The Redemption of Allegory

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Abstract

Samuel Taylor Coleridge doomed allegory to the dustbin in the early 19th century—or at least he tried to. He alleged that allegory is uninteresting for its lack of richness or complexity. But across the pond, only a few decades later, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville wrote texts that, though they profess not to be, are undeniably allegorical, and far from simplistic, mechanical, definite, or easy. This dissertation argues that, despite the romantic taboo against allegory, allegory emerges as a potent way to test the limits of how figurative meaning is transmitted. I trace the story of how Shelley, Hawthorne, and Melville reveal allegory to be more complicated, more lasting than Coleridge imagined.

I argue that Hawthorne and Melville do not simply attempt to move beyond allegory. Shelley's figures offer a glimpse of how one might bypass Coleridge's critique. But Hawthorne and Melville both write fiction that takes up the problem of allegory head-on, considering, often with allegory as a method as well as a subject, the nature, purpose, and efficacy of allegory. I read their fiction, which often has an epistemological bent, as not just failing to move beyond allegory but as actually being about allegory. Hawthorne sees allegory as an incarnation of the Unpardonable Sin, but he also sees that it is a sin the literary tradition dooms him to perpetuate. I argue that Hawthorne's messier allegories grant his reader a new kind of freedom, and perhaps a small window of escape from the Unpardonable Sin of traditional allegory. Melville's characters are vexed by just the kind of epistemological questions that allegory and *allegoresis* raise, and their inability to land on any solid answers means they can never stop teasing out whether allegory is an appropriate mode of thought. In Hawthorne and Melville's hands, allegory takes on new forms. But these more difficult, more anxious allegories, suited to their new landscape,

offer redemption for the whole mode of allegory. Allegory becomes far more interesting when, in these writers' hands, it becomes a problem.

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Introduction: The Problem of Allegory

Billy Collins wrote an obituary for allegory in 1991. In "The Death of Allegory," Collins imagines allegorical figures fled from ordinary life, retired in Florida (11), while the rest of the world has moved into a modernity free of personified abstractions:

> 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. (17-26)

The capitalized allegorical figures Collins describes—"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"—are obsolete now, the poem claims (1-4). Collins is by no means alone in proclaiming the death of allegory.[1] If

[1] For other similar proclamations, see, for example, Edwin Honig, Theresa Kelley, and Gary Johnson.

allegory is dead, let's name its murderer: Samuel Taylor Coleridge deserves the bulk of the credit.

Allegory is boring. That was more or less the dominant charge in the 19th century, following from Coleridge: Allegory works mechanically, substituting figures for ideas, transmitting simple, straightforward understanding of dogmatic ideas. Coleridge, whom I will discuss at much more length later, alleged that allegory deals in "fixities and definites" and is uninteresting for its lack of richness or complexity (*Biographia Literaria* 305). But across the pond, only a few decades later, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville wrote texts that, though they profess not to be, are undeniably allegorical, and far from simplistic, mechanical, definite, or easy. Why would those two Americans write texts that buck the anti-allegorical trend? Why, doing so, would they disavow allegory along the way? And why would they explicitly draw attention to the fact that they are doing all this, bucking trends, criticizing themselves, making the matter of allegory altogether needlessly messy and involved, when they could have just decided not to engage with it? What kinds of allegories do they write, and how might their unconventional allegorical practices defy previous thinking about allegory? What, broadly, do they use allegory to do, and why?

Although Collins' poem's title suggests allegory is dead, the reality is a little more complicated. Consider: If, in the poem, allegory is dead, the allegorical figures are not; they are merely banished to Florida, out of work, with "nothing to do" (14). The modern world is not for them, emptied as it is of their homes, places like the Garden of Mirth or the Bower of Bliss. In Collins' rendering, the retired allegorical figures are replaced—but with objects that may not be quite as straightforward as they seem. Collins' wheelbarrow

recalls William Carlos Williams' red one, and even that tiny jolt of recognition spurs associations: The reader is off, connecting items to other items, thinking about their significance, their poetic genealogy. That wheelbarrow may not be the Truth, Chastity, Courtesy, or Villainy Collins describes as figures from the allegorical past, but it cannot be itself and nothing more. One wonders if allegory is really dead after all.

Consider, too: Despite Collins' poem, allegory seems very much alive in our era. Ask anyone with a passing familiarity with allegory—any middle school student, say—and the first allegories he'll name are quite likely from the 20th century, after the purported death of allegory: *Animal Farm*, *The Crying of Lot 49, The Wizard of Oz.* Allow him to name movies and he'll have a field day, even if he limits himself to the last few years: *Us, mother!, Snowpiercer, Inside Out, A Serious Man, Avatar*.

It seems, then, that it is only a certain notion of allegory that is dead. Sure, there's no Bower of Bliss anymore, but Truth and Chastity are still bopping around, even in Florida. And their replacements in the world of non-retirees might be more subtle, but they evoke ideas, like their predecessors, all the same. What distinguishes modern allegories from the kinds Collins proclaims dead? What happened to yield the allegorical landscape we find ourselves in now? We seem to prefer "objects that sit quietly on a line in lower case" but are nonetheless surrounded by popular allegories. The homes of allegories might have been razed, but the inclination to think about how things signify remains.

This dissertation considers the story of allegory's redemption after Coleridge's anathema. Its focus is three somewhat unlikely allegorical heroes: Percy Bysshe Shelley, Hawthorne, and Melville. None of the three is primarily considered as an allegorist, yet their writings all break down Coleridge's critique—Shelley through his figurative

language and its relation to love; Hawthorne through his tales' insistence on allegorical representation even when Hawthorne shows the limits of allegory; Melville through his ceaseless questioning, through allegory, of the value of allegory. Where Coleridge found allegory cold and lifeless, Shelley associates it with love. Hawthorne takes up the problem of allegory's sterility and, by complicating the form, allows allegory and sympathy to comingle. Where Coleridge found allegory epistemologically reductive, Shelley knows full understanding cannot be pinned down so easily, and Melville treats allegory as a perpetually vexing problem, certainly not an overly easy intellectual dead end. There is something in the form of allegory—something Coleridge seems not to have accounted for—that these writers blow up to examine more closely, revivifying allegory for meaningful literary use by wondering, constantly, how and even whether it works. Allegory becomes far more interesting when, in these writers' hands, it becomes a problem.

If the primary purpose of this dissertation is to trace the story of how Shelley, Hawthorne, and Melville reveal allegory to be more complicated, more lasting than Coleridge imagined, the secondary goal is to suggest reading Hawthorne and Melville in a new light, one that considers them explicitly as allegorists. Although plenty has been written about their allegorical methods and individual allegories that appear in their writing, I propose that a wholesale consideration of their approach to allegory might shed new light on some of their more abiding concerns. That is, I propose a reading of Hawthorne and Melville that takes allegory to be a primary feature of their work. I consider allegory not as a tool, not as a momentary posture in the service of some more general aim, not as a comedic or satirical flourish, but as an essential expression and

investigation of both writers' views of knowledge, its limits, and its functions. Primarily through readings of Hawthorne's tales and Melville's *Moby-Dick*, I argue that both writers, despite or perhaps because of their anxiety about a form in low repute, use allegory to interrogate the value and limits of allegorical reading and the epistemological postures it presumes. Both Hawthorne and Melville stood at the convergence of multiple intellectual traditions that set them up to complicate the legacy of allegory. Hawthorne sees allegory, which makes people the servicemen of ideas, as the Unpardonable Sin, but he transmutes allegory into new modes that might offer some redemption for a form whose presence in the literary landscape is inevitable. Through the multiple allegorical readings and readers in *Moby-Dick*, Melville presents allegory as a desperate but tenuous attempt to see meaning in even the inscrutable, and the book ultimately refuses to answer the question of whether allegory can get us anywhere.

In the first half of the 19th century, a number of thinkers expressed profound skepticism about what they might know. Shelley doubted man's ability to know theological or metaphysical truths about the world; Hawthorne worried about man's ability to know other people; Melville wondered even whether scientific measurement or objective knowledge about the facts of the world were possible. These three writers weren't unique in their skepticism; after all, George Berkeley and David Hume, along with plenty of others, had written in the previous century, and even if René Descartes had overcome his hyperbolic doubt in his *Meditations*, he had entertained it in 1641. Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus laid out the foundations of skepticism centuries earlier. But in Hawthorne and Melville especially, epistemological skepticism simultaneously threatens

to impede literary output and impels it. Writing becomes a problem if one cannot know—and yet writing is a way to tease out what and how one might know.

Shelley offers an important first jab at Coleridge's theory, one that will prime us for the investigations of Hawthorne and Melville that are this dissertation's chief interests. In light of Coleridge's condemnation of allegory, Shelley is a complicated figure, in part because it is unclear whether we ought to categorize him as an allegorist. Undoubtedly there are strong arguments that cast Shelley as an allegorist, and I will discuss some of them here. But in Coleridge's own terms, Shelley isn't really an allegorist. Even if we consider Shelley from a Coleridgean vantage, though, he still presents arguments that indicate the shortcomings of Coleridge's critique of allegory: Shelley's figuration, even if we do not consider it as allegorical, offers a unified, mutable vision that nonetheless retains the associative qualities Coleridge lumps in with allegory. That's why Shelley is important for my purposes: He is, unlike Coleridge but like Hawthorne and Melville, a skeptic—and one whose writing, whether considered as allegorical or not, takes up many of the problems Coleridge associates with allegory. There are other poets—including Blake, Byron, and even Dante—who are relevant to a consideration of the relationship between skeptical thought and allegory, but because my primary interest in this dissertation is in the special nature of Hawthorne and Melville's allegory, my American focus leads me, for reasons of expediency, to cast those earlier European poets aside here.

Hawthorne and Melville are not typically read primarily as allegorists, but allegory is a particular response to the fraught epistemological position Hawthorne and Melville found themselves in. Nor is much attention given to the fact that allegory was a fraught genre—and thus perhaps a fitting recourse. Joel Fineman argues that allegory is

inherently insatiable. It assumes a dual world, but the sphere of allegorical figures, divorced from referents in the narrative telling, wants to connect to the deep truth. “Distanced at the beginning from its source,” Fineman says, “allegory will set out on an increasingly futile search for a signifier with which to recuperate the fracture of and at its source, and with each successive signifier the fracture and the search begin again: a structure of continual yearning, the insatiable desire of allegory” (45). This kind of desire is at the heart of Hawthorne and Melville’s work, and so I propose that it is fruitful to consider them as allegorists. Allegory is the conduit for their epistemological longing.

What is allegory?

Allegory is notoriously difficult to define. We can start with a look at etymology: The Greek *allegoria* comes from the words *allos*, meaning “other” or “different,” and *agoreuein,* “to speak” (“allegory”). Allegory, then, is speaking about something else. Or, as Gordon Teskey puts it in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, “allegory” means “either ‘saying something other than is meant’ or ‘meaning something other than is said’—or both.” The other thing that is clear about allegory is that it is a type of figurative language. In that sense, it is related—though in what precise way remains to be seen—to symbol, metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy. Cicero and Quintilian provided relatively early definitions of allegory as continued metaphor.

The earliest allegories are Greek—the most famous, of course, is Plato’s allegory of the cave. Plato’s Socrates tells his interlocutors just what he means by the allegory; in a sense, he provides a key to unlock the extended metaphor’s meaning. Socrates describes a man imprisoned in a cave, forced to watch reflections of real objects. Eventually, the

man is led outside of the cave, where he sees the sun, which he finally understands to be the real governing force in the world. Socrates explains:

> This whole image, Glaucon, must be fitted together with what we said before. The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey, since that is what you wanted to hear about. Whether it's true or not, only the god knows. But this is how I see it: In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. (517b)

Socrates not only reveals that the sun is an allegorical figure for the good—and he goes on to explain more of the allegory's implications—but he is also very open about his use of allegory as a rhetorical technique. Socrates is aware that an allegory requires a reader (or, in this case, a listener) who interprets correctly. He also knows that the allegory has a specific purpose—that is, that the allegorist embeds meaning in the allegory. There is no subtlety here, no trickery; Socrates makes totally transparent the way the allegory is supposed to work. Each item in the story of the prisoner in the cave has an analogue in Socrates' abstract lesson. The correspondences work tidily. They even play into other figures Socrates has used earlier in the dialogue. He has already explained to Glaucon that the different types of understanding might be represented by a divided line, and Socrates now explains that the allegory of the cave is supposed to mean the same thing. There is a great and broad idea that persists no matter what figure a philosopher might

use to try to explain it. Socrates says "only the god knows" whether the idea is actually true, but he takes it to be so, and the idea is not wholly contingent on the allegory he uses to try to express it. Allegory, then, is just a vehicle, but it is a particularly good one because it uses concrete images that the mind can grasp easily and because the allegorist can explain clearly how the allegory works.

