical nature of the novel seems, if not predetermined, then at least unsurprising. The combination of Orwell’s personal predilections and the historical moment in which he lived and wrote is a powerful indicator of how we should read this narrative.14

**Allegory and Textual Phenomena**

A second view of allegory—a formalist one—shifts the focus from the authorial and genetic issues I discussed above to the text itself. Morton Bloomfield

14. While clearly “fictional” in an important sense of that word, Orwell’s narrative, as Rorty’s analysis makes clear, comes close to being a work of history, a narrative constructed around “real” historical actors and a series of “actual” historical events. This is why Rorty’s claim that Animal Farm amounts to a “redescription” makes sense.
gives voice to one version of this approach when he writes that “The only stable element in a literary work is its words, which, if we know the language in which it is written, have a meaning. The significance of that meaning is what may be called allegory. The problem of interpretation is the problem of allegory” (301). Bloomfield sounds very much like the critics who emphasize the reader’s role in constructing allegory, but the emphasis on language and the implication that the arrangement of words in a text results in a meaning that the reader can uncover give Bloomfield’s pronouncement a decidedly more formalist air. Orwell would seem to give some credence to this view when he claims that *Animal Farm* should be able to voice its own meaning.

We might take a single word from Orwell’s novel to illustrate what Bloomfield calls the significance of the meaning of the novel’s language. Indeed, the first word actually spoken by Old Major—“Comrades” (7)—goes a long way toward introducing the overarching theme of the work, situating it historically, and identifying the nature and identity of the characters because it is a term so inextricably and resonantly associated with the communist movement. As this example demonstrates, the most basic and fundamental of all textual phenomena—the words that comprise the novel—do in fact play a significant role in the transformation of Orwell’s rhetorical purpose into the narrative. And in some ways, the careful choice of language (as the term “comrades” reveals) can make the “problem” of interpretation that Bloomfield identifies far less problematic than it could otherwise be.  

When we endeavor to interpret *Animal Farm*, however, we are dealing not only with issues of language per se—issues of the meaning of words and the significance of those meanings, that is—but also with certain aspects of narrative, which also constitute “textual phenomena.” Take character as just one example. The personified animals in this work point readers rather unambiguously toward an allegorical interpretation. When the pig called Old Major addresses his fellow farm animals to tell them about his “strange dream” and the nature of the life of a farm animal (7), sophisticated readers recognize the obvious allegorical possibilities, or what Wayne Booth would call the “invitation” of allegory (*A Rhetoric of Irony* 25). Clearly, we are not meant to rest on the literal level of the narrative, as these fabulous characters offer the reader an invitation to respond to the text differently than we might respond to a more mimetically oriented narrative. Thus, the very nature of the characters has a significance that is at least as meaningful as the nature of

15. I do not mean to put undue emphasis on this single word; indeed, for a writer such as Walt Whitman “comrades” simply means “fellow men.” But, given the historical moment in which Orwell worked, this word does carry considerable and special weight. As a general point, I want it to illustrate the importance of this kind of textual phenomenon to the allegorical enterprise.
the language that Orwell uses. In addition to language and character, other textual phenomena that can contribute to the allegorical nature of a narrative include plot, point of view, and themes. I will address these more fully in the following chapters.

**Allegory and Readerly Concerns**

As reader-response critics are quick to point out, every text needs a reader if it is not to remain forever inert. The reader of a work of fiction, according to both these critics and rhetorical critics, encounters not only the textual phenomena that I addressed above but also the whole range of genetic considerations with which I opened this section. And the ethical reader—the very one who feels some obligation to give due credence to an author’s claims about his or her own work—has divided loyalties. While there is an obligation that attends genetic considerations, the reader must also be true to him or herself as a reader and maintain room for doubt. In other words, good readers will not simply take an author at his or her word concerning intentions and meanings, for the possibility always exists that a particular work of fiction will belie any authorial pronouncements about it. Despite what Jameson says about the power of context to impose “allegoricity” on a fictional narrative, we should be skeptical of such a sweeping claim. For these reasons, a number of critics—especially those with formalist leanings—have adopted the stance that allegory is primarily, if not wholly, a function of reading and that authorial intention and the context of composition have little or no role to play in deciding whether a work of fiction is, finally, allegorical or not.

