Thematic Allegory

Roth

IN THE introduction I used Billy Collins’s poem “The Death of Allegory” to illustrate the fact that according to many literary types (critics, theorists, and authors) allegory as it was once practiced in the West—especially in the medieval period and during the Renaissance—no longer exists. Collins writes:

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.

Instead, Collins contends, we now have a stable of “real”—or at least realistic—objects standing in their place:

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 I maintained in that introductory section, I think that Collins’s speaker is at least partially correct: those “great ideas on horseback / and the long-
hairy virtues in embroidered gowns” seldom get cast in starring roles any-
more, as the kind of fiction that once welcomed and depended on them
drifts further and further toward the margins of literary consciousness.

As is the case with much of his poetry, however, Collins has colored “The
Death of Allegory” with a tinge of irony, a tinge that has two hues. First,
even if the “tall abstractions” have left the working world of literature and
migrated to a “Florida for tropes” for the early-bird specials, lots of golf, and
the final slow fade, it does not follow that their lower-case replacements—the
vase of peonies, the black binoculars and the money clip, the wheelbarrow,
the empty mailbox, and the razor blade resting in a glass ashtray—represent,
as Collins claims they do, “themselves and nothing more.” For example, the
last supposedly merely self-referential item in his list (the razor blade in
the ashtray) likely evokes in the reader of the poem images of drug use that
belie the strict mimeticism that the speaker assigns to it. Though a razor
blade is not an abstract concept in the same way that Valor and Chastity
are, there is no reason that a razor blade could not be a leading figure in an
allegorical transformation. The second ironic aspect of this poem, and the
one that I want to focus on in this chapter, involves the intellectual tension
produced by a narrative—and I do consider this poem to have a strong nar-
rative component—that is about something that has ostensibly died. Col-
lins’s treatment of allegory has the effect of reviving it, at least in the reader’s
mind, even though the poem itself is not an allegory. This poem offers a clear
example of what I want to call “thematic allegory.”

The bulk of this chapter will be devoted to the explication of another nar-
rative work of fiction—Philip Roth’s American Pastoral—that has allegory as
a prominent theme, but before I get to that novel, we need to consider the
general and highly significant relationship that obtains between allegory and
theme. To get at the nature of this relationship, we shall return to one of the
basic tenets that supports my theorizing about allegory, namely that allegory
depends on a narrative structure. If we accept this premise, then we will
quickly realize that “theme” emerges as one of the most significant aspects
of narrative for the study of allegory.

As I argued in the introduction, allegory and narrative are closely linked,
and this is especially true in the case of narratives that are (also) allego-
ries, such as those works that I addressed in my first two chapters. But, as I
have tried to show, the connection between allegory and narrative runs even
deeper than this kind of generic coincidence; all manifestations of allegory
depend on a narrative structure.

Even approaching the concept of allegory from the reader’s vantage
point, rather than from the textual or authorial one, reveals the significant
association of allegory with narrative. In The Political Unconscious, Fredric
Jameson argues that, as readers of literature, we might have a natural tendency toward allegory. Jameson intends his opening chapter, “On Interpretation,” as a defense of his Marxist-inspired allegorical approach to hermeneutics. More broadly, however, he lays the groundwork for a theory of interpretation that depends on a narrative-based conception of allegory. Building on the work of both Marxists and myth critics (especially Northrop Frye), Jameson argues that we are predisposed to see our world in terms of “master narratives.” These master narratives then serve as the framework through which we make sense of (interpret) the actual narratives that our culture produces. “The idea is,” Jameson explains, “that if interpretation in terms of . . . allegorical master narratives remains a constant temptation, this is because such master narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them; such allegorical narrative signifieds are a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality” (34).

Even a reader skeptical of Jameson’s claim that a collective political unconscious leaves evidence of itself in individual texts, which together form an uninterrupted historical-political master narrative (“the single great collective story” of Marxist struggle, in Jameson’s take on things), might be convinced by his broader argument about the persistence of allegory and allegorical interpretation. In this regard, one of his most penetrating insights resides in his general claim about the centrality of the allegorical process to the hermeneutic endeavor. Equally illuminating from my perspective is his use of the term master narrative to describe what seems to be both the catalyst for and the product of the act of interpretation. As we have already seen, allegory has a narrative structure, and it seems, at least according to Jameson, as if readers have internalized this and recognize it as the natural state of affairs.

Despite the generally recognized connection between allegory and narrative, however, when we speak of allegory we tend to focus on the hermeneutic issues of meaning and interpretation, often to the exclusion of any in-depth analysis of the narratives that carry those meanings. I hope to have begun to offer a corrective to this oversight, and this chapter will continue that project. Before I get to the meat of this chapter (Philip Roth’s <i>American Pastoral</i>), however, it might be instructive to try to understand why hermeneutics has trumped narratology when it comes to allegory. Toward this end, we can return to Northrop Frye’s <i>Anatomy of Criticism</i>, which I discussed in chapter 1, “Strong Allegory.”

The combination of Frye’s idea that all commentary is allegorical interpretation and his claim that in actual allegory the poet has already provided
all of the commentary we need goes a long way toward explaining why readers often abjure allegory: “The commenting critic is often prejudiced against allegory without knowing the real reason,” Frye claims, “which is that continuous allegory prescribes the direction of his commentary, and so restricts its freedom” (90). For many readers, meaning is still the aim of interpretation; hence, these readers naturally shy away from anything that smacks of allegory because in allegory the author has often made his or her meaning clear, and an analysis of an allegory in this context might be seen as little more than a literary autopsy.