Consider the nature of fallen man: Kicked out of Eden, he cannot know everything in full. With knowledge forbidden, full understanding inaccessible, the world becomes dual. There are things as they are and things as they seem; there are things that are perceived and things that are not. We are led, ultimately, to Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena. But epistemological thought arrived at Kant's revolution only after centuries of preoccupation with fundamental problems about the disjunctions between perception and reality, real and abstract, human and transcendent. To map one onto the other was the great problem; Kant's revolutionary idea is that no such mapping is possible, that all perception is mediated by human categories. Charles Feidelson argues in *Symbolism and American Literature* that a certain type of symbolic expression emerged as a result of Kantian epistemology (56). Post-Kantian writers had a natural human yearning to know noumena, but they were also told that such knowledge was eternally out of reach. And so they turned to symbol—or, perhaps more broadly, figurative language—to suggest an understanding they could not otherwise access.

Perhaps allegory is an inherent human impulse—to see one thing in another, to draw connections, to triangulate our way towards revealing meaning by telling a story that sheds light on a more abstract, less accessible idea. Allegory emerges from the gap between the tangible things of the world and the intangible ideas that animate our minds:

We long to address the latter but are stuck with the former as our only material. With a bit of craft, though, the imagination can plant abstractions in that worldly material. And perhaps even before the imagination learns to plant, it learns to discover abstractions it supposes someone else—an artist, a divinity, nature itself—has planted in the material of the world. *Allegoresis*, or the interpretation of a work as allegorical when it was not intended to be read that way, precedes allegory in the history of literary thought; perhaps it is also the more natural inclination of the mind, an inevitable result of a natural interpretive faculty.

Allegory is thus quite useful, because it can make clear, or at least suggest, things that would otherwise not be approachable. In an autocratic regime, for example, one might write an allegorical criticism of the regime; unmasked, such criticism would be forbidden, but disguised as an allegory it just might slip under the radar. Or, in less politically fraught circumstances, allegory might make ungraspable religious or metaphysical ideas a bit easier to imagine by translating them into concrete analogues. So while the allegorical tendency runs through the whole of literary thought, there is a clearly discernible tradition of allegory, both as figure and as mode, and perhaps even, as Maureen Quilligan suggests, as genre. Rather than classify works outright as allegory, though, Edwin Honig refers in *Dark Conceit* to "the allegorical quality," which he says exists "in a twice-told tale written in rhetorical, or figurative, language and expressing a vital belief" (12). A work may contain an allegorical figure, a talisman that shows up and represents something else in a sustained way, or it may be an allegory taken as a whole.

Quilligan offers an unorthodox definition: In *The Language of Allegory,* she claims that allegories have a "very particular emphasis on language as their first focus and

ultimate subject" (15). "Allegories are about the making of allegory," and the reader is central to their meaning (15). And, she notes, "a sensitivity to the polysemy in words is the basic component of the genre of allegory" (33). Because allegory is an inherently written genre, Quilligan argues, it uses wordplay and puns to draw attention to the multiplicity of meaning inherent in the world. This, surely, is true—words accrue meaning just as nature contains multiple meanings, and allegory insists on pulling the reader into the project of understanding those multiple and perhaps even mutable meanings. Quilligan also contends that "allegory's final question" is whether metaphor, or perhaps figurative language more generally, is "a thrust at the truth or a lie" (46). Here she distinguishes between allegory and *allegoresis*, or allegorical criticism. "*Allegoresis*, elder cousin to narrative allegory," Quilligan says, "begins by saying that texts are, superficially, lies; they must be interpreted, or 'allegorized' into telling the truth. The allegorical poet simply asks in narrative form what the allegorical critic discursively affirms; are my words lies, or do they in fact thrust at the truth?" (46-47). This concern for truth and the proper way to approach it may well be what draws writers to allegory.

In *The Vitality of Allegory*, Gary Johnson argues that, despite plenty of announcements of allegory's death, the form is very much alive, and to make sense of its survival he offers a taxonomy of types of allegory. Johnson notes the figurative essence of allegory, but he foregrounds its narrative form: He defines 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" (8). Focusing on allegory's dependence on narrative allows Johnson to account for Quintilian's sense of allegory's extension of metaphor's figurative nature and for related 20th-century accounts (most

notably by Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man) of allegory's diachronicity. But Johnson emphasizes that allegory need not mark a whole text but can be a feature or an embedded part of a text; in fact, he blames pronouncements of allegory's demise in large part on "our general insistence on applying the conventional designation 'allegory' or 'allegorical' only to entire works" (3). Thus, Johnson suggests that works that are allegorical as a whole might be either strong or weak (reflective of the extent to which the text is committed to its allegorical nature); at the same time, he proposes that texts might have allegorical qualities or concerns without being, on the whole, allegories.

But long before the arrival of such varied definitions and classifications of allegory, Samuel Taylor Coleridge offered what is likely the most influential and most polemical definition of allegory:

> We shall not err in any material point if we define allegoric composition as the employment of one set of agents and images with actions and accompaniments correspondent, so as to convey, while we disguise, either moral qualities or conceptions of the mind that are not in themselves objects of the Senses, or other images, agents, actions, fortunes and circumstances, so that the difference is every where presented to the eye or imagination while the Likeness is suggested to the mind: and this connectedly so that the Parts combine to form a consistent Whole. (*Lectures* 99).

Note that this definition is little more than an extended gloss on the etymological definition of *allegoria*: speaking something other. And yet it is at the heart of a strong turn against allegory, spearheaded by Coleridge.

The badness of allegory

Perhaps the first critique of allegory comes from Plato, in the same text as the foundational example of allegory. Plato's Socrates doesn't criticize allegory by name, but his critique of poetry in *The Republic* is fundamentally a critique of allegory: He argues that art is doubly removed from the true nature of things, because art is an imitation of an idea, which is in turn an imitation of a form (598b). But poetry might lead "children and foolish people" into believing that it really represents the truth (598c). Socrates worries that they might not be able to "distinguish between knowledge, ignorance, and imitation" (598d). It seems, then, that the difference between acceptable allegory and dangerous poetry, in Socrates' mind, is in the degree of transparency. Didactic allegory is fine because it admits its own purpose and mechanics, whereas poetry that is not explicit about its mimetic nature might escape control and thus lead to error. Correct interpretation is king in Socrates' mind, and if the poet does not tell his audience exactly what he means to say, his audience might misunderstand. Poetry incites the passions, Socrates knows, and that can be quite dangerous. Socrates more or less accuses foolish readers of practicing *allegoresis*—of interpreting a story to mean something it might not be intended to mean. Allegory is an acceptable rhetorical tool, but it should always be deployed in a targeted way, to convey a specific message in a regulated manner, safe from the unpredictable passions. In Plato, then, allegory is more a rhetorical figure than a genre or poetic device. Because he operates with a somewhat narrow definition of allegory, the form escapes real condemnation. Still, *The Republic*'s critique of poetry poses problems that would arise again, centuries later, for allegory.

The British romantics really made allegory a problem. The leading detractor of allegory—and still its most defining theorist—is Coleridge, who drew on Goethe's thinking about the difference between allegory and symbol, first articulated in the 1797 essay "Uber die Gegenstände der bildenden Kunst" (Chai 76). Coleridge's clearest articulation of the difference comes in *The Statesman's Manual*:

> Now an Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a Symbol…is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative. (*Statesman's Manual* 102)

Allegory, in Coleridge's telling, suggests two distinct layers of meaning, and one can mechanically substitute one layer for the other. Symbol, on the other hand, is more robust, infinite in meaning, but a feature of a unified, rather than bifurcated, world. Allegory was decidedly the intellectually and poetically inferior mode. Allegory, Coleridge says, "is incapable of exciting any lively interest for any length of time—for if the allegoric personage be strongly individualized so as to interest us, we cease to think of it as allegory" (*Lectures* 102).

Coleridge formed his definition of allegory for a very specific, polemical reason. As I will discuss further in chapter one, Coleridge's thought is undergirded by his religious commitment. Against the secularism of the Enlightenment, Coleridge yearned for a theory that might protect an essentially religious worldview from the scientific thought he saw encroaching. In his conception of symbol, Coleridge allowed for a religious vision. The "Unity" Coleridge mentions in his definition of symbol is, as J. Robert Barth notes, God (123). Symbol thus partakes in the unity of God, so "symbol-making for Coleridge—and symbol-perceiving—is essentially a religious act" (Barth 144). "Symbol, therefore, not merely expresses the juxtaposition of two realities (as metaphor can do) but also articulates, however dimply, the 'interpenetration' of two disparate and often seemingly very distant realities, such as humankind and God. It is by such language—poetic language—that the chasm between the immanent and the transcendent can be bridged" (Barth 25-26). But that restoration of a religious wholeness—indeed, a poetics compatible with religion—doesn't come for free. Allegory takes the fall. Only by constructing a pretty narrow definition of allegory can Coleridge set symbol up to carry the religious mantle.

The extremity of Coleridge's position on allegory comes into stark relief in his comments on some of the most celebrated allegorists—or perhaps I should say in his lack of comments on them: Coleridge actually doesn't comment much, or with much specificity, about Dante, Spenser, or Bunyan as allegorists. His commentary on allegory is mostly quite abstract; he defines it and holds forth on his definition, but he doesn't really apply his definition to actual cases of allegory to see how it might play out in practice. If he were to do so, he might run into a problem: Spenser or Bunyan, he might

find, wrote pretty complicated, interesting allegories—not just the neatly packaged one-to-one correspondences, promoting prefab thought, that Coleridge takes allegory to be. So Coleridge offers a strange comment: "If the allegoric personage be strongly individualized so as to interest us, we cease to think of it as allegory….—The dullest and most defective parts of Spenser are those in which we are compelled to think of his agents as allegories" (*Lectures* 102-103). That's quite the evasion: If allegory gets too good, it stops being allegory. Though he doesn't say it outright, Coleridge implies that Spenser—or at least the good part of Spenser—isn't really allegory at all. He's more explicit about Dante: "The Divina Commedia is a system of moral, political, and theological truths, with arbitrary personal exemplifications, which are not, in my opinion, allegorical" (*Miscellaneous Criticism* 150). When Coleridge's definition of allegory is so narrow it forces him to exclude Dante and perhaps even Spenser, we might be dealing with a straw man.

Still, Coleridge's thought on allegory proved highly influential, and it introduced two essential problems for the student or practitioner of allegory. First, it complicated the matter of definition, turning the distinction between allegory and symbol into a problem for literary thinkers to work out—especially because even Coleridge's distinction was neither entirely straightforward nor, at least in hindsight, uncontroversial. Second, it turned allegory into something of a taboo. When a form is commonly denounced as simplistic and old-fashioned, a writer can no longer embrace it without in some way, even just implicitly, taking up a stake in the debate of what allegory is and whether, why, and towards what end it should be used.[2]

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[2] In *Allegory and Enchantment: An Early Modern Poetics*, Jason Crawford lays out a similar problem facing allegory before Coleridge's repudiation. Crawford notes that early modern poets saw allegory as a

A definition?

I have come, reluctantly, to the time when I must offer a definition of allegory. Plenty of discussions of allegory punt on the matter of definition. Even Angus Fletcher, in his seminal study *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, avoids the task of straightforward definition: “Given [the form’s] range of reference, no narrowly exclusive stipulated definition will be useful, however desirable it might seem, while formal precision may at present even be misleading to the student of the subject” (1). But in fact every study of allegory must, at least implicitly, assume a particular definition. The term might be murky, and it might mean various things in various critical contexts, but if I am to speak about it coherently, I ought to make clear what I mean when I refer to “allegory.”

While I don’t think Coleridge’s take is precisely right, it is important to acknowledge it as the abiding definition that generally dominated later critical thought. While critics like Michael Murrin or Maureen Quilligan offer alternative definitions that broaden what counts as allegory and thus save the form from Coleridge’s strain of condemnation, many other critics—Fletcher perhaps chief among them—more or less accept Coleridge’s definition wholesale, and their attempts to redeem allegory work within Coleridge’s taxonomy. Fletcher, F.O. Matthiessen, Edward Bloom, Edwin Honig, Charles Feidelson,

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hallmark of an enchanted, pre-modern world, but that they nonetheless wrote allegories (11). Despite the fact that allegory seems to enchant, then, “early modern poets…seem to discover again and again that allegory has disenchantment embedded in its most fundamental dynamics,” and thus “allegory has in fact always tended to orchestrate its own repudiation” (13). Crawford sees in early modern allegory a dialectic of enchantment and disenchantment—an observation similar to what I will argue about the dialectic allegory in *Moby-Dick.* It is important to note, then, that while the particular allegorical scene I discuss develops largely from Coleridge’s criticism of allegory, and Coleridge sets the terms for much of 19th century discourse about allegory, Crawford traces similar phenomena even before Coleridge.