Emphasizing the reader’s role in constructing allegory has a long history, going back at least to neo-Platonic Christian interpreters of Homer.16 Dante, one of the most influential early theorists of allegory, also conferred considerable power on the reader, power to uncover the truth that was often hidden behind the “beautiful lie” of a fictional work’s surface-level meaning.17 For Dante, validation of literature itself was at stake, and he needed a way to justify expending time and energy producing and reading “mere” fiction. His solution was similar to that hit upon by the Christian exegetes

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16. See Robert Lamberton’s *Homer the Theologian* for an insightful history of allegorical reading.
17. Dante’s most sustained discussion of allegory comes in Book II, chapter 1 of the *Convivio [The Banquet]*. Allegory is also the topic of the *Epistle to Can Grande*, but scholars cannot definitively attribute this work to Dante.
of classical texts: to use allegoresis as a tool to get at the moral and spiritual truths hidden beneath the literal level of literature. In this way readers can allow themselves to continue to enjoy and value works that might not at first seem reconcilable with a particular religious faith.

We can see, then, that allegory develops along two different tracks, a compositional track and a hermeneutic one. This split has been the source of some confusion, and critics often fall on one side of the divide or the other, depending on their critical inclinations. In the twentieth century, theorists such as Hirsch focused on the compositional side while others emphasized the reader and his or her role in interpreting a text. For this second group of critics, allegory is an interpretive enterprise rather than a genetic one. Maureen Quilligan, for example, remarks that “[Critics] have had to remind us that all literature is, in essence, allegorical, if only because all literature has readers, and readers, as is their wont, think about what the work ‘really’ means . . . ” (15). Striking a similar chord, Northrop Frye famously notes that “all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery. The instant that any critic permits himself to make a genuine comment about a poem . . . he has begun to allegorize” (89). Sayre Greenfield echoes this sentiment in *The Ends of Allegory*, in which he argues that “Allegory is always . . . a way of interpretation” (52). From this angle, it seems to be the reader who bears the responsibility of realizing literary allegory. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, there would appear to be nothing—including the author’s original intentions—that could stop a particular reader from construing any particular work as an allegory of something else.18

In practice, though, nearly all readers recognize certain constraints on their interpretive freedom; there are limits on what we can make *Animal Farm* mean, for example, even if we disregard Orwell’s commentary on it, his tendencies as a writer and thinker, and the circumstances in which he composed it. Indeed, in the preface that I have already cited, Orwell restrains himself from more extensive commentary on the narrative because, he asserts, “if [the novel] does not speak for itself, it is a failure” (406). One

18. Peter Berek has proposed an interesting way of reconciling the competing desires of the genetic critics and the reader-response critics—drawing a strict distinction between the act of interpreting an allegorical text and allegoresis, or the act of reading allegorically. “I argue,” Berek writes, “that interpreting the meaning of allegorical texts, like interpreting the meaning of other writings, has a claim to validity resting ultimately upon evidence as to the writer’s intended meaning. Allegoresis, on the other hand, though its practitioners make interpretive statements which at first sound much like those made by interpreters of allegorical works, ultimately makes claims to validity that have nothing to do with authorial intention, but rather with a truth the allegorizing reader knows which may well have been beyond the awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, of the work’s author” (118).
senses here that Orwell looks at his own work as Gay Clifford understands allegory, and that is as a mode that “presupposes an audience who will respond to it in specific ways” (36). Eliciting that response depends on what is in the actual narrative, on what the narrative literally says.

A rhetorical approach to narrative—and by extension to allegory—seeks to allow for the intersection of the compositional and hermeneutic tracks via the concepts of purpose (which I discussed above in relation to the idea of aesthetic merit) and authorial audience. Returning to Phelan’s conception of the rhetorical approach to narrative, we can see how the three apparently discrete variables I have been discussing operate together to allow for the emergence of meaning. Phelan explains that,

for the purposes of interpreting narratives, the [rhetorical] approach assumes that texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways [this would constitute “purpose” and would involve an understanding of genetic concerns]; that those designs are conveyed through words, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as genres and conventions readers use to understand them [broadly considered, these are the “textual phenomena”]; and that reader responses are a function of and, thus, a guide to how designs are created through textual and intertextual phenomena. (Experiencing 4)

Phelan’s model also works under the assumption that some readers of fictional narratives “[seek] to enter the authorial audience,” an audience constituted by “the author’s ideal reader” (4).¹⁹ It is from this assumption that Phelan develops his account of “rhetorical reading.” The reader, in such a schema, gains access to the authorial audience through a holistic approach to the text, one in which he or she takes into consideration the interplay of intention, context of composition, and textual phenomena.