Frye does offer a second possible explanation for the lack of narratological attention paid to allegory, but in order to get at it, we will need to understand some of the terms he employs in his definition of actual and continuous allegory. We should first note that Frye uses the term “image” very broadly; an image in the context of this work can mean not only the “replica of a visual object,” but also “symbol” and even “idea” (84). Furthermore, images often take on “thematic importance” in the context of a narrative (85). For Frye, allegory depends primarily on establishing a relationship between a literary work’s “images” and the extraliterary concepts to which those images are meant to correspond. In actual allegory, that relationship is clear, (relatively) explicit, and stable.

In terms of reading allegory, Frye cautions that “even continuous allegory is still a structure of images, not of disguised ideas, and commentary has to proceed with it exactly as it does with all other literature, trying to see what precepts and examples are suggested by the imagery as a whole” (90). Frye is arguing, in other words, that reading allegory does not entail the identification of individual allegorical symbols, but rather the understanding of a larger “structure” that, in the case of allegory, points to some identifiable idea that exists outside of the text. The “structure of images,” in Frye’s anatomy, is the “form” of a work of literature, and that form, he says, “is the same whether it is studied as narrative or as meaning” (85). Frye contends that there is a general preference for the studying of meaning over narrative because of a “vague notion that the [former] method produces a simpler result, and may therefore be used as a commonsense corrective to the niggling subtleties of textual studies” (85). Whether for this reason or for some other, Frye is correct when it comes to the reading of allegory. Even his own comments reveal more interest in examining allegory as meaning than as narrative, this despite his insistence that allegory must be approached as a

1. Frye’s terminology is somewhat idiosyncratic. He claims that a work of literature’s “narrative is its rhythm or movement of words” (78), and in this sense “narrative” seems to mean something close to style. Nevertheless, his use of the term still draws an important distinction between structure and meaning, a distinction that I will explore in more detail below.
structure, just like any other narrative.

My contention is that the way in which allegory manifests itself in many modern and contemporary narratives necessitates our approaching allegory from a more structural or narratological starting point; this is because many of our hoarier ideas about allegory and meaning often do not apply easily to these more current works. Taking the Collins poem as just one example, we can all recognize the presence of allegory as a part of the narrative structure, but I doubt that anyone would want to read the work as an allegory. The poem is about allegory, but it is not one. As we enter this realm of “about-ness,” we perforce enter as well the narratological realm of “theme.” Thus, I contend that Collins's poem stands as an example of thematic allegory but not as an example of allegory proper.

This raises the question of the relationship between allegory and theme in narratives that we do label allegories. Though we could certainly label “Soviet-style communism” a theme in Animal Farm, this move does not go far enough in capturing what happens in allegory. A narrative that we recognize as an allegory is not simply “about” some phenomenon (in the way that The Iliad is about war, for example) but is a rewriting of that phenomenon. The concept of theme simply does not satisfactorily capture what transpires in an allegorical work.

The reason for this failure lies in the fact that, as Gerald Prince argues, “a theme involves only general and abstract entities: ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and so on. When I speak of the theme of rain, the theme of Antigone, or the theme of Creon,” Prince explains, “I merely use a kind of shorthand to evoke certain philosophical, ideological, or moral views or concepts . . .” (Narrative 5). When we speak of allegory, on the other hand, we do not use the object

2. As an aspect of narrative, theme poses a number of problems, primarily because of the looseness with which we often use the term. In his Narrative as Theme Prince illustrates the impressive variety of ways in which we understand and use the term "theme":

. . . theme is both intra- and extra-textual, immanent and transcendent, what the work speaks about and what allows one to speak about the work; theme is to plot as meaning is to form; theme is that which plot constitutes a temporal projection of; theme is what is made of a topic; theme is the main idea in a text, a central thread, a minimum generalization; theme is a highly abstract semantic category subsuming a set of motifs or minimal and concrete thematic units; theme is a frame, a macrostructure, a reality model, a system organizing knowledge about some phenomenon in the world; theme is what a text or part thereof is about; theme is a general thought unifying and summarizing a series of sentences. . . . (2)

Prince does not try to sift through all of these uses and identify the one true meaning of "theme"; instead, he takes a pragmatic approach and “[sketches] some of the elements entering into theming, into (re)organizing and grasping a text in terms of theme, into reading it for or according to theme” (3).
of the preposition “of” (an allegory of ___) as shorthand for anything; it is specifically what it is, only transformed into a narrative. At times, of course, the phenomenon transformed into a narrative happens to be the kind of abstract entity, even “a philosophical, ideological, or moral view or concept,” that Prince describes as being characteristic of theme, but this occasional coincidence does not amount to identity.