Bainard Cowan, Deborah Madsen, Olaf Hansen—all these critics, and many more, use Coleridge's definition as a baseline in their considerations of allegory, whether explicitly or implicitly. They may diverge from him somewhere down the line, and they may not ultimately embrace his definition, but it is the starting point from which they work. His influence in setting the terms of allegorical theory is immense.

There are, of course, critics who do not work with a Coleridgean definition, and they are often among the most interesting theorists of allegory. Murrin and Quilligan are chief among that camp, and I will discuss both of them at length later. In some sense, their definitions harken to a pre-Coleridgean understanding of allegory. Murrin draws his from the study of Renaissance rhetoric, and Quilligan's definition relocates Dantescan polysemy to the level of the word. Still, Quilligan excludes from the genre several texts that are generally considered allegorical, and Murrin's definition is more particular to Renaissance texts than to the genre as a whole.

Fredric Jameson's recent manifesto on allegory, *Allegory and Ideology*, inverts the Coleridgean valuing of symbol above allegory and argues that allegory is in fact the more complex system. But Jameson works with a very particular notion of four-fold allegory, revived from Dante—in that sense, Jameson, too, turns back to a pre-Coleridgean understanding of allegory. Like Coleridge, Jameson eschews the more typical allegory of one-to-one correspondences. Nevertheless, Jameson celebrates allegory for precisely the reasons Coleridge disparages it: "The signal advantage of allegorical systems over symbolic ones is that they raise such practical issues of representability, whereas recourse to the symbol and its impoverished systems of identification tends to efface the practical problems themselves and to substitute meanings for constructions, in the long run drifting

toward the religious and the mystical, if not simply the humanistic" (Jameson 36-37). Jameson thus likes allegory precisely because it does not gesture towards concerns for which he has little taste: humanism, aesthetics, beauty, truth, universalizing impulses (which Jameson, like Nicholas Halmi and Coleridge, associates with the unifying, rather than dual, nature of symbol). Nonetheless, Jameson is acutely aware of his inversion of Coleridge's thought; the essential difference is just that he wants to do away with any sort of religiously-tinged holistic worldview Coleridge sought to preserve. In that sense Jameson, too, is indebted to Coleridge's allegorical theory.

It seems to me that if Coleridge's definition has such staying power—if it has shaped so many opinions—it has to be the primary basis for any general consideration of the form. Coleridge may not have been right when he devised his taxonomy (though who is to say, absent an ultimate authority that could not possibly exist, how to determine whether he was right?), but his legacy is so strong that he now must stand, if not as the sole arbiter of allegory's definition, at least as the dominant voice everyone else must attend to.

So I don't adopt Coleridge's definition wholesale or without reservation, but it provides the working baseline for my understanding of what allegory is. That is, an allegory is a story in which characters or objects figure abstractions, in a prolonged, one-to-one correspondence. I take Coleridge—and Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne's fictional editor in "Rappaccini's Daughter," and so many other thinkers—to be essentially right that, in its strictest form, allegory is mechanical, simplistic, and not that interesting. But I also take allegory to tap into a fundamental human impulse to want to understand things beyond what can be seen, to recognize that everything may not be

merely what it appears to be, that great meaning may lurk behind mundane objects. I even agree that allegory insists that its reader decide whether to believe that a text can convey come kind of transcendent meaning, and that, at least historically, that meaning is religious in nature (Quilligan 241).

Thus, even adopting Coleridge's definition, allegory is a form, more than any other, that demands consideration of epistemology—of how we know about the world around us and the ideas in it. In this sense, the essential nature of the form of allegory is much more interesting than many actual examples of allegorical texts are. But, sometimes, an allegorical writer might refuse to write a tidy allegorical text. He thus turns his reader's attention to the question of what an allegory is, how it works, and why it might be interesting, useful, or revealing. He admits that allegory is a potentially pedantic or tedious mode but insists, despite himself, on using it anyway, because he recognizes, even unconsciously, that it shares his epistemological fixations. Then, he unveils the mechanics of allegory as perhaps more complicated and richer than Coleridge or anyone else might have thought them to be. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville are such writers. They write allegories despite themselves, and often their allegories don't work and thus don't turn out boring or mechanical. They write allegories, perhaps, because allegory is the form that best suits the skepticism they cannot get beyond—skepticism about human knowledge, about the purpose of literature, about the ability of a person or especially a writer to connect warmly and sympathetically to other people. Allegory may be stunted as a narrative form, but Hawthorne and Melville wonder if the world itself isn't stunted, too—if it may be futile to strive to know or to love. What better form, then, than one that seems at first glance so facile? And what better way to probe the depths of

knowledge, love, and imaginative possibility than to break a form that cannot contain their all-embracing, all-denying, all-questioning inquiries?

The way forward

Chapter one examines Shelley in light of the English romantic taboo against allegory. I focus on what William Keach refers to as Shelley's imagery—his metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, simile; that is, his figurative language. I, along with Joel Fineman and Quintilian, among others, take these sorts of figures to be junior cousins of allegory: Allegory is extended metaphor. Shelley's figures offer a glimpse of how one might bypass Coleridge's critique of allegory. Shelley's vision of love recalls Coleridge's understanding of allegory, but Shelley associates love with metaphor. The vitality of his metaphor and other figures, even if it operates on a smaller scale than the allegory against which Coleridge positions himself, thus suggests the possibility for the redemption of something resembling allegory. Shelley's shifting figures frequently offer images of withdrawal, and he wonders what is left at the core, what his figures work around. I propose that where it is tempting to see vacancy beneath the veils of metaphor, Shelley instead asserts a powerful human force of love. Shelley's figures tease out, on a smaller scale, the primary allegorical concerns I address in my chapters on Hawthorne and Melville, both of whom read Shelley (P. Robertson 233; Sealts 214). Shelley suggests a strong connection between metaphor and love, whereas Hawthorne agonizes over but perhaps ultimately finds a connection between allegory and what he calls "human warmth." Shelley uses his ever-shifting figures to probe the essential vacancy of the world as it presents itself for human understanding; Melville, similarly, offers

allegories—and characters' doubts about allegories—that shift and reveal Moby Dick, like the world he lives in, to be ineluctably inscrutable. Against Coleridge's dominant critiques of allegory, then, Shelley's embrace of figure stands as a harbinger of allegory's redemption as it plays out, in two rather different ways, in Hawthorne and Melville.

In chapter two, I argue that Hawthorne writes allegories that push the bounds of Coleridge's definition and thus might offer a redemption of allegory. Curiously, Hawthorne begins "Rappaccini's Daughter" with a preface that speaks of himself in the third person, disavowing his own allegorical tendencies. I argue that Hawthorne finds himself inheriting traditions that reject both allegory and romance, but, instead of joining in that rejection, Hawthorne uses allegory and romance to investigate just what is so bad about them. As a result, his own engagement with allegory is fraught and anxious, and he writes allegory even while explicitly distancing himself from the form. In extended discussions of "The Minister's Black Veil" and "The Celestial Railroad," I examine ways in which Hawthorne's allegories interrogate the mode of allegory itself. Hawthorne sees allegory as an incarnation of what he calls the Unpardonable Sin, but he also sees that it is a sin the literary tradition dooms him to perpetuate. I argue that the new kind of overdetermined allegory he writes in "Rappaccini's Daughter," in its brokenness, grants its reader a new kind of freedom, and perhaps a small window of escape from the Unpardonable Sin of traditional allegory.

Chapter three considers Melville's wrestling with allegory in *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael, like Hawthorne, explicitly criticizes allegory, and he insists that the tale of Moby Dick not be mistaken for an allegory. Ahab, on the other hand, seems at first glance to want to read the whale allegorically, as he explains in his Quarter-Deck speech. But, through an

examination of Ahab and Ishmael's diction—particularly their shared use of the word "some"—and both their misgivings and questions that undercut the ideas they seem to hold, I propose that both Ishmael and Ahab are actually torn, unsure of what to make of allegory, because both find the world to be fundamentally unknowable. Forced in some way to choose, Ahab falls on the side of allegory, while Ishmael ultimately rejects it. But just as each character contains his own inner battle over the value and truth of allegory, *Moby-Dick* presents the two characters in a dialectic relationship, neither able to triumph over the other—and thus we come to no ultimate conclusion about allegory. Melville uses allegory to develop that dialectic; that is, he uses allegory to suggest that there can be no final verdict on allegory, and thus he goes beyond Coleridge's condemnation. The question of allegory, one on which Coleridge seemed to have ruled permanently, is in fact one Melville can never finish asking.

In both Hawthorne and Melville, then, we see allegory that is decidedly not the boring, straightforward tool Coleridge threw to the dustbin. That's not because Hawthorne and Melville disagree with Coleridge's evaluation of allegory, or that they define it differently. Rather, as Robert Weisbuch and others have argued, the American romantics were plagued by a skepticism even their English romantic predecessors could not have fully envisioned. In the new, higher stakes intellectual atmosphere they find themselves in, Weisbuch argues, Hawthorne and Melville open up to questioning matters Coleridge and even Shelley took for granted (258). As a result, they find themselves questioning so deeply, so hyperbolically, that it almost doesn't make sense anymore to reject allegory because it's too simple. To Hawthorne and Melville, nothing can be simple. Dogma is out of the question. So there's no longer any need to criticize allegory, because the dogmatic,

simplistic ways of thinking it traditionally attends are no longer a threat. (Indeed, the stability of dogmatic thinking might almost seem welcome in the tremulous American intellectual landscape.) In Hawthorne and Melville's hands, allegory takes on new forms, forms that might seem broken given the paradigm of traditional, one-to-one, mechanical allegory. But these more difficult, more anxious allegories, suited to their new landscape, offer redemption for the whole mode of allegory. Coleridge declared allegory dead, but Shelley allows us to see why the primary concerns of allegory cannot die, and then, in America, allegory finds new life.

Chapter One: Shelley's Figuration of Love

What happens after a literary form is declared dead? Coleridge's condemnation is a strong blow to allegory's standing, and I want to examine the story of how allegory rises from the ashes after his criticism. In Shelley's poetry and prose, we might see not a full restitution of allegory but a series of ideas that land as jabs in Coleridge's argument, laying the groundwork for allegory's redemption. Shelley's skepticism, combined, if strangely, with his deep longing for a unified, assertive, transcendent vision of the universe, allows us to see that Coleridge's categorization of allegory is not the only way. Shelley's grand thinking prevents him from being an allegorist,[3] I argue, because he is at once too prone to connect ideas to all other ideas (resulting in a unitary, not dual, vision of knowledge) and too doubtful of dogma of any sort. An allegorist in the Coleridgean conception, on the other hand, tends to promote a codified, prefabricated vision, translated into a figured form—but Shelley simply does not think that way. Whereas Coleridge associates allegory with a set constellation of other tropes and concepts—he distinguishes, on the one hand, the set of allegory, metonymy, fancy, and a dual world from the superior set of symbol, synecdoche, imagination and a unitary world—Shelley cuts across those divisions, revealing the concept of allegory to be more malleable than Coleridge imagined.

Before we turn to the American writers who more explicitly complicated Coleridge's ideas about allegory, then, we ought to dwell on Coleridge's compatriot, not chiefly an allegorist but a poet just as interested in figurative language. Shelley's epistemological

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[3] Critics like Carl Grabo and Michael Murrin read Shelley as an allegorist, but, as I explain below, they work with different understandings of allegory than the one I, following Coleridge, have adopted.

fascination—his deep epistemological skepticism—throws him again and again into the kinds of questions that allegory, because of its epistemological posture, raises.

Shelley's figures are grounded in a radical vision of ever-shifting connections between things, and Shelley takes those connections, fundamentally, to be expressions of love. But if Coleridge sees allegory as brittle, dealing with "fixities and definites" (*Biographia Literaria* 305), Shelley sees metaphor as much the opposite. My primary focus is on Shelley's figures, among them metaphor, which I see as a strong precursor to the sort of thinking one sees in Hawthorne and Melville. Quintilian defined allegory as extended metaphor, and that definition has persisted. Even in 1981, by which point plenty of other definitions of allegory were available and even dominant, Joel Fineman relied primarily on Quintilian's, calling it "the standard formulation" in "The Structure of Allegorical Desire" (30-31).[4] Shelley's figures, extended, become, in a way, Hawthorne and Melville's allegories—especially because these American romantics share with Shelley, in a way Robert Weisbuch explains, a deep, hyperbolic skepticism. Shelley's preoccupation with knowing deeply is similar to that of Hawthorne and Melville, and, like them, Shelley sees the world as difficult to pin down at all, let alone with a straightforward allegory. Shelley reflects that view in his ever-shifting figures, which result in what William Keach calls "Shelley's speed" (159). As Edwin Honig notes of the British romantics, "instead of the petrified personification of debased allegory, they insisted on the Janus-faced metaphor, the ironic ambiguity, the self-contradictory hypothesis" (40). My contention is that Hawthorne and Melville went on to do much the

[4] Rosemond Tuve has a similar understanding of metaphor and allegory: "By definition a continued metaphor, *allegoria* exhibits the normal relation of concretion to abstraction found in metaphor, in the shape of a *series* of particulars with further meanings" (105-106).

same thing, except that they fused the two poles Honig names: They undo allegory's petrification and allow it to be as Janus-faced and mutable as Shelley's metaphor is.