The argument that I want to put forward regarding allegory—at least full-length allegories such as Animal Farm—is that they are by nature narrative rhetorical acts, and in order to understand them we must recognize the importance and the interrelatedness of all three of the aspects I have described above: genetic concerns, readerly concerns, and textual phenomena. When it comes to interpreting such narratives, Phelan’s feedback-loop metaphor, which positions these three narratological issues at the points of a rhetorical triangle, can help us see how they tend to initiate and then to compound or reinforce a meaning for the text.

¹⁹. I will address the idea and the significance of the authorial audience in more detail in the following chapter.
The feedback-loop metaphor strikes me as particularly apt for allegorical narratives because an actual feedback loop involves a system in which a transformation occurs, and as I conceive of the term, transformation is a defining characteristic of the allegorical enterprise. But rather than trying to identify one agent—whether it be the author, the rhetorical situation, the text, or the reader—responsible for that transformation, I prefer to attribute the change to the interplay of some, most, or all of these elements. Regarding a work such as *Animal Farm*, one that I call a strong allegory, the “input” into the feedback loop tends to be overwhelmingly “positive.” In other words, all of our acts in the reading process tend to produce results that positively reinforce the transformative impetus. In nontextual feedback loops, such a situation would lead to exponential growth (think of compounding interest, for example) or decline, whereas with a text, it leads to a particularly strong rhetorical effect.

As Phelan understands the hermeneutic process, the reader “may begin the interpretive inquiry from any one of [the] points on the rhetorical triangle, but the inquiry will at some point consider how each point both influences and can be influenced by the other two” (*Living* 18). Today, many—perhaps most—readers of *Animal Farm* will begin from the genetic point, knowing something about Orwell's intentions or the circumstances under which he composed the novel, or both. This information might come from teachers, from “Introductions” published with the actual novel, or simply from a cultural familiarity with the text. When this is the case, the reading process might become essentially an exercise in confirmation, one in which the textual phenomena are more or less simply and uncritically found to reinforce the stated desire of the author or to support the analysis of previous readers.

Similarly, a reader could begin the process of interpretation from a reaction to the text that precedes any actual engagement with it. For example, a reader with communist sympathies or socialist leanings might have formed an opinion of the work based on reactions to what he or she might have heard about the work and the politics of its author. Such an approach could certainly color one's response to and interpretation of the work. We would hope, however, that a careful and ethical reader would still be able to recognize the phenomenon that Orwell has transformed even if that reader does not share Orwell's particular worldview. From the other end of the spectrum, I could also imagine a reader raised on a farm who happens upon a novel called *Animal Farm* and who immediately finds him- or herself predisposed to like the work. It might take a while for this reader to recognize that Orwell's work is not really meant to be primarily about a farm, but, again, we would hope that the evidence provided by the text itself would bring this
reader around to a valid interpretation of the text.

Finally, the possibility certainly exists that a reader—perhaps one completely unfamiliar with Orwell and his work or with life on a farm—might start by directly engaging the textual phenomena. Even in this case, though, most interpreters seem to have a basic desire to understand what a speaker or an author intends by an utterance, and most begin with what Hirsch calls a generic expectation that takes the form of a "type idea" and that functions as a heuristic device. When a narrative provides textual cues that point toward allegory, allegory becomes this kind of type idea, and it guides our interpretive activities at least until we have evidence that this idea is not or is no longer tenable (Validity 88). If the narrative bears out our initial guess and does not fit as well with alternative type ideas, then we can be reasonably sure that we have hit upon what Hirsch calls the "intrinsic genre," or "that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy" (86, emphasis in original). Again, it is important to note that this "sense" resides in the interpreter and it manifests itself in that interpreter because of the rhetorical effect produced by a narrative (or a speaker). With strong allegories, this rhetorical effect is nearly overwhelming, and that makes the interpreter’s guess about the intrinsic genre a fairly risk-free enterprise.