Moreover, even when the phenomenon transformed in allegory is some abstract idea (say, the salvation of the human soul), the relationship between the transformational narrative and the phenomenon transformed differs from the relationship between a nonallegorical narrative and its theme(s). Prince points out that “theme is distinctive, if not unique, because of its relation to textual surface structure: it does not consist of textual units, and it is different from them in kind; rather, theme is illustrated by any number of textual units (or by other macrostructural categories, such as plot, or by other themes), just as a general law or rule or precept is illustrated by an example” (5, emphasis in original). In the case of allegory, the “textual units” function as constitutive elements of the transformed phenomenon because that phenomenon has been rendered as a narrative; in other words, the allegory—precisely because it is a narrative—consists of textual units rather than being illustrated by them. For example, the character “Envy” (a textual unit) in Langland’s Piers Plowman has a role, literally, in the transformation of the idea of salvation into a narrative, and so it is an element of that allegory, not just an illustration of a theme. There are of course still themes in strong allegories such as this one, but the allegory itself is something differentiable from and superior to individual themes.

In works such as Piers Plowman or Animal Farm one can draw the distinction between allegory and theme relatively clearly. The allegory is the narrative transformation of some phenomenon, and separate themes might exist within that narrative. Thus, Animal Farm allegorizes Soviet-style communism while offering, say, “the corrupting influence of power” as a theme.3 When we are dealing with what I have called weak allegories, the distinction becomes less obvious. If the phenomenon purportedly transformed cannot be identified with any real precision, then the textual units that would normally constitute an allegory do not work with such a concentrated purpose.

3. Prince draws distinctions between “theme” and several other related concepts, including one, “topic,” that also seems to bear some relation to allegory. According to Prince, the primary difference between a topic and a theme is that the former can refer to concrete entities whereas the latter refers to abstract ideas (5). If this is so, then we might legitimately say that the topic of Animal Farm is Soviet-style communism. Though true on one level, this will not suffice because Prince’s definition of topic cannot account for the transformative aspect of Orwell’s novel. Only after we recognize the transformation can we identify the topic.
The standards for identifying a theme, I submit, are less rigorous than those for arguing for allegory because readers generally do not expect a theme to encompass all—or even most—of a narrative’s textual units. As Prince makes clear, a prominent theme, or one that can be successfully argued for, subsumes a greater rather than a lesser number of textual units (9), but even the strongest theme does not require the same kind of unity of purpose that we see in strong allegories. In a weak allegory, on the other hand, some textual units fail to fit in with the majority of the other units that comprise the narrativized phenomenon; think back to my chapter on weak allegory and the monkey in *Coco the Carrot*, for example. Such outlying textual units often tend to undermine the reader’s confidence in the implied author’s intentions, and this lack of certainty might turn us away from allegory and toward theme.

But what then distinguishes a work that has a particularly strong theme and one that we might want to call a weak allegory? Could we reasonably argue, in other words, that women’s equality is simply a theme in *Coco the Carrot* and that Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* offers us a choice among a number of potentially strong themes, including the sense of alienation experienced by modern humans or the difficulties of the writer’s life? The short answer here is that we certainly could, and to do so would probably lower the standards in terms of the amount of textual evidence that we would need to produce in order to prove our hypothesis effectively. Yet in these particular examples I suspect that readers will always be pulled toward allegorical interpretations because of the respective narratives’ emphasis on figuration. When we have narratives that rely so heavily on figuration and that have such a pronounced thematic component, we likely and reasonably incline toward reading these texts in a certain way; the term “weak allegory” helps to classify both the texts and the way we read them.

Thus, the hermeneutic effect of strong figuration can mirror that produced by the presence of embedded allegories. It does not take much, it seems, to get many readers moving in the direction of allegorical interpretation, and once we start down that path, it can be difficult to change interpretive directions. This is why it can be so hard not to read Kafka allegorically and why a title such as Philip Roth’s *Everyman*—an (intentional?) allusion to the medieval allegory of the same title—can catalyze allegorical interpretations even if the narrative itself fails to validate such an effort. Even as Roth’s novella, for example, bears little resemblance to the late-fifteenth-

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4. In Kafka’s case, both the title of the story and the fact that Gregor undergoes a metamorphosis serve to nudge us even more forcefully toward allegory. For a historical overview of the tradition in which Kafka seems to be working, see Bruce Clarke’s *Allegories of Writing: The Subject of Metamorphosis*, especially the second chapter, “History of Metamorphic Allegory.”
century allegorical mystery-morality play, the shared and highly figurative title ensures that it is, in the words of the critic James Wood, “haunted by its near-namesake,” if only “trivially” (28). Roth’s title guarantees the presence of allegory—whether it be a trivial or a profound presence—in his novella, but it does not guarantee that the novella will be an allegory. In examples such as this one, we have, I submit, allegory present as a potential theme.

We see a similar phenomenon at play in the oeuvre of J. M. Coetzee, whose Elizabeth Costello served as one of my examples of embedded allegory but whose other narratives also play with allegory in interesting ways. As Derek Attridge notes, “It’s hardly surprising that one of the terms in the critical lexicon most frequently applied to Coetzee’s novels and novellas is allegory” (32). Attridge points to the “often enigmatic characters,” “the scrupulous avoidance of any sense of an authorial presence,” and “the frequently exiguous plots” of Coetzee’s fiction as markers that “encourage the reader to look for meanings beyond the literal, in a realm of significance which [a number of his novels] may be said to imply without ever directly naming” (32).