Coleridge and Shelley: love and allegory

Coleridge's distinction between allegory and symbol maps onto his notions of fancy and imagination. In the *Biographia Literaria,* he defines two types of imagination: The primary imagination is the force that guides the world, "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and…a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (304). The secondary imagination is a human faculty that reflects the primary imagination. It is the type of imagination that concerns us here. Coleridge says this type of imagination "is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead" (304). Fancy, by contrast, is mechanical and "has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites" (*Biographia Literaria* 305). As we have seen, Coleridge takes allegory to be mechanical and thus simplistic. One need only determine the allegorical vehicle and line the pieces up, and the allegory carries itself through. Thus while symbol, like the imagination, "struggles to idealize and to unify," allegory is a lesser mode more akin to fancy (304).[5]

But Coleridge's definitions of symbol and allegory are really what one typically takes to be definitions of synecdoche and metonymy. Symbol, Coleridge says in *The Statesman's Manual*, is a figure that stands for something of which it is also a part: This is a straightforward definition of synecdoche. Nor is Coleridge's alignment of symbol

[5] For a relatively recent argument for the revaluation of fancy, see Jeffrey Robinson's *Unfettering Poetry.*

with synecdoche confined to this one example. He makes a similar comment in a lecture on *Don Quixote:*

> The Symbolical…cannot perhaps be better defined, in distinction from the Allegorical, than that it is always itself a *part* of that of the whole of which it is representative—Here comes a *Sail*—that is, a Ship, is a symbolical Expression—Behold our lion, when we speak of some gallant Soldier, is allegorical—of most importance to our own present subject, that the latter cannot be other than spoken consciously/ while in the former it is very possible that *the general truth* represented may be working unconsciously in the Poet's mind during the construction of the symbol….The advantage of symbolical writing over allegory, that it presumes no disjunction of Faculty—simple predomination. (417-418)

A refresher on some definitions might be helpful. A synecdoche is a figure in which a part stands for the whole—for example, when one refers to a car as "wheels." A metonym is a figure in which something stands for something to which it is related but of which it is not a part, like when one refers to governmental authority in a monarchy as "the crown." Quite clearly, then, Coleridge identifies symbol with synecdoche and allegory with metonymy. (A sail is part of a ship, and a lion is like a soldier but not part of him.)

We might draw two opposing constellations of ideas, then, according to Coleridge's taxonomies. Symbol, imagination, and synecdoche are all related. So are allegory, fancy, and metonymy. The first group, in Coleridge's mind, is clearly superior to the second. If

we compare how Coleridge and Shelley view love, though, we might see in Shelley a redemption of allegory from Coleridge's critique.

Coleridge and Shelley offer starkly contrasting understandings of love. In a lecture on *Romeo and Juliet*, Coleridge says,

> Considering myself and my fellow-men as a sort of link between heaven and earth, being composed of body and soul, with power to reason and to will, and with that perpetual aspiration which tells us that this is ours for a while, but it is not ourselves; considering man, I say, in this two-fold character, yet united in one person, I conceive that there can be no correct definition of love which does not correspond with our being, and with that subordination of one part to another which constitutes our perfection. (498)

Coleridge's conception of love resembles synecdoche. Man is linked to God—man is, in some sense, a part of God—so love must partake in God. For a person to love another person, he must also see that person as participating in God. The beloved is thus a symbol of God: He stands in for but is also a part of God.

Shelley's conception of love, by contrast, more closely resembles metonymy. Shelley, the staunch atheist, has no conception of man as part of God. Loving another person resembles loving something transcendent—in that both are forms of connection—but, even ignoring the concept of a personal deity, the human beloved does not participate in the analogous love object, the transcendent but unknowable truth. So we might then say that Shelley's love resembles metonymy, which, if we recall the Coleridgean

constellation of related concepts, resembles allegory. Simply, then: Shelley's love resembles Coleridge's understanding of allegory.

Remarkably similar passages in Coleridge and Shelley reveal the difference between their conceptions of love. Coleridge's object of love doesn't have to participate just in God; other transcendent or natural phenomena can play a similar role. He says of love:

> Love…is an associative quality.…What is the first effect of love, but to associate the feeling with every object in nature? the trees whisper, the roses exhale their perfumes, the nightingales sing, nay the very skies smile in unison with the feeling of true and pure love. It gives to every object in nature a power of the heart, without which it would indeed be spiritless. (*Text* 499-500)

Compare Shelley's take:

> Hence in solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings and yet they sympathise not with us, we love the flowers, the grass and the waters and the sky. In the motion of the very leaves of spring in the blue air there is then found a secret correspondence with our heart. There is eloquence in the tongueless wind and a melody in the flowing of brooks and the rustling of the reeds beside them which by their inconceivable relation to something within the soul awaken the spirits to a dance of breathless rapture, and bring tears of mysterious tenderness to the eyes like the enthusiasm of patriotic success or the voice of one beloved singing to you alone. (*On Love* 202)

For Coleridge, love between people animates nature. Love first exists between people, but then, by means of association, the world seems to come alive, perhaps because love participates in the world. For Shelley, though, nature serves as a replacement love object. A person can love another person, or, failing that, he can love nature. The same spirit operates in both cases; it is just the object of love that has changed. The lover does not animate nature; rather, he finds it animated. Shelley's nature is far from the dead copy Coleridge takes it to be. Shelley's nature has "eloquence," "melody," and "rapture," readily available to man if only he would love it. Coleridge's nature, by contrast, is "spiritless," and it becomes as wonderful only when the lover associates it with love. Both Shelley and Coleridge talk about associations or correspondences between love and nature, but there is a subtle difference: Coleridge says nature is associated with "the feeling" of love, whereas Shelley takes nature to correspond "with our heart." So Coleridge links nature with the experience of love—the idea of love—whereas Shelley just loves nature. Coleridge is theorizing; Shelley is practicing love that oversteps its bounds. Coleridge sees his idea of love mapping onto a broader phenomenon in which it participates. The lover is part of the natural world. He is generalizing from the particular, opening love up to illuminate more than itself. He is practicing synecdoche. Shelley is merely substituting one object of love for another, transferring his love from one object to an equal other. He is working metonymically.

Although Shelley does not present his figures as allegory, and he does not identify his conception of love with allegory, Coleridge's thought leads us to see a connection between Shelleyan love and the Coleridgean understanding of allegory. Shelley's love connects without participation—the object of love plays a similar function to the object of

epistemological longing, but the two remain in separate spheres, working in parallel but not together. While Coleridge's thoughts on love and allegory are not native to Shelley's thought, they help us see Shelley as a potential rebuff to Coleridge. If Coleridge condemns allegory for being mechanical and fixed, perhaps Shelley offers a way to consider allegory differently. Following Coleridge, other 19th century critics—Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James chief among them—would dismiss allegory for its coldness, its inhumanity. For Shelley, though, allegory is not just mechanical. Although the definition of allegory is disputed, if we take Coleridge's definition and conclude that allegory is to metonymy as symbol is to synecdoche, love, for Shelley, falls in the camp of allegory, whereas for Coleridge it is more closely related to symbol.

Shelley is freed to define love as he does in large part because of his atheism; Coleridge's understanding of love is much more religious. And for traditional Christian thought, allegory plays a different role: It works in the service of promoting religious messages. Shelley has no such messages to promote. He doesn't need allegory to serve a particular vision of God; similarly, he doesn't need love to promote a vision of God.[6] If, for Coleridge and other Christian thinkers, allegory is a tool for promotion of religious orthodoxy, it is no surprise that it should come off as mechanical or simplistic. Allegory, in a Christian context, is merely a key; the contents of the lock are predetermined, fixed. Coleridge's position is thus tricky: Wanting to preserve religious integrity against Enlightenment thought—but also to preserve poetry from dogma—he turns allegory into a scapegoat. As J. Robert Barth says, "Coleridge was able to evolve, if not fully to shape, a generally consistent body of thought that is at once religious and secular. Indeed, this is

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[6] Shelley thus doesn't share Coleridge's fear of Enlightenment thought and its scientific threat to religion; in fact, Shelley was fascinated by science and read scientific work ravenously, as Carl Grabo has shown.

precisely the role played by symbol in his thought: to reconcile opposites, or what seem to be opposites, including the secular and the religious, the temporal and the eternal" (140).[7] But for Shelley, nothing is predetermined but mutability, which is inherently unfixed, and the possibility of love. And so while I do not read Shelley chiefly as an allegorist, perhaps his visions of love and metaphor unearth allegory's potential for vitality.

Shelley shifts Coleridge's conception of allegory, which corresponds to metonymy, fixity, and a known orthodoxy, towards a paradigm more grounded in ambiguity. He uses metaphor to draw a link between metonymy and love. The metonymic relations Coleridge associates with allegory are now tied to an almost Pyrrhonian skepticism, an ever-shifting sense that mutability is the world's only constant, and that the best way to approach an understanding of mutability or truth is through negative, retreating metaphors. To Coleridge, the act of substitution—the fundamental mechanism of metonymy and allegory—is evidence of a fixed, brittle world. Merely substituting one thing for another is a boring way to find meaning, and the meaning it delivers is likely to be dull. Coleridge instead would see symbols always as part of a unified and thus infinitely rich whole. The work of the symbolist—the work of the imagination—is "to unify" (*Biographia Literaria* 304). But to Shelley, substitution is not fixed. One thing can substitute for another in an ephemeral or ambiguous way. Shelley sees a more connected, more unified world, where inquiries in one vein easily morph into another, and all are prone to shift. Substitutions

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[7] In *Coleridge and Shelley: Textual Engagement*, Sally West notes that Coleridge and Shelley are alike in their resistance to dogma. She sees in Coleridge's resistance to allegory a reflection of his antipathy to passive religious understanding: In Coleridge's view, religion ought to be "understood rather than simply accepted as dogma," so Coleridge "laments the propensity of received religion to create either a spiritual wasteland by adhering to the literal, or a pernicious mystery by relying solely on the metaphorical" (West 176). In that sense, Coleridge, like Shelley, West argues, is suspicious of the potential for abuse of language when "words are empty and we can fill them with as much or as little meaning as we choose" (177). West, like Barth, claims that for Coleridge the valuing of symbol above allegory is a way out of that problem.

need not—and in fact cannot—remain tidily paired. And this conception of substitution thus challenges Coleridge's condemnation of allegory as a purely mechanical vehicle for the transmission of orthodoxy. Shelley doesn't do it through allegory per se, but his vision of love—which Coleridge and Shelley alike take to be animating and vital—is related to Coleridge's understanding of allegory. The key to understanding Shelley's vision of love, and its redemption from Coleridge's charges, is his metaphor. Shelley uses metaphor—and other figures—in his poetry to triangulate a response to the epistemological dead end he faces. He also uses love, and he sees love and metaphor filling very similar roles: Through metaphor and love, a poet might escape what might otherwise seem to be a paralyzing epistemological skepticism.

Something much like Shelley's vision of the unfixity of the world—the shifting, protean, Janus-faced nature of figurative language—we will see, marks Hawthorne's and Melville's use of allegory. Their allegories are more extended than Shelley's figures, which tend to last for only a moment before they shift. Hawthorne's allegorical figures are developed over the course of a whole tale, often; allegorical features accrue to a character. So perhaps Hawthorne's allegories don't shift so much as they overlap; while Shelley's figures change quickly, Hawthorne's characters, particularly in "Rappaccini's Daughter," retain features of multiple allegorical mappings over an extended period of time, even when those allegories come into conflict with each other. Still, Hawthorne shares with Shelley a sense that figurative mappings might not be purely mechanical, that they might, in their multiplicity, break free from Coleridge's critique. And Melville shares with Shelley a sense of a fundamental void at the heart of any figurative efforts towards meaning; like Shelley's figures, Melville's allegories reveal both the mutability and deep

vacancy beneath them. There, too, is a redemption from Coleridge's critique: If its tenor is unstable and unknowable, an allegory cannot offer a tidy one-to-one correspondence but must instead, perforce, shift and grow in its complexity. Instead of offering a shortcut to the figured truth, then, allegories unsettle their reader, the facts one might think firm, and the very mechanism by which truth might be transmitted.