Applying these hermeneutic concepts to Animal Farm, we might say that the early appearance in the narrative of talking pigs raises some rather specific and powerful expectations concerning the type of meaning that Orwell intends to produce.20 This is a preliminary rhetorical effect produced by a textual phenomenon, but it does not ensure that what the reader is reading is "an allegory." As the reader continues, new textual evidence arises that either strengthens or fails to strengthen this preliminary rhetorical effect. Despite the allegorical potential inherent in the personified animals, the narrative as a whole cannot result in a strong allegorical effect without the presence of other textual phenomena that reveal the author’s thematic intentions. Obviously, corroborating narrative evidence in Animal Farm abounds. Indeed, as Old Major continues the speech that begins with "Comrades," his words serve only to strengthen Orwell’s rhetorical effect. That speech is, as Orwell explains, essentially "Marx’s theory from the animals’ point of view," as it emphasizes the fact that man has been unjustly and cruelly exploiting the animals for their labor and keeping all that the animals have produced for their own consumption and profit.

20. One legitimate expectation, of course, might be that we have begun reading a work of children’s literature. Such an expectation would not preclude the possibility of allegory; it might in fact heighten it. I address the role of children’s literature in allegory more fully in chapter 3, “Weak Allegory.”
As readers of *Animal Farm* progress through the narrative, the textual phenomena continually reinforce our early sense that Orwell has allegorical intentions and remain congruent with the theme of the communist revolution in Russia. At the same time, the import of this theme and the rhetorical situation that inspired it become increasingly clear as what started out as a noble and just cause becomes, in the hands (hooves?) of the unscrupulous, traitorous, and dictatorial pig Napoleon, a disillusioning power-grab. This is not a tract meant as a blanket condemnation of communism and socialism—indeed Old Major himself and his ideas are portrayed in strikingly positive terms—but rather a work meant to decry the misappropriation and misapplication of Marxist ideology by corrupt and illegitimate leaders. As Orwell claims in his preface to the Ukrainian edition, the work does “speak for itself,” and what it reveals most clearly is the rhetorical situation that called it into being.

Recognizing Orwell’s allegorical intent and identifying the fundamental theme of his narrative can make a reader confident in calling *Animal Farm* an allegory, but the case is strengthened even further when we are aware of the rhetorical situation that gave rise to it and makes clear the author’s aims in addressing that situation. A narrative that produces the strongest allegorical effect also straddles the line between literature and pure rhetoric more precariously than do other narratives; this helps to explain the distaste for and distrust of allegory on the part of many literary critics. Whether one likes them or not, those works that strike us as the strongest examples of allegorical writing are also the ones that seem to address directly some kind of exigency, but they do so from within the framework of a fictional narrative. Given Bitzer’s claim that the “exigence and the complex of persons, objects, events and relations which generate rhetorical discourse are located in reality, are objective and publicly observable historic facts in the world we experience, [and] are therefore available for scrutiny by an observer or critic who attends to them” (390), we would seem to have good reason for skepticism regarding my claim that the rhetorical situation plays such a central role in producing the allegorical effect. But fiction that produces a strong allegorical effect on the reader often needs a rhetorical situation as much as does the kind of discourse about which Bitzer theorizes. We must weaken Bitzer’s claim that the constituent elements of the rhetorical situation must be “observable historical facts” if we are to apply the idea to allegorical fiction,21 but we must also recognize that some real exigency—even if it is a general concern about the state of the human soul—gives rise to and manifests itself in allegorical narratives. This explains the pedantic quality of many works

21. Though in the case of *Animal Farm*, of course, they are.
that feel strongly allegorical; it also explains how Fredric Jameson can claim that, in some cases, the rhetorical situation *alone* is enough to produce a strong allegorical effect.

In the following chapter I will examine more carefully what I am calling “strong allegories,” paying particular attention to the rhetorical effect produced when the hermeneutic feedback loop receives input that propels an interpretive transformation so powerfully in one direction. In addition to accounting for these strong allegorical transformations, the narrative-rhetorical approach to allegory that I am proposing will also help to explain how some works that seem allegorical—or that seem as if they *should* be allegorical—do not produce the same degree of certitude as does *Animal Farm*. I will address these weaker allegories in chapter 2.