While acknowledging the large body of critical ink devoted to allegorical interpretations of Coetzee’s work, Attridge wants to pursue a different path: “With the encouragement of the fiction itself,” he explains, “I want to ask what happens if we resist the allegorical reading that the novels seem half to solicit, half to problematize, and take them, as it were, at their word” (35). Attridge’s path of interpretive resistance has been blazed by Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation” and Donald Davidson’s “What Metaphors Mean.” Both of these essays, according to Attridge, eschew the notion that literary works of art intend to “say” something and are instead animated and motivated “by the same impulse: for Sontag what is important about art-works, and for Davidson what is important about metaphors, is not what they mean but what they do” (37). Thus, Attridge turns a blind eye to the temptation to read allegorically and, recognizing that “we are dealing [in Coetzee’s work] with novels which, to a greater degree than most, concern themselves with the acts of writing and reading, including allegorical writing and reading,” decides to ask, as his primary research question, “how allegory is thematized in the fiction, and whether this staging of allegory as an issue provides any guidance in talking about Coetzee’s use of allegory” (33–34).

Attridge, therefore, recognizes the presence of the idea of allegory in much of Coetzee’s fiction (his focus is on Waiting for the Barbarians and Life & Times of Michael K), but he responds to this presence with what he calls a literal reading, a reading that “occurs as an event, a living-through

5. Among these works are essays by Peter McDonald, David Atwell, and books by Atwell, Dominic Head, Teresa Dovey, and Sue Kossew.
or performing of the text that responds simultaneously to what is said, the way in which it is said, and the inventiveness and singularity (if there is any) of the saying” (60). This kind of reading, which approximates the point I was trying to make about Coetzee’s use of embedded allegory in *Elizabeth Costello*, stands in contrast to readings that tend toward allegoresis because these, Attridge contends, “arise less . . . from the actual experience of works of literature than from the imperatives that drive literary commentary” (61). Attridge helps us to see that the presence of allegory as an idea in a narrative text does not necessarily mean that the author intends the entire narrative to be an allegory and, consequently, to be read only as such.

The abstract idea of allegory fits Prince’s description of a theme quite well, and there is no reason that a narrative could not be about allegory on some level without actually being one. Indeed, I see a great deal of potential in allegory as a theme because the ways in which we think about allegory can reveal much about how we think about literature, aesthetics, culture, and meaning. And we can turn to Philip Roth to witness one author who apparently shares this interest in the idea of allegory. Even more than is the case with *Everyman*, Roth’s *American Pastoral* is a narrative haunted by allegory, a haunting that makes allegory one of the novel’s central themes.

The first chapter of *American Pastoral* is a historically contextualized discourse on allegoresis and the problems of interpretation that inhere in this process of constructing allegories and allegorical figures. This early chapter is an intradiegetic narrative insofar as it serves as the prelude to the primary narrative that will follow it. As the novel opens, Roth’s narrator is reminiscing about his past, and in particular about a boy several years older than himself who had come to embody the hope of a community of immigrant Jewish families in New Jersey, a handsome and athletically gifted youth who had been transformed into a “household Apollo” by his working-class neighbors (4). This is the intradiegetic narrative, the story of how this figure comes to represent what he does, the story of how, in other words, he has been constructed and interpreted as a character by his community. The primary narrative that follows this early allegorical narrative, however, is essentially a corrective one, one in which the narrator abandons the allegorized version of the protagonist for something more mimetic, something more real. Clearly, the relationship between the two narratives is problematic, but understanding the source of the problems and how they are handled can be enlightening with regard both to the novel itself and to allegory more generally.
At the center of Roth's story is the novel's Jewish protagonist, Seymour Irving Levov, a star athlete at a Newark high school whose Nordic good looks beget the nickname “the Swede.” Coming of age in the 1940s, the Swede becomes a mythic, if somewhat unlikely, hero figure for the local Jews, a population that typically “venerated academic achievement above all else” (3), including athletic exploits. In the context of the Second World War, however, the Swede's physical gifts take on special significance. Nathan Zuckerman, Roth’s narrator for this and several other novels, notes that “through the Swede, the neighborhood entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world, the fantasy of sports fans everywhere: almost like Gentiles (as they imagined Gentiles), our families could forget the way things actually work and make an athletic performance the repository of all their hopes. Primarily, they could forget the war” (3–4). Yet the Swede seems to offer more than the possibility of temporarily forgetting what is happening to American soldiers and to the European Jews; he also facilitates a more active fantasy. For this neighborhood, at this time, Zuckerman remarks, the Swede stands “as a symbol of hope,” as “the embodiment of the strength, the resolve, the emboldened valor that would prevail to return our high school's servicemen home unscathed” (5).

The Swede functions on two figurative levels here. First, he is clearly a symbol, someone who represents or stands for a multitude of abstract positive ideas (hope, strength, innocence, purity) at a time when a particular group needs him to do so. In the eyes of his community, the Swede coincides perfectly with what he purports—is even required—to represent: “there appeared to be not a drop of wit or irony to interfere with his golden gift for responsibility” (5). Second, the Swede is also part of a complex of allegories. Once the Swede's symbolic qualities find their way into a narrative structure, even a hypothetical one such as the safe return of local soldiers or the ultimate defeat of the Nazis, his nature becomes allegorical. As an allegorical figure, the Swede plays the leading role in several public narratives, even if he remains unaware of his own significance.