Shelley and allegory

Before we turn to Shelley's metaphor, there is a bit to say about his allegory. Carl Grabo explains the scientific learning undergirding *Prometheus Unbound.* Shelley was deeply interested in science, and Grabo traces extensively the influences of Erasmus Darwin, Humphry Davy, William Herschel, and Isaac Newton, among others, on Shelley's ideas and verse. There are ways in which Grabo seems to offer an allegorical reading of Shelley. He takes *Prometheus Unbound* to expound Shelley's ideas about electricity, astronomy, chemistry, and other advanced scientific theories—and surely a poem that seems to be about gods and spirits but is actually, on some deeper level, about electromagnetism seems to demand the label of allegory. Grabo even discusses the poem, at times, as if it were theoretically possible to decode it fully, revealing its ultimate, figured meaning. "A complete annotation of the poem," he says, "would leave no important implication without its commentary" (xi). The suggestion is that one might eventually uncover the meaning of every word, trace every allusion, and thus understand fully the true figured meaning of *Prometheus Unbound*—one might fully unlock the complex allegory.

Yet Grabo sees that there is more at stake in Shelley's poem than a mere rehearsal of scientific theories, even allegorically disguised. Instead, Grabo presents a Shelley to whom science is one way to know, if a particularly fascinating and important one, and thus it is just one of many modes of thought Shelley aims to grasp. "Science to him," Grabo says, "was one strand of human knowledge, to be woven into a synthesis with moral philosophy and metaphysics. What he was after was what all of us are after, a unified conception of the universe" (viii). In that sense, the allegorical meaning of *Prometheus Unbound*—all the hidden scientific references that require great study to track down—is not to be divorced from any other meaning. For example, Grabo says about love: "Love, in Shelley's employment of the word in *Prometheus*, is both a spiritual and a physical power, in the latter sense identifiable with electricity" (45). One might trace the scientific implications of Shelley's presentation of love, but one also might understand him to be actually talking about love, the human bond that he sees, as he sees electricity, as the great glue of the world. Erasmus Darwin, in whom Shelley was quite interested, considered poetry and science to have much the same aim: "to understand the whole of nature" (Grabo 59). Shelley shares that vision, and so his allegory is not precisely the sort Coleridge condemns: It is not a simple one-to-one correspondence that privileges the figured meaning above the literal. To the contrary, in Shelley's allegory, figured meaning and literal meaning—the scientific and the theological or poetic—are united, each helping deepen and clarify the other, both in the service of a great understanding that spans all facets of human inquiry. Shelley's allegory is thus not the kind of presentation by substitution that Coleridge understands allegory to be. Instead, Shelley works with a vision of the world as whole, unified. That is a way of

thinking more closely associated with what Coleridge calls symbol. Still, insofar as Grabo takes *Prometheus Unbound* to operate on multiple levels, with a clear figured meaning available only to a properly attuned audience, we might say the poem is, if not in precisely the way Coleridge would have it, an allegory.

There is another way in which Shelley might be seen as a promoter of allegory in a non-Coleridgean mode: Michael Murrin argues that Shelley is the figure who most revives Renaissance allegory after its abeyance in the 18th century. Shelley "revives in full the theory of divine inspiration" from the Renaissance allegorists (206). Perhaps more important, he adopts the Renaissance notion that poetry reflects a truth—the thing the poet understands by virtue of his divine inspiration—that cannot be conveyed directly. So "the artist deliberately veils truth and his audience perceives it indirectly"—this is as much the case for Shelley as it is for Boccaccio or any other allegorist of the sort Murrin discusses (207). As Shelley puts it in his *Defence of Poetry*, "veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed" (*Defence* 131). Murrin argues that this is the essential feature of allegory. His is decidedly not a Coleridgean understanding of allegory (more on this in chapter two), but it is a conception nonetheless, and one that celebrates Shelley as allegory's greatest 19th-century practitioner.

Still, Murrin notes a critical distinction: While the Renaissance allegorist "could not ignore his audience, for it was part of his very conception of poetry," the romantic allegorist could serve as his own audience (209). Shelley, like Wordsworth, turns inward: The truth is his goal, and to serve an audience would be to direct himself away from the truth, which has a particularly personal slant. Murrin suggests that the reason for this difference is technological revolution, which caused poetry to be a written rather than

oral art (209). But it also matters that Shelley is an atheist, unconcerned with the divine authority of the truth of his poetry. I have noted that Shelley shares with the Renaissance allegorists a sense of divine inspiration, but Shelley's divinity is not a god so much as a Platonically inflected transcendent presence, a poetic inspiration that runs through the world and moves people and thoughts but does not really have a personality or embodiment in the way of a Christian God. Because Shelley does not subscribe to the notion of a constant God who rules over all people, it matters less that his audience come to understand any orthodox truth his poetry reflects. He wants to get at the deep truth, but that truth matters particularly to him, because he is the one who has experienced its allure and beauty. He wants to write his way back to some shadow of the sensation of contact with truth, as the poet in "Alastor" longs to reconnect with the spirit who visits him. Or, as Murrin puts it, "his truth is primarily psychological" (210).[8] An external audience is more or less irrelevant; as Grabo puts it, "he was heedless of an audience" (197). So when Murrin notes that Shelley's fixation on the creative power of the imagination also distinguishes him from Renaissance allegorists, he sees that the poet can create love, which is "the secret of morals" (Murrin 209). "Spencer, on the contrary, did not create values but recalled old ones to his audience" (Murrin 209-210). If we can see this shift as incidental to the business of allegory—a change merely in content and attitude, not in

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[8] To Coleridge, by contrast, truth connects always to God, even when it seems to be personally felt. In a notebook, Coleridge wrote that even when he is "seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists," he has "an obscure feeling as if that new phaenomenon were the dim Awaking of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature/It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is λόγος, the Creator!" (*Notebooks* 2546). Coleridge still conforms to Murrin's observation that romantic poets do not much care about their audience, but his inwardness is less pronounced than Shelley's, because even in his most inward moments he is directed towards God, an external, constant presence.

form or underlying belief about the transmission of truth through poetry's veils—we might, with Murrin, see Shelley as a strong romantic allegorist.

In other words, Shelley thinks about truth—and the writer's role in suggesting it—in the way of an allegorist. Murrin's definition of allegory is useful here, even if we adopt Coleridge's as our primary understanding, because Shelley illustrates the ideas about epistemology that are crucial to the kind of 19th-century allegory I am interested in. We might, then, say that Murrin establishes the way the allegorist approaches ideas, whereas Coleridge's definition is more granular, more concerned with the way the allegorical mechanism actually works. Murrin describes a mode of thought, whereas Coleridge describes a technique. Murrin considers Shelley an allegorist, but Coleridge almost surely would not. Because of Shelley's robust conception of the project of understanding the universe—because, despite his essential skepticism (about which more later), he is after a broad, united understanding of things—a type of allegory marked by dualism is almost irrelevant to his thought. Shelley aims at the deep truth beyond the veil of skepticism, and thus his approach resembles an allegorist's quest for a disguised truth. But stability cannot work for Shelley, and there he lays the ground for Hawthorne and Melville. It will be useful, then, to understand Shelley's thinking, but also to see how his thought is baked into his use of figure. Figures work on a smaller scale than allegory, but Shelley's figures resemble the American allegories I will turn to in chapters two and three—allegories that are, contra Coleridge, anything but stable.[9]

[9] Note that one might well propound a reading of some of Shelley's major poems as allegories. See for example Grabo's reading of *Prometheus Unbound*—but one might, and many critics do, also read *Queen Mab, Hellas,* and *The Witch of Atlas* as allegories. Such a reading is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it might also yield an argument about a type of allegory marked by instability, against the Coleridgean definition.

Shelley's figures: mutability

"Nought may endure but Mutability," Shelley declares, in a somewhat unusually blunt statement for the poet prone to convoluted figures ("Mutability" 16). Mutability, one gathers from a look at several of Shelley's poems, is a persistent fact about the unknowable world; it accounts for doubt and change with which the human mind can't quite keep up. And yet mutability is a vexing concept. Shelley's language, in both his poetry and his prose, is deeply metaphorical, figurative, or imagistic. Even and perhaps especially when Shelley aims to express ideas he believes no person can understand, he falls back on figures to suggest meaning. Beneath those figures, mutability reigns. It inspires images; it is also the subject images sometimes aim to explain. But figure is still an insufficient mechanism; it is flimsy, circumstantial compared to the enduring mutability. It is subject to the change mutability wreaks upon the world. And it cannot—because nothing can—denote the whole of the world's fundamental truth or mutability. Still, as if to compensate for the inadequacy, Shelley uses a barrage of figures, as if he can drown a lack of understanding in a flood of approximations.

Undergirding much of Shelley's work is his deep epistemological skepticism. To understand that skepticism, one must grant that Shelley understands poetry to entail a quest for truth. For him, human longing for knowledge actually constitutes a definition of poetry. Poetry, Shelley says in the *Defence of Poetry*, comes from the "faculty of approximation to the beautiful" (111), and "a poem is the image of life expressed in its eternal truth" (115). The nature of that truth, though, is elusive—perhaps deceptively so. As with so many thinkers who followed Kant, for Shelley, the most essential questions

are ones whose answers evade full and accurate human understanding. In the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," Shelley knows that he will find no clear answers to the deepest questions he asks, that "no voice from some sublime world hath ever / To wisest poets these responses given" (25-26). But he asks the questions nonetheless: "Why fear and dream and death and birth / Cast on the daylight of this earth / Such gloom, —why man has such a scope / For love and hate, despondency and hope?" (21-24). Shelley takes the asking of these unanswerable questions—questions that only lead to further questions—to be the aim of poetry.

Although no sure answers are available, it is possible to strip away false answers. People often construct what Shelley calls "frail spells," dogmatic but weak attempts to solve the world's deepest mysteries ("Hymn" 29). Unable to bear their lack of knowledge, they puff up their own vain efforts to craft the explanations the world does not offer them. A true answer would be found, not created, but those who turn to "the name of God and Ghosts and Heaven" as answers have given up on finding what is true and seek instead to fill an epistemological void (27).

Shelley aims to dispel the misleading answers others adopt. Though their followers adhere fast to them, frail spells can never really replace the inaccessible deeper truth. No matter what myths people construct, the frail spells' "uttered charm might not avail to sever / From what we feel and what we see / Doubt, Chance and mutability" ("Hymn" 29-31). Instead of frail spells, Shelley turns to a spirit he calls intellectual beauty. This spirit comes as a visitation; it is the undefined inspiration for poetry. It is fleeting and beyond human control; it "floats…with as inconstant wing / As summer winds that creep from flower to flower" (2-4). But because that spirit is not something anyone can corral,

it cannot offer ready answers to his deepest questions on command; it can only offer glimpses.

Poetry, Shelley explains in the *Defence,* aims to unveil the way things are—just as frail spells intend to do. But poetry—which Shelley understands very broadly—recognizes that it cannot complete the task, that it will never get to the total truth; poetry accepts uncertainty and obscurity. It still asks the questions, which are more important than their answers, but, in so doing, it stumbles in search of an appropriate vocabulary to articulate precisely the deepest metaphysical truths. These are the truths that require a sublimer voice than people can utter. As Shelley says in the *Defence,* "veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed," for it persistently eludes human grasp (131). But the poet can nonetheless devote himself to tearing down veils, to inching ever closer to the sense of the inmost sublime meaning. Shelley can aim for a negative truth; he can tear down answers he knows to be wrong, even if he does not replace them with new arguments. And he can also hint at a generally sensed—if not quite directly understood—positive meaning. Intellectual beauty is not his to use as a tool of his own will. But it can grace him with insight, and poetry can reflect that insight. It can do so, though, only through an imprecise vocabulary. Intellectual beauty may provide a look at the clear, deep truth poets seek. Poetry, in turn, can suggest such an understanding, but it cannot attack it head on.

In the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," Shelley uses the word "some" to convey a general impression without directly articulating the nature of the thing he describes. The word is a pact with the reader; while the speaker and reader both intuitively know the sense being suggested, neither can name it in precise language. Shelley describes "some unseen Power"

(1), “some sublimer world” (25), “some mute instrument” (34), and “some uncertain moments” (38). Both poet and reader know, vaguely, what “some” refers to, but it is not explicitly stated, and there aren’t precise words for it. When poetry attempts to describe these metaphysical truths directly, it cannot quite do it; thus, the poet must fall back on suggestive words like “some.” For poetry, though, this sort of language is good enough to convey meaning, and perhaps it is even generative in its imperfection. By recognizing the necessary failure of language—a human artifice—to grasp nature’s deepest truths, poetry can aim at a purer truth than the false constructions of the modern religions Shelley criticizes. And by using self-consciously insufficient language, the poet can draw attention to the inherent fallibility of human language and understanding. Keach argues that Shelley’s language “calls attention to itself as an arbitrary product of the imagination,” and thus “Shelley acknowledges its inherent limitations while extending its resources” (42). Poetry’s recognition of its own imperfection is thus essential to its power—and we will see Melville, for example, using the word “some” to much the same effect in chapter three.

Still, though Shelley doubts the human ability to know what Demagorgon in *Prometheus Unbound* calls “the deep truth,” he does suggest something known and abiding (II.iv.116). He has various names for it, but perhaps the clearest and most all-encompassing is “mutability.” Demagorgon identifies this pervading force: “For what would it avail to bid thee gaze / On the revolving world? what to bid speak / Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change?—To these / All things are subject but eternal Love” (II.iv.117-120). Or, in the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” Shelley says, “frail spells…might not avail to sever / From what we feel and what we see / Doubt, Chance and mutability” (29-31). It seems somewhat odd to say that the only permanent thing—

the only thing that governs the way of the world, that touches everything else—is change. Or perhaps it is merely a tautology: If everything is subject to change, then of course change is the one exception, because change entails change in its very existence. Still, even the persistence of mutability is posed not entirely as a settled fact: The frail spells "might not" be able to free the world from mutability—of even that seemingly almost trivially obvious fact, Shelley is not totally sure. If we consider the assertion of mutability to be an essential statement of Shelley's skepticism—mutability's rule is one of the chief reasons it is impossible for the human mind to know the deep truth—then even his skepticism is essentially surmise. But Shelley puts it nearly as explicitly as possible in the short poem "Mutability:" "Nought may endure but Mutability" (16). In a world of flux, it at least makes sense to believe or assert that of course the one enduring thing is exactly that flux—or mutability.

Against mutability and the general inability of language to convey precise meaning, Shelley turns to figures or images, often in the form of metaphor.[10] The "deep truth" may well be "imageless," but the world is still replete with images that can suggest or even generate meaning. As Shelley puts it in the *Defence of Poetry*, metaphorical language "marks the before unapprehended relations of things" (111). Metaphor can allow a reader to understand something he wouldn't otherwise by translating it into terms more familiar or accessible to him. The idea—the tenor of the metaphor—will not be completely conveyed by the vehicle, because, by definition, the two are not exactly the same. But the metaphor is still useful in that it can suggest, it can evoke the right feelings, and it may

[10] While in his prose Shelley refers to his figures primarily as metaphors, he in fact uses a more diverse set of figurative tropes. I thus use Keach's terms—"figure" and "image"—to account for metaphor as well as simile and metonymy, though in my discussion of Shelley's own comments on his figures, I retain his term, "metaphor."

thus be the closest human language—or human intellection more broadly—can get to transmitting certain ideas or the deep truth. In that sense, metaphor and other figures work much like the word “some.” The word “some” accounts, in a way, for the insufficiency of a figure; it picks up the slack where an imperfect figure would otherwise fail. In a sense, the word “some” allows for imageless figuration: The reader knows there is something on the other end—something “some” refers to—but “some” tells him that the way that thing is articulated is insufficient, incommensurate to the thing that should be articulated, that would convey the idea precisely. (Again, we will see more about imageless figuration or allegory in chapter three.) Shelley is unusually attuned to and preoccupied with the insufficiency of poetic articulation—with the fundamental epistemological shortcomings that make allegory alluring. But instead of drawing out an allegory, he falls back on the suggestiveness of “some.”

Perhaps, though, there needn’t even be any correspondence between a figurative vehicle and its supposed tenor. Such a correspondence is necessary if the vehicle and tenor come from two different realms, if they need, in some way, to be made to line up in order to convey their meaning. But Keach notes that Shelley’s figures complicate the interplay between the mind and external objects. “The usual idea of metaphorical or figurative imagery,” he says, “takes for granted a dualism of mind and matter, thoughts and objects of sense; the principal function of imagery, from this perspective, is to give expression to mind and thought by the means of verbal correspondences drawn from physical objects and sensations” (45-46). But in the case of Shelley it is not so straightforward: “In his essays Shelley implies that all imagery must be drawn from mental operations,” not from external objects” (46). Shelley’s figures thus virtually

render null the standard understanding of figurative language's dualism. If figures emerge wholly from the mind, in other words, they cannot be emblems of a riven world. Both sides of the figure—both tenor and vehicle—come from the same source, the mind. If Shelley's figures truly come from the mind, with no real concern for or source in the physical world, there is no precise, knowable object for words like "some" to approximate. Instead, everything operates within the mind. Shelley's vision of imagery divorced from the concrete world elides the dualism Coleridge fears. Shelley's figurative vision, then, is in line with the Coleridgean conception of symbol, in which the world is whole and figures participate in ideas. Shelley's figures of the mind thus make the poet out to be a sort of miniature God in a way that recalls the Coleridgean "infinite I AM" (*Biographia Literaria* 304).

Still, Keach says, "In contrast to Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley freely appropriates the idea of language as dress or vestment to express his sense that the poet must inevitably articulate his conceptions in words not entirely of his own making, in words which, though they have 'relation to thoughts alone', can never be those thoughts" (25-26). It is thus essential that Shelley's figures are mutable. Even if they refer to ideas wholly in the mind, the mind is not fully graspable or still. The mind is mutable and evasive; so must be the figures it generates. Shelley's figures, then, unlike a more fixed tool like allegory, last only for a moment, suggesting a glimpse of connection but not solidifying it. A solid connection would suggest that the link is satisfying, that it elucidates meaning in some permanent, conclusive way—that the task of suggesting meaning is complete. An ever-mutating array of figures, though, suggests that the search for figurative connection must keep moving, hoping to illuminate an idea but never

settling on one perfect image that does the trick. In Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," the poet asks the Wind to "Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!" (66-67). Each of those dead words—depicted as ashes or leaves—in fact contains a vast array of metaphors, mechanisms of meaning. But they never rest or harden; they never develop into anything more than fleeting metaphorical suggestions.

Perhaps the most blatant example of Shelley's shifting figures comes in "To a Sky-Lark," which contains a series of stanzas beginning with the words "like a," each suggesting a new figure to capture the nature of the sky-lark.[11] The poem is quite explicit about the purpose of the sequence of images: "What thou art we know not; / What is most like thee?" (31-32). When direct knowledge fails, a figure or image is the next best option for one who wants to understand. But because a figure offers a sideways glance—understanding by comparison, not by direct statement—it is more useful to triangulate through a series of such figures (in this case, similes). In their collective suggestions, each attending to a different angle, something close to the actual truth may emerge.

Figures of withdrawal

Shelley articulates rather explicitly the central aim of philosophy—and of poetry: to strip away false knowledge. It may be impossible to know the deep truth, but it is possible to know some things that are not the deep truth, and philosophy or poetry's job is to identify and reject them. The closest approach to the deep truth, then, may in fact be through negative, or withdrawing, motion. In a discussion of "The Sensitive-Plant," Earl

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[11] Keach proposes that the intransitive verb "melts" kicks off the series of similes (123).

Wasserman notes that “the love, beauty, and delight that are the eternal forms constitutive of Existence are of such blazing brilliance that our senses cannot perceive them in their own blinding nature, just as we cannot see the stars in the greater glare of daylight. Paradoxically, we are so constituted that we can experience manifestations of light only in darkness” (166). In *Prometheus Unbound* and elsewhere, Shelley asserts love as the one exception to the dominion of change or mutability, but Wasserman’s point about love can also be made about the deep truth or the thing left behind if all the infinite veils were to be undrawn: Only negative imagery can illuminate them. Figures, like the word “some,” may be the best strategy to convey images or ideas that cannot be denoted explicitly, but Shelley uses one particular sort of figure again and again. Frequently, he describes negative or withdrawing motions.[12] In the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” the poet addresses the spirit of intellectual beauty: “Thou—that to human thought art nourishment, / Like darkness to a dying flame!” (44-45). Darkness encroaches upon a dying flame, helping it in the act of dying and thus feeding its death, just as intellectual beauty nourishes human thought. Still, “nourishment” is an odd word to use in such a context; after all, darkness doesn’t quite actively nourish the flame’s death so much as it just takes the place of the flame as it dies. Darkness is an absence, and the whole image of a dying flame surrounded by darkness would be more accurately construed as one of retreat or withdrawal, not nourishment.

A similar image opens “Mutability”: “We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon; / How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver, / Streaking the darkness radiantly!—

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[12] Keach discusses a similar type of figure in his chapter “Evanescence: Melting, Dissolving, Erasing.” He focuses on the implications of such figures for the poet; he says his emphasis is on Shelley’s “effort to arrest moments of experience as they move towards that absence or emptiness which is the condition of desire and regret” (122). My interest is more external to the poet’s mind.

yet soon / Night closes round, and they are lost for ever" (1-4). The clouds veiling the moon are lost to the night; that much isn't quite an image of receding except in that the clouds become hidden as the night overtakes them. But the action—the overtaking—is one of growth, not withdrawal, even if its effect—the loss of the clouds—is negative. But the clouds, in the first line, had undertaken their own task of veiling, so the night is veiling a veil. That additional consideration doesn't just compound the image of overtaking. The clouds veiled the midnight moon—an item of the night. So when the night overtakes the clouds, it obscures the thing that had been hiding the night, incarnate in the moon. The night then reveals itself by freeing the moon from the veil of the clouds. But instead of posing the situation as the night asserting itself against the clouds that had been veiling it, Shelley focuses on the clouds, and the image becomes one of double acts of obscuring. To suggest a presence, Shelley again uses negative imagery. These are just two of many examples of such types of figures, in both Shelley's poetry and his prose.

The mere mechanism of figuration or image is not enough to suggest the deep truth or what exists beneath the infinite veils. It can't just be any figure; only this particular sort of negative, dark, or receding figure works. Those figures at once make clear that the tenor is unknowable and establish the very mechanism of figuration as a convoluted and thus insufficient stopgap for an impossible task.

The effect of many of Shelley's negative figures is difficult. Because movement in one direction is used to evoke movement in another, or darkness is used to evoke light, or absence to evoke presence, each of the figures set the reader on a small task of semantic gymnastics. Of course, the degrees of difficulty vary, but each of them is at least in some way counter-intuitive. Perhaps many readers glance over them quickly, not stopping to

parse the more complicated ones thoroughly. And that is fine; the effect may still be generative because the figures often work by suggestion, not by precise one-to-one correspondence. But the reader who labors over each negative figure may discover a further layer of effect. First, the fact that the reader has to exert some effort to understand the figure's meaning matters. The work of drawing veils back from the deep truth is not easy. But beyond that, even the most diligent attention will not get the reader to a full understanding. Even if he could understand the figure perfectly, he would only arrive at a grasp of its vehicle, an image—and, as we know, "the deep truth is imageless." The figure thus gets the reader much closer to the truth than any other method would, but its own imperfection and difficulty do an important part of that work. A perfect, easy image would be self-defeating: It might seem a good solution to the problem of discussing the deep truth in language, but it would amount to just another "frail spell."

Jerrold Hogle argues that Shelley's metaphors are constantly on the move, that they undermine any hope Shelley has of "permanent and central meanings…At every 'center' of Shelley's poetics, no matter where we place the 'essences' of his thought, we find him being forced to reveal a prior performance of shifts that is never an essence of any sort and keeps decentering itself forever" (166-167). Hogle is right that Shelley's metaphors shift frequently, that they cannot be pinned down and fastened to some static meaning. But he doesn't account for their negativity: Many of Shelley's figures are in flight not so much from static meaning as from themselves. Hogle says Shelley's metaphors keep creating "new thoughts and new inscriptions rising out of their faded progenitors" (167). But Shelley's figures do more: They also constantly undermine themselves, making the reader work with no totally satisfying payoff, making him see that forward motion exists

only accompanied by backward motion, that presence can be understood only in relation to absence. And in both generating and undermining meaning, of course, those figures illustrate exactly that point of the simultaneity and mutual dependence of movement in opposite directions.

Those simultaneous opposite gestures also reflect Shelley's views on the deep truth. Shelley firmly believes that truth exists. Like Emerson, Shelley seems to believe that a coherent skepticism requires belief. So to be able to take a somewhat Kantian view of knowledge of the deep truth—to believe noumenal facts exist but are utterly out of the domain of human access—Shelley has to believe in the existence of those facts, even if, by definition, he can never confirm them. His figures, then, even while they spill into each other and press on towards ever new meaning, reveal something about the "centers" Hogle says they lack. Hogle claims that "metaphor demands that [Shelley's] concepts try to refer to centers that are not in motion" (167)—essentially, that the mechanism of metaphor requires a still center, a constant referent. The problem for Shelley, of course, would then be that no such center exists; after all, "nought may endure but Mutability." But Hogle fails to note that many of Shelley's metaphors exist precisely to suggest a center that is not still—to suggest Mutability itself. Hogle does acknowledge that Shelley recognizes the impossible task his figures are up against, and that he then redeems them by using them to generate meaning beyond the still center the metaphors lack. But Shelley is not just in the game of generating new meaning through language, metaphor, and love; he also reveals something important about the persistence of mutability.