The Swede's first allegorical role is as the protagonist of several war-related scenarios. As Zuckerman notes, “The elevation of Swede Levov into the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews can best be explained, I think, by the war against the Germans and the Japanese and the fears that it fostered” (4). Out of these fears, the Swede emerges as a figure who represents the potential for American victory and Jewish survival. In this case, the hope that the Swede represents is translated into a narrative that has a happy ending. This was a period, Zuckerman remarks, “when our entire neighborhood’s wartime hope seemed to converge in the marvelous body of the Swede” (20).
Perhaps more interesting, however, is the Swede’s role in an even more particularly Jewish narrative. In this scenario, the protagonist represents the potential for overcoming a kind of Jewish angst. Zuckerman describes this angst, and how the Swede is seen to resolve it, in a paragraph that is worth quoting entirely:

The Jewishness that [the Swede] wore so lightly as one of the tall, blond athletic winners must have spoken to us too—in our idolizing the Swede and his unconscious oneness with America, I suppose there was a tinge of shame and self-rejection. Conflicting Jewish desires awakened by the sight of him were simultaneously becalmed by him; the contradiction in Jews who want to fit in and want to stand out, who insist they are different and insist they are no different, resolved itself in the triumphant spectacle of this Swede who was actually only another of our neighborhood Seymours whose forebears had been Solomons and Sauls and who would themselves beget Stephens who would in turn beget Shawns. Where was the Jew in him? You couldn’t find it and yet you knew it was there. Where was the irrationality in him? Where was the crybaby in him? Where were the wayward temptations? No guile. No artifice. No mischief. All that had been eliminated to achieve his perfection. No striving, no ambivalence, no doubleness—just the style, the natural physical refinement of a star. (20)

The Swede is seen here, again, as the happy resolution to a plot that has the potential for disaster. He is the Jew who can be but not seem Jewish, the Jew who has achieved a “oneness with America” that has consistently proved elusive and illusory to many other Jews. The Swede personifies what Zuckerman identifies as the hypothetical teleological apotheosis of Jewish-American assimilation, the product of “each new generation’s breaking away from the parochialism a little further, out of the desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals” (85). The price of this freedom seems to be Jewishness itself, but it also seems to be a price that many would have been willing to pay.

The means by which the Swede realizes his apparent success in this area both underscores his differences with other Jews and explains his ability to forge his “unconscious” connection with America. As a star athlete, the Swede is simultaneously an atypical Jew and the prototypical American icon. The Swede’s athletic prowess, in fact, enables him to participate in one of American culture’s great collective figures: sport as a metaphor for life, and
the sports star as one for whom life in general comes easily. As a boy five years younger than his neighborhood idol, Zuckerman is dazzled by the Swede's physical gifts, his grace, and his natural style, all of which characterize the Swede not only as an athlete but also as a kind of ideal human. Reflecting on one incident during which the sixteen-year-old Swede calls the narrator by his nickname (“Skip”) in front of a group of his friends, Zuckerman acknowledges that this recognition from one whom he already considered a “god” transformed, in his mind, the sports hero into something even larger and more significant:

The mock jock self-pity, the manly generosity, the princely graciousness, the athlete's self-pleasure so abundant that a portion can be freely given to the crowd—this munificence not only overwhelmed me and wafted through me because it had come wrapped in my nickname but became fixed in my mind as an embodiment of something grander even than his talent for sports: the talent for “being himself,” the capacity to be this strange engulfing force and yet to have a voice and a smile unsullied by even a flicker of superiority—the natural modesty of someone for whom there were no obstacles, who appeared never to have to struggle to clear a space for himself. (19)

This is a powerful and persistent act of allegorical figuration, or allegoresis, one that even today we find tempting, especially with our sports heroes.

We can see that the Swede functions as the protagonist in a variety of related allegories. In just the first chapter of American Pastoral, the Swede is the central figure in allegories of the overcoming of the Germans and the Japanese, the overcoming of the difficulty of Jewish assimilation into American cultural and social life, and the overcoming of the difficulties associated with life in general. In all three cases, the literal narrative facilitates a movement toward anagogy (interpretation in spiritual terms) on the part of the interpreters. Success on the basketball court or baseball field, or a simple act of kindness, for example, is endowed with near-mystical meaning as it is reread in allegorical terms. The agents behind the allegorizing in this early section of the novel are Roth's characters—including his first-person narrator—and this is important to keep in mind because Roth sets out in American Pastoral not to write an allegory, but rather to write a novel largely about allegory.

The fact that we have Roth's narrator acting as a commentator, helping us to interpret and assign meaning to these narratives, further strengthens the claim that we are in fact dealing with allegoresis here, even if it is as a
theme rather than as a genre. Zuckerman’s narration includes his explanation of the Swede’s figurative significance and the ways in which that allegorized figure functioned within his particular “interpretive community.” Roth’s intention is not to be allegorical in writing this section of American Pastoral; rather, he takes as one of his themes the allegorization of the Swede. Through Zuckerman, Roth is looking back on and representing realistically several fictional acts of allegoresis.

This representation of allegory (or of allegoresis) is what I am calling thematic allegory. In American Pastoral Roth uses the early representation of allegory as the impetus to construct a counter-narrative, one that will ultimately allow his narrator to rewrite a story that risks leading to a failed allegory. In order to understand how Roth’s thematization of allegory leads to this rewriting, however, we need to examine the effect that the presence of allegory in this work has on three important and closely related narratological issues that bear heavily on the concept of allegory: characterization, plot, and focalization.

Since the object of an allegorical narrative is to transform some phenomenon into a figural narrative, the primary allegorical narrative depends on the careful coordination of character, plot, and focalization. All of these aspects of narrative must work together to facilitate the transmission of the author’s intended meaning. In such works, the author would ostensibly begin with the idea and construct a narrative—including characters and a plot—that facilitates its reception by the reader. When allegory appears thematically in the context of a realistic narrative, however, we tend to see a case of reverse engineering. The author’s representation of the process of allegoresis reveals the artificiality that remains behind the scenes and uncovers certain instabilities that seem paradoxical to the nature of allegory. Roth’s depiction of the Swede, for example, allows the reader to see that an act of allegoresis necessarily occurs in a determinative context—a nexus of historical, political, and personal forces that facilitates various interpretations of Seymour Irving Levov—and that any allegory that results from a particular act of allegoresis is dynamic rather than stable. In thematic allegory, in other words, the progression of the narrative continually changes the landscape in which

6. The opening chapter of American Pastoral comes close to being what Frye calls an actual allegory—or at least the re-presentation of an actual allegory—because Zuckerman fairly “explicitly indicates the relationship of his images to examples and precepts” (Frye 90). Indeed, Zuckerman tells us quite clearly what the Swede meant to those in his community.
interpretation takes place, thereby putting constant pressure on the resultant allegory, pressure that it may not always be able to bear.\(^7\)

This state of affairs is in keeping with Prince’s general conception of how we read for themes: we identify them as possibilities, and then verify as we progress through the narrative. Like any narrative, a primary allegorical narrative is kinetic, but the phenomenon transformed by that narrative tends to be stable, oftentimes resembling one of a culture’s recognizable master plots.\(^8\) In strong allegories, the primary narrative always seems to build easily toward this secondary narrative; any difficulties in constructing characters and a plot that work seamlessly with the intended secondary narrative have been “edited out,” as it were, of the final draft. Thematic allegory, on the other hand, lays bare all of the inner workings of allegoresis because the narrative depicts the process of constructing the allegorical narrative. As the primary narrative progresses, the meaning that the act of allegoresis was meant to capture is repeatedly assailed by new events, new developments, new revelations, and new interpretations. The passage of chronological time in *American Pastoral* has precisely this effect on the meaning of the Swede. As Zuckerman takes the reader from the 1950s into the 1990s, the Swede’s allegorical significance is questioned, denied, and ultimately radically revised.

If Zuckerman’s commentary serves to clarify the allegorical nature of the Swede, as I claim above, its unfolding as the narrative progresses also allows the readers to recognize that we are not intended to accept this allegorical representation as a sufficient or final interpretation of this character. Although we are not meant to question the fact that the Swede did function allegorically, we are meant to think critically about the process of allegoresis that led to the Swede’s embodying all that he did for his community and to question whether our understanding the Swede as a figure in a series of related allegorical narratives is sufficient or even accurate. Indeed, Zuckerman himself is skeptical as he remembers and reconstructs the past—the Swede’s, his own, and his community’s.

The impetus to remember the Swede, and then to reinterpret him, comes in the mid-1990s in the form of a letter that Zuckerman receives from the protagonist himself, a letter that invites the narrator to meet in order to discuss the Swede’s recently deceased father, for whom the son is supposedly struggling to write a memorial tribute. The letter and the subsequent

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7. In retrospect, Zuckerman acknowledges the inherent instability of the allegory his community has created around the Swede: “Even as boys,” he avers, “we must have known that it couldn’t have been as easy for him as it looked, that a part of it was a mystique” (83).

8. Abbot defines master plots as “Recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals that play a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life” (192). He points to Cinderella and the Horatio Alger story, among others, as examples (42–43).
meeting have the effect of forcing Zuckerman to revisit the idealized image of the Swede that both he and his entire neighborhood held and to come to a new understanding of who the Swede is and what he represents. Looking back as an adult, Zuckerman is skeptical of the allegories that he and his community had constructed around the Swede, and he begins to question, to dig beneath the surface, figuratively speaking. Zuckerman recognizes and celebrates the smooth surface that facilitated the various allegories about the Swede, but he begins, in retrospect, to wonder about the reality beneath that surface: “Only . . . what did he do for subjectivity? What was the Swede’s subjectivity? There had to be a substratum, but its composition was unimaginable” (20).

That substratum is unimaginable to Zuckerman because he is, at this point, still blinded by the narrative of the Swede that dominated his youth. In anticipation of their meeting as adults, Zuckerman wonders “What, if anything, had ever threatened to destabilize the Swede’s trajectory” (20). That upward trajectory, however, is the one imposed on the Swede; it is the natural playing-out of his allegory’s narrative plot. Zuckerman knows intuitively that no real life could unfold in the ideal, obstacle-less manner that the Swede’s seemed to, and that his allegory would more or less require, but he cannot imagine the alternative, the counternarrative that would serve as the corrective to the naïve allegory: “No one,” Zuckerman muses, “gets through [life] unmarked by brooding, grief, confusion, and loss. Even those who had it all as kids sooner or later get the average share of misery, if not sometimes more. There had to have been consciousness and there had to have been blight. Yet I could not picture the form taken by either, could not desimplify him even now: in the residuum of adolescent imagination I was still convinced that for the Swede it had to have been pain-free all the way” (20). Our narrator, as he admits, is unable to provide a point of view other than that of his youth; he can only focalize the Swede and his story in one way. This conflicts, however, with his sense of reality. He realizes that his vision of the Swede is simplified, naïve, and, in a word, allegorized, but “the residuum of adolescent imagination” does not allow him to see the Swede in a more complicated, realistic way.