Vacancy

Shelley seems to offer two possible answers to what may be left when the work of stripping away false veils is done: mutability and vacancy. Both appear frequently: Shelley asserts the dominion of mutability in *Prometheus Unbound* and the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and devotes the entire poem "Mutability" to that subject. And vacancy is what remains after the departure of the vision in "Alastor," after the philosopher has done his work in "On Life," and perhaps once the veils around the inmost meaning of poetry are undrawn in the *Defence*. But vacancy tends to appear in the context of the human mind, while mutability is a fact about the external world. In "Alastor," we hear about the poet's "vacant brain" (191); in "On Life," vacancy is the product of the work of philosophers. Vacancy is not a fact of the world; as "Mont Blanc" suggests, it is only to the human mind's imaginings that silence and solitude might be vacancy—but even silence and solitude are not the most accurate description of features of nature. Naught endures but mutability; the world constantly changes, and only in the human mind's conception—perhaps as a result of a frail spell—can nature be read as vacancy.

To see vacancy seems a misreading, but not an unforgivable one. After all, language and image cannot depict, except by suggestion, the deep truth, so it would be reasonable to infer that the deep truth is vacant. When part of a metaphor's vehicle has no analogue, it makes sense to assume that there is in fact none, that that slot in the logical mechanism of a metaphor is blank or vacant. But that assumption is really an assertion of the mind—to assume vacancy where one sees nothing is to fill an epistemological void with a positive human conception. (It is somewhat counter-intuitive to refer to vacancy as a

positive conception, but even if vacancy itself is an absence, the *idea* of vacancy is a presence, an asserted concept.) It is wrong to assume that nothing can exist beyond the purview of human perception or understanding; just because one sees nothing does not mean one has encountered vacancy. There may well be something there, never perceived, but no person could ever know. What we can know—or what Shelley does assert—is that that hole in human perception, rather than being filled with the human idea of vacancy, is really some sort of metaphysical mutability.

Towards the beginning of the *Defence,* Shelley invokes an image much like one from the earlier poem "Mutability."[13] "There is a principle in the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings," Shelley says, "which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody, alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. It is as if the lyre could accommodate its chords to the motions of that which strikes them" (*Defence* 109). The second stanza of "Mutability" poses a very similar situation, with nearly an opposite conclusion. There, Shelley compares people to lyres that have no control over the blasts that sound them, that are entirely subject to the caprices of the wind. One could simply attribute the difference to a shift in view over time; Shelley wrote the *Defence* at least five years after "Mutability." In the *Defence*, though, Shelley is talking specifically about poets, whereas in "Mutability" he is talking about an undefined "we," and he seems to be referring to people in general. Perhaps poets in fact have an additional power to adapt their sounds to those of the wind, to be not just a tool but one that accommodates and

[13] The date of "Mutability" is unknown, but it was first published in 1816. Shelley wrote the *Defence* in 1821, so it is only unclear precisely how much earlier "Mutability" was, not that it was significantly earlier.

plays off its player. The poet can create figures to channel and translate the material around him to something somewhat more accessible.

In that act, though, which Shelley undertakes with great frequency, meaning can change. The human mind steps in—it interferes. It must, if it is to convey ideas that are beyond its reach. And especially if the basis of all deep truth is mutability, perhaps it is essential that the human mind be able to harmonize, through figures, with the wind of truth. Without an assertion of the mind—without the imagination—the deep truth, with all its mutability, would go unnoted, unconsidered. And even if all efforts to note the deep truth must in some way fail, if it goes totally unnoted, does it move at all? A totally ignored truth might be totally insignificant; might that be a form of vacancy that would exist not just in the mind? And so it is not just to reflect the world's inherent mutability that Shelley must craft his negative figures; it is to avoid the very fate of vacancy that some of those figures seem to suggest.

Mutability and love

Shelley turns to love to fulfill much the same role as mutable figures: as some sort of solution to human longing. Instead of lusting hopelessly after insight, Shelley directs us to human sympathy. "Those who love not their fellow-beings, live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave," he says in the preface to "Alastor." The poet lives in solitude, so his only companion is the mystery of the natural world. The poem begins with an exaltation of "Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!" (1). But those are natural—not human—elements. Brotherhood is a human state, but this poet seeks to impress human relationships on things that do not conform to them. He looks for company

in the solitary world of nature, and that may be part of his problem. People can understand each other better than they can understand nature. The relationships that structure our understanding of the world are indeed human; they are not part of the great natural mysteries. Intellectual beauty or similar spirits can still direct us towards each other. Someone who worships intellectual beauty finds that the spirit's "spells did bind [him], / To fear himself and love all human Kind" ("Hymn" 84-85). Intellectual beauty inspires duty to others. It is a "messenger of sympathies / … / that to human thought art nourishment" ("Hymn" 41-43). People are predisposed to sympathize with other people; Shelley refers to "human joy" and "human grief" as natural inclinations ("Alastor" preface). Those who ignore those sympathies, he says, "languish, because none feel with them their common nature" ("Alastor" preface). It is our duty—and a duty intellectual beauty pushes us towards all the more—to recognize our common nature and natural sympathies, and those are ideas we can turn to of our own volition. And words are better suited for sympathies—because sympathies are inherently human—than for the deep truths poetry seeks.

In *Prometheus Unbound,* human sympathy is represented as the even stronger power of love. "To know nor faith, nor love, nor law; to be / Omnipotent but friendless is to reign," Asia says (II.iv.47-48). Jupiter, she says, reigns, but Prometheus has wisdom and human sympathy, so, when he takes power, he gives rise to a better, more sympathetic world. After the departure of the spirits who give Prometheus some insight into the way of world, Prometheus says "and yet I feel / Most vain all hope but love" (I.807-808). Love, unlike any other power, persists in its strength, apart from the deep mysteries we cannot probe. Love has a transcendent power specifically because it does not aim to transcend human

relationships, as Demogorgon explains: “If the abysm / Could vomit forth its secrets. But a voice / Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless; / For what would it avail to bid thee gaze / On the revolving world? What to bid speak / Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change? To these / All things are subject but eternal Love” (II.iv.114-120). Just as in “Alastor,” the deep truth cannot be represented in an image. That poet’s attempt to conjure his own vision to embody all the deep truth failed; here, because the world changes and is subject to temporal and whimsical forces beyond human control, there is no voice or image that can explain everything. Only love escapes that deep, changing mystery. Even if the world changes and thus cannot be reached by human voices or understanding, love exists between people, so it can last as long as we want it to, and we can understand it as we can understand nothing else.

Love causes change. The change is almost magical; without any visible work, outward things conform to the spirit of love the Spirit of the Hour feels inwardly. That change comes only after the Spirit of the Hour sees more clearly, also thanks to love’s pervasiveness: “The sense of love dissolved in [air and sunlight] / Had folded itself round the sphered world. / My vision then grew clear, and I could see / Into the mysteries of the universe” (III.iv.102-105). Because love is a human sentiment, people generate this clarity of insight in a way they cannot generate the vision of intellectual beauty, but love also pushes beyond us. Fundamentally, love connects; it “is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists,” Shelley says (“On Love” 201). Love’s clarity may be inspired by intellectual beauty because that spirit can move people to turn towards their own sympathies, but it is not fleeting or uncontrollable as intellectual beauty is.

To America

Robert Weisbuch suggests that American writers in the 19th century responded to the anxiety of following their British precursors in one of two ways: by making the Brits' ideas real or by taking them into still deeper skepticism. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, Weisbuch argues, are examples of the first type of response; Hawthorne and Melville, the second (xviii). Shelley is not usually considered the archetypal romantic, but if we fixate, as the American romantics did, on the business of knowing and its relation to love, Shelley becomes an archetype indeed. And his epistemological probings lead him to a deep skepticism, but one against which he asserts the positive power of love. The deep truth is imageless, and we can know nothing surely, Shelley suggests—except in matters of human connection, which we can then use to overcome our more detached, impersonal analyses of the world. It might seem that it is impossible to take such a stance further. But Hawthorne and Melville, I think, do.

Weisbuch maintains that Hawthorne and Melville, along with Dickinson and Whitman, elide, at times, the distinction between writer and text. "The American 'I,'" he says, "is not the isolated ego but…a self who blends his most immediate and personal being, his very seeing, with a national epistemology" (216). In a sense, the stakes are simply higher for American writers in this mold. They write not just a self; instead, the self is commensurate with the nation, part of the world beyond the self. And if the self is the world, what of Shelley's affirmation of love as the salve against skepticism? A single self can love, but can a self who brings the whole world, the whole question of knowing, along with him? Shelley's outlet through love is by no means easy—it comes as the

product of some agitation on the part of his characters in *Prometheus Unbound*, not to mention the work his reader has to do to see the solution love presents, and the work Shelley seems to go through to reach that stance, too. But such a solution is still much harder for writers like Hawthorne and Melville. For them, Weisbuch says, “the very categories of self and world are abolished. This finally results in the reversal of mimeticism whereby literature claims not to imitate or even to interpret reality but to create it” (218-219). This process, which Weisbuch calls “actualism,” fashions the world in the image of literature or idea. It “demands a refusal of any boundary between literature and life” (219).

Refusing such a boundary is exactly the opposite of what allegory does. But allegory is, as we have seen, a useful tool for considering matters of epistemology, which Weisbuch understands to be essential to American writers. “It is possible,” he says, “to discuss the world-hypotheses of any work, but all works do not lead their own discussions of their epistemology and its results as American works tend to do” (217). And while Weisbuch discusses Hawthorne and Melville at times in his explication of actualism, he primarily classifies them in the other camp—the group of Americans who, instead of seeking to make British romanticism real, take it still further into skepticism. Actualism, like Shelley’s love, asserts a merging of the self—not with another self, as for Shelley, but with an external, communal, or national vision. But in the shift from love of an individual person to identification with an idea, something of the self is lost. There is an anxiety in actualism (251). That anxiety leads to what Weisbuch calls “ontological insecurity”—of a kind that need not arise from genuine interpersonal love. If skepticism becomes a positive goal, American romanticists have a mooring other than actualism to

rely on. For Shelley, skepticism seems a problem; for Melville, it seems often to be a final belief—a belief against steadfast belief.

Here, too, allegory would seem an odd choice for the American romantic. Allegory depends on fixity. One-to-one correspondences are established, and if they shift too much, the allegory falls apart. The American romantic, one would think, would never stand for such a requirement of stability. Emerson articulates perhaps most clearly the American romantic devotion to unfixity: "I unsettle all things," he declares ("Circles" 188). "Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit" (189). And on and on he goes, throughout his work, celebrating fluidity and mutability. But the kind of allegory I am interested in is not quite so static. Weisbuch claims that the American romantics accept their insecurity and treat it as "a resource" (257). "Accepted," he says, "ontological insecurity becomes epistemological play" (255). And one way in which Hawthorne and Melville play with epistemological postures is through allegory.

The playfulness of Hawthorne and Melville's engagement with allegory is essential. "The Celestial Railroad," one of Hawthorne's most allegorical tales, is arguably all a big joke; his preface to "Rappaccini's Daughter," where he critiques allegory most explicitly, is also funny in its self-deprecation and linguistic games. Ishmael's comments about allegory in *Moby-Dick* are surely somewhat tongue in cheek, too, as is the novel's most explicitly epistemological meditation, "The Fountain." These writers were aware of the taboo against allegory; they play into and against their knowledge of that widespread literary judgment when they employ or denounce allegory—or when they do the two simultaneously.

But even if allegory is, to them, a form of epistemological play, it is also serious. It is a genuine way of confronting ontological insecurity, of responding to the anxiety of British romantic influence, of wondering how, especially on the vast continent of America, they can know or assert anything. Perhaps the only way to respond to those uncertainties is through playfulness—as Melville's Stubb says, "a laugh's the wisest, easiest answer to all that's queer" (171)—but their play feels bitingly important. Hawthorne and Melville play with the idea of allegory. They write it while condemning it, they break its definitions, they write it in funny ways. And yet allegory is a means of connecting to a British tradition—especially to an older and thus less threatening tradition, a tradition that is as much their own heritage as it is a Brit's (Weisbuch 16)—and playing with it to see how it might shift its valences in an American landscape.

"People are not allegories," Weisbuch notes (294). He's talking about *The Portrait of a Lady*: "The world is now truly all before Isabel and all before us, we who have been shorn of all the comforting reductionisms, and who now must live in ontological insecurity, by our wits and by our love" (294). Of course people are not allegories. But what if allegories are not allegories either? That sounds stupid, but there is no solid, definite, universally accepted definition of allegory. A student of mine once defined it as "a story with a hidden meaning." That seems wrong, or at best simplistic, but can we do much better? To declare that allegories are not allegories is to set the maligned form up in opposition to the stalwart self-identification of God: I am that I am. It is to destabilize ontology at its very core—to accept that the world is shaky and slippery, perhaps even fundamentally unknowable. It is also to force a question: Well, if allegory isn't allegory, what's allegory? And why would we bother talking about it? This is all ridiculous.

Yes, it's ridiculous, which is why I've laid out some working definitions and will proceed from there. But if to acknowledge, as Weisbuch does, that people are not allegories leads to the conclusion that we should lean on love, then what are we left to lean on if allegories are not allegories? That's a central question, I think, that Hawthorne and Melville run up against. When the facts of the world are so tremulous—and the identification of the self with the world so full, and thus so thinning of selfhood—that even love cannot offer total solace, what then? That is the terrifying extension to which Hawthorne and Melville take the British romantics'—and especially Shelley's—skeptical program. Allegory is an ancient method of making sense of the world, its facts, their metaphysical or theological meanings, and the ways people have of confronting them all. But what happens when allegory, too, is destabilized?

That may be the question Hawthorne and Melville find themselves faced with, even, at times, not fully consciously. They find themselves wanting—needing—to grasp everything, yet finding everything uncertain or unstable. Weisbuch concludes that "the prevalent genre of American romantic texts is the encyclopaedic…. The American romantics replaced the ideal of epic by an encyclopaedic form that was less the story of all things than the telling of all tellings of some things" (270). He nods to Northrop Frye's definition of the encyclopedic as "the sacred scripture" or "human *analogies* of mythical or scriptural revelation" (Frye 53)—and surely there is something scriptural about Hawthorne and Melville's fictions. Perhaps allegory is a form properly fitted to the encyclopaedic work. After all, encyclopedias replicate, in a sense, the form of allegory: You look up an entry in an encyclopedia and find what it means—what it signifies. There

is a one-to-one correspondence between item and description, even if that correspondence is sometimes not tidy.

The fundamental impulse to understand is, historically, often theologically driven, and Sacvan Bercovitch argues that America is distinctive in its merging of the national, personal, and spiritual. If one rejects allegory as Coleridge suggests—if one instead embraces individual people, or love, or what I am going to discuss later as "human warmth"—one unmasks the fiction of allegory and reveals the world to be whole. One rejects the method of substitution and instead sees the triumph of the symbolic principle: understanding works synecdochally, not metonymically, seeing all things as unified and related. And a world that is whole is more likely to be fathomable. But allegory insists upon rupture or dualism. God can be whole—he can proclaim "I am that I am"—but man operates always at a distance; he cannot see God, cannot see a unitary world as God sees it, cannot even speak God's true name. Allegory, then, just acknowledges that fact. So in some ways, since it acknowledges man's impassable distance from noumena, or godly knowledge, allegory is a theological form, if not in Coleridge's understanding. (Note, of course, too, its long history of religious use.)

In different ways, despite their different understandings of love and their different implications for the valuation of allegory, Coleridge and Shelley both offer visions of the world as whole. Coleridge, the ultimate rejecter of allegory, clings strongly to "the idea of God as the I AM" (*On the Constitution* 168). Similarly, he celebrates the imagination as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation of the infinite I AM" (*Biographia Literaria* 304). He identifies the imagination with God, sees the mind to participate in the same self-generating, self-defining thought God thinks. Thus, once

more, Coleridge envisions a unified world, the kind he associates with symbol, not allegory. But he also uses that articulation of God to reject pantheism, a belief that more closely resembles Shelley's conception of intellectual beauty. Shelley's atheistic spiritual—even theological—beliefs show, in a different way, another vision of a unified world. Shelley, as Grabo notes, sees all types of knowledge as kin, all combining to yield a unified understanding of the universe. That is why Grabo's reading of Shelley's scientific meaning is not precisely an allegorical one, in the Coleridgean sense—the vision of the world it entails is too whole. So if Coleridge adamantly rejects allegory and its riven world, Shelley simply doesn't really need it.

For those two very different English romantics, then, allegory is not really the best or most appropriate mode: Allegory's insistence on the duality of the world is at odds with both Coleridge and Shelley's visions. But it might just be a form well fitted to American visions. If we grant Bercovitch's entanglement of the theological and personal in the American imagination, or Weisbuch's claim that the American self is fused with the world, we might seem to land on an understanding of Hawthorne and Melville as co-believers, with Coleridge and Shelley (if, again, for different reasons), in a vision of the world as whole—or at least a vision of the self as at one with a world beyond the self. But such a vision is insufficient for Hawthorne and Melville. If the self is one with all that is beyond it, that does not solve the problem that what is beyond it is also beyond its ken. An American thinker might find himself entangled in a vision of theology, nation, or ontology—might feel those matters to be indistinguishable from personal import—but nonetheless he can find no great key to understanding. Whereas Shelley can assert a vision of love—and see that vision as related to extra-personal forces like electricity—

Hawthorne and Melville cannot, because it is not so much that they bring the theological or national into the orbit of the self but that the self is lifted up, without its will, into matters far larger, far harder to fathom. Without Shelley's power to assert human love or genius against vacancy, then, Hawthorne and Melville have to confront that vacancy, to see that the self is entangled in matters it can never know. So the wholeness—the fathomability—of the world is gone.

The American romantic thus falls back on a much less certain vision. It's not that he perceives the world to be riven, as a traditional, straightforward allegorical approach would suggest. The problem is just that he is left with a skepticism that goes beyond even Shelley's, and so he must entertain the *possibility* that the world is riven, and that he can never know whether or not it is so. Allegory is a means of exposing rivenness. And if Hawthorne and Melville cannot know the nature of the world, but they feel themselves to be indistinguishable from the world, perhaps the rift is actually primarily in their own minds. There is a deep way in which they cannot understand themselves. Allegory, then, might prove a way to examine not just the world, not just epistemological assumptions, but even the self. And thus allegory—in a newly destabilized, fraught form—might find its reinvention in a new American clime.

Chapter Two: Hawthorne and the Sin of Allegory

In the face of allegory's unpopularity, Nathaniel Hawthorne uses allegories that don't quite work tidily to complicate the ways in which texts can offer meaning and depict human sympathies. Consider two dominant charges against allegory: first, that it is mechanical and simplistic, and second—perhaps a corollary to the first—that it renders characters flat and emotionless. Hawthorne is well aware of both these critiques; he even echoes them at times in his tales. And yet he writes a number of tales that are clearly allegorical. These tales, then, suggest a potential redemption of allegory. Might Hawthorne's allegories, which often do not fit neatly into the paradigmatic model of one-to-one correspondences, actually suggest new possibilities for what allegory can accomplish?

Hawthorne inherited, via his Puritan predecessors, a Christian tradition heavily steeped in allegory. Many of his more American tales—among them "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" and "Young Goodman Brown"—deal with the historical and theological legacy of that tradition. The tradition bequeathed to him a formal style as well—the form of allegory. Allegory had been a primary mechanism for the propagation of Christian orthodoxy, and the Christian allegorists Hawthorne followed were staunch believers in that orthodoxy. But Hawthorne didn't just inherit his American and Christian ancestors' tradition; he also found himself in a literary world that handed him its own traditions, standards, and conversations. And, as I have discussed, allegory's reputation in literary circles had dropped precipitously by the time Hawthorne wrote. Hawthorne found himself at the convergence of these two traditions—from America, an allegorically

steeped religious tradition, and from the romantics across the pond, a self-proclaimed anti-allegorical tradition that instead embraced the vitality and creativity of the human mind. But despite Coleridge's critiques, British romantics like Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake had begun to revive the form. Shelley and Blake differed dramatically—not least in that Shelley was an atheist and Blake a devout, if unconventional, Christian—but both celebrated a vital human creative genius grounded in the bonding force of love. To them, allegory was not a device for the dissemination of orthodoxy but a mutable reflection of the ever-shifting vital human genius at the base of all thought, all creativity, all beauty. While these poets didn't inherit the same Puritan tradition as Hawthorne, Shelley's iconoclastic allegorical thinking may have ventured into territory Hawthorne would probe further. Finding himself facing the convergence of seemingly irreconcilable traditions and ways of thinking, Hawthorne may have found a way to redeem allegory. He takes the allegorical strain of his American past and fuses it with a romantic concern for sympathy and skepticism towards orthodoxy, and the allegories that emerge in his tales question the very premises on which allegory had previously stood.

Hawthorne stands, too, at the crux of a great battle over the narrative of American literary history. He is the central figure in the theory of American romance developed by the likes of Richard Chase and Lionel Trilling in the mid-20th century; their readings of romance, as opposed to the novel, as the archetypal American form depend largely on Hawthorne's pivotal role in American literary history and his self-identification as a romancer. These liberal midcentury scholars, in turn, became the antagonists against whom the New Americanists positioned themselves in the 1980s and '90s, deriding their predecessors' dismissal of history. While the battle between these two schools of critics is

no longer quite as vitriolic or field-defining as it once was, these two camps still stake the landscape of the study of 19th century American literature. It is odd, then, that Hawthorne has receded from his dominant role, that he is no longer so common a subject of scholarly attention.

If the question of romance is essential to an interpretation of Hawthorne, it is perhaps complicated by the relation of romance to allegory. In the landscape in which Hawthorne wrote, romance was considered morally deviant (Bell 29-30). Early American novels were prone to moralize. The most popular novels—books like *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*—tended to warn against the dangers of fiction. But a romancer embraced the imaginative despite general societal wariness (Bell 29-30). There was not exactly a clear critical consensus about what romance actually was (Baym), but in general we might say that romances take as their subject something removed from contemporary society, whether in time or imaginative license, and that they are thus likely to offer a certain fantastic sort of escapism (Beer 2). In the moralizing, grounded early American landscape, allegory was a more acceptable form of imaginative writing. Michael Davitt Bell notes that, before the 1790s, American literature was "so propagandistic or blatantly allegorical as to call into serious question its status as fiction, let alone as art" (3). Such terrain is likely to foster skepticism towards romance and its fantastic tendencies.

Allegory, on the other hand, drew almost precisely opposite criticism, though from a different segment of the reading population. For writing allegory, one would face not an American taboo against the imagination but a Romantic taboo against the mechanical and didactic thought Samuel Taylor Coleridge had associated with allegory. So an American writer of allegorical romance would face opposition from two directions: He would be

criticized for both fantasy and rigidity, for wantonness and staidness. Bell argues that Hawthorne, Melville, and their contemporaries were shaped in part by their anxieties about their deviant embrace of romance. As a result, he says, "they continually return in their fiction to doubts and questions about their medium" (29). This is surely true, but for every anxiety about romance there must also be an opposite one about allegory.

And yet allegory and romance, criticized from opposite directions, for opposite sins, are closely related. Gillian Beer notes that allegory is a dominant type of romance (Beer 18). Allegory, like romance, draws the reader's attention away from the personal qualities of individual characters and towards some bigger idea. Bell claims that romance is "always fundamentally dualistic" because it draws an opposition between fiction and fact (31). Allegory, too, insists on the duality of the world, divided between abstract or noumenal ideas and phenomenal figures. Hawthorne often approaches romance through allegory, and this isn't a move out of left field, but it is one that, like his historical and literary inheritance, dooms him to stand between opposing schools of thought, to find himself at a point of convergence—perhaps at a "neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (*Scarlet Letter* 36). Such a position might prove a fertile testing ground for the sorts of ideas that accompany both romance and allegory. It might also render Hawthorne ambivalent, or at least somewhat anxious, about staking out such a fraught territory. Bell argues that the deviant romancer finally "justifies his activity as more genuine than alleged 'normalcy'" (34). Thus, perhaps, we might find an explanation for Hawthorne's strange and elusive comments, throughout his work, about

both romance and allegory—and his insistence on addressing, constantly, what those two categories mean.

Allegory is, most essentially, a means of getting at or displaying truth. It suggests a certain epistemology: It supposes a dual world, divided between the stuff one aims to know and the figures one might use to angle towards that knowledge. It's also an artificial form, one that clearly requires an active author manipulating his subjects to reflect the truth he means to convey. And allegory comes with baggage. Hawthorne, well educated in European thought, knew that allegory was generally frowned upon, especially in the wake of Coleridge's criticism. He could, perhaps, have disavowed the Puritan heritage that thrust allegory upon him. But he did not. Why, then, we must ask, would Hawthorne write allegory?

Bell has argued that Hawthorne used the form of romance to interrogate romance itself: "Such things as romance, allegory, and symbolism presented not only modes to be appropriated but dilemmas to be faced; they were not so much aesthetic givens as metaphors or models for more general problems of knowledge and belief" (149). Bell, like many other critics, considers the effects of Hawthorne's allegory—a great deal of ink has been spilled on the effects of allegory on Hawthorne's formal positioning of his own writing, on his particular take on romance, on his political and theological views, and much more. But in all the debate about the centrality of romance to Hawthorne, and by extension to American literature more broadly, Hawthorne has