Although the Swede is not, strictly speaking, an example of a personified abstraction (such as Hope or Charity, for example), Zuckerman’s difficulty in imagining him leading a life narrative that has a complicated, convoluted, or circuitous plot is in keeping with Gordon Teskey’s claim that “in allegory narrative and personification are inversely prominent” (23). Allegories that rely heavily on personification tend, in other words, to have simple plots. “In Johnson’s allegories, for example,” Teskey explains, “the thought represented by a series of personified abstractions is carefully worked out so that only
the most rudimentary narrative is required to link the elements of the series
together” (23). Zuckerman's simplification of the Swede is actually more a
simplification of plot than of character; given his conception of this figure,
Zuckerman cannot imagine him in a complicated plot.

As we get to the end of the first chapter of the novel, however, we see Zuck-
erman actively beginning to reexamine this simplified vision of the Swede; he
is recounting the allegorical aspects of the Swede in order to reevaluate those
allegories and to reread the figure at the center of them. Indeed, the narra-
tive moves through the first chapter of the novel from the point where “the
Swede” was a “magical name” attached to a mythlike figure who is the hero of
several allegorized narratives, to a moment when Zuckerman, after a meeting
with the Swede in 1995, decides that “This guy is the embodiment of nothing”
(39). Even in characterizing him as “the embodiment of nothing,” however,
Zuckerman continues to see the Swede in figurative terms, as a vessel that
carries significant meaning at one point, but who, when viewed from a dif-
f erent vantage point at a different time, embodies the concept of nothingness;
he becomes the representation of the vacuous sports hero or Hollywood star.
“There's nothing here but what you're looking at,” Zuckerman tells himself.
“He's all about being looked at. He always was” (39).

At this point it has become clear to both Zuckerman and the reader that
we do not know the real Swede, if such a thing can be said to exist. Zuck-
erman's dual role of narrator and participant in the past events of his narra-
tion seem to preclude any objective or mimetic representation of the main
figure of the narrative. As a writer, Zuckerman recognizes and accepts—even
embraces—the difficulty of accurately portraying a human figure. When
trying to understand others, he laments, “You get them wrong before you
meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong
while you're with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about
the meeting and you get them all wrong again. Since the same generally goes
for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion empty of all
perception, an astonishing farce of misperception” (35). The first chapter
of *American Pastoral* is the chronicling of Zuckerman's misreadings of the
Swede, of the various ways in which he gets or has gotten him wrong. But it
is also Zuckerman's recognition and confession of the fact that this has been
the case. Indeed, his difficulty reading the Swede serves as a kind of perverse
reminder that he is alive: “The fact remains that getting people right is not
what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting
them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, get-
ting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong” (35).
It is with this pronouncement that Zuckerman begins the process of decon-
structing the allegory that for so many years had stood as his conception of
the Swede. In order to do so, he must refocalize the narrative.

We have in this novel a clear and significant shift in focalization. I’m using the term focalization here to refer exclusively to the perspective—as opposed to voice—through which the narrative is represented. The narrative voice remains relatively consistent throughout the novel; it is that of Zuckerman the narrator. Zuckerman, however, has a kind of epiphany at his fiftieth high school reunion and decides to alter the way in which he has been focalizing the Swede and his story. In the opening, allegorical section, Zuckerman’s status as a homodiegetic narrator (he participated in the narrative he recounts and was profoundly influenced by the figure at the center of his story) makes it difficult for him to view the Swede realistically. At the reunion, however, he learns more about the fate of the Swede after Zuckerman was no longer a consistent character in the narrative. It is here, as Zuckerman dances with a former classmate, that he admits to a kind of focal shift, admits to having

lifted onto my stage the boy we were all going to follow into America, our point man into the next immersion, at home here the way the Wasps were at home here, an American not by sheer striving, not by being a Jew who invents a famous vaccine or a Jew on the Supreme Court, not by being the most brilliant or the most eminent or the best. Instead—by virtue of his isomorphism to the Wasp world—he does it the ordinary way, the natural way, the regular American-guy way. To the honeysweet strains of “Dream,” I pulled away from myself, pulled away from the reunion, and I dreamed. . . . I dreamed a realistic chronicle. I began gazing into his life—not his life as a god or demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man. (89)

From here, Zuckerman recedes from the diegesis and becomes a more traditional heterodiegetic narrator. He pulls away from himself, as he says, and attempts to see the Swede more objectively so as to portray him more realistically. The voice is still unmistakably Zuckerman’s, but the vision we get of the Swede is no longer determined by the allegorical version of the character that dominates the first chapter.

The shift from homo- to heterodiegesis entails a similar shift from internal to zero or free focalization. At the beginning, the story is obviously

9. The focalization in the first chapter is admittedly somewhat more complicated than this. Zuckerman is relating the events of this chapter retrospectively, and so he is not literally a participant in those events. Nevertheless, he was an actor in the events that compose that narrative’s plot, and this fact is significant because it has unmistakably limited how he has been able to view the Swede.
focused through Zuckerman the character and, by association, his Jewish community. This focalization makes the maintenance of the allegorical reading of the Swede understandable in an ethnocentric context. It also reveals a kind of childlike naivety, which Zuckerman recognizes in retrospect by acknowledging that he was still under the sway of that “residuum of adolescent imagination.” It is only in shedding this limited perspective that Zuckerman is able to portray the Swede from a more realistic, “desimplified” vantage point, even if the story that comes out of that perspective is largely imagined or “dreamed.”

Roth’s shift in focalization allows him to allow his narrator to tell a story that would not be possible to tell if the early allegorized version of the Swede remained intact. The initial characterization of the Swede effectively limits the direction of any plot that Zuckerman can conceive, given his pre-understanding of the central figure. When he removes the filter through which he has seen the Swede, new narrative possibilities present themselves. And when Zuckerman learns that the Swede had a daughter from his first marriage who killed a man when she exploded a bomb in protest of the war in Vietnam, he realizes that the Swede’s “pastoral” narrative has exploded as well; this daughter has transported the Swede “out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk” (86). At this point, Zuckerman seems to realize that his initial conception of the character of the Swede coupled with the new plot twist has exploded, so to speak, the allegorical narrative established early on. This development then necessitates a re-vision of the primary narrative.

This reworking takes the form of a less idealistic reading of the Swede that Zuckerman produces after his epiphany on the dance floor. Interestingly, Zuckerman uses the “dream,” which is a traditional marker of allegory, to signify entrance into a mimetic narrative that will serve as a counternarrative to the allegorical, but “real,” narrative that we have had so far concerning our protagonist. The reference to dreams and dream worlds is usually indicative not of “realistic chronicles” but rather of allegories. In this case, though, what was ostensibly the real narrative—the one Zuckerman “participated in” as a youth—seems less plausible than the fictionalized account of the Swede that he eventually endeavors to create.

The primary difference between the two competing narratives is Zuckerman’s evolved understanding of the plot, the events of the Swede’s life. The first chapter is dominated by a seemingly immutable character, and the perceived ontology of the Swede limits plot possibilities.10 As Zuckerman

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10. I would hold that this limitation is prevalent in all traditional or strong allegories. If a
begins to realize the complex nature of his character’s life, he also realizes that his allegorical narrative has become insufficient and untenable. His eventual move to free focalization allows for the interplay between character and plot to become much more complicated because the narrator is ready to “desimplify” his subject. In Zuckerman’s own words, he sets out to “chart [the Swede’s] collapse” and “to make of him, as time wore on, the most important figure of my life” (74). As he does so, plot becomes a stronger force than character, shattering the original allegories constructed around the Swede and forcing both narrator and reader to resituate this figure in a revised master narrative that is, given both its juxtaposition with the early allegorical reading of the Swede and Roth’s title, ironic.

Zuckerman’s dualistic approach to the Swede and his story brings us back to a question that was raised in the introduction: is all interpretation—even of characters—somehow allegorical? This possibility certainly presents itself in this novel, for even the “realistic chronicle” that is meant to override the simplified notion of the Swede presented in the first chapter leads to an allegorical interpretation. When he is no longer able to see the Swede’s story as the story of (Jewish) American success, Zuckerman instead sees it as the story of modern American calamity: “His great looks, his larger-than-lifeseness, his glory, our sense of his having been exempted from all self-doubt by his heroic role—that all these manly properties had precipitated a political murder made me think of the compelling story . . . of Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, only a decade the Swede’s senior and another privileged son of fortune, another man of glamour exuding American meaning, assassinated while still in his mid-forties just five years before the Swede’s daughter violently protested the Kennedy–Johnson war and blew up her father’s life. I thought, But of course. He is our Kennedy” (83). Thus, we witness here the process by which Zuckerman adapts his reading of the Swede to the allegorical exigencies made manifest by the progression of the plot. Zuckerman reweaves his early version of the Swede into an allegorical narrative that tracks along a downward, tragic trajectory rather than an upward, pastoral, and anagogic one.

Nevertheless, the recasting of the Swede in an alternative allegorical plot (the one meant to correspond with or call to mind the rise and fall of Kennedy) does not lead to the conclusion that all interpretation is allegory or that all reading is allegoresis, particularly given the way in which I am using “allegory” here. Indeed, my claim is that although Zuckerman’s narrative is allegorical, Roth’s narrative is not. Roth uses Zuckerman’s narrative to thematicize allegory, to highlight Zuckerman’s allegorizing of the Swede and to invite us to think about the habit of reading others’ lives in allegorical terms.

character is going to hold as an allegorical figure, the range both of what can and cannot happen to him or her and of what he or she can do is necessarily limited.
If all interpretation were allegory, then I would have to say that there's something allegorical about Roth's thematizing. But since one of Roth's thematic points is that allegory is often reductive, allegorizing his narrative would undermine his thematizing—and do so in a way that I don't believe the novel invites. To put these points another way, I claim—using *American Pastoral* as an example—that an interpretation of a narrative can uncover the representation of allegory as a theme within a narrative that is not (necessarily) allegorical. Unlike many other themes, allegory is inherently narrative; consequently, the representation of this theme allows readers to glimpse the narrative structure that underlies allegory more generally. Ultimately, I hope to have demonstrated that a careful analysis of that intradiegetic narrative structure—an analysis that highlights what Frye calls those “niggling subtleties of textual studies” (plot, character, and focalization, in this case)—can go a long way toward helping us to understand how allegory works and, on occasion, why it fails to do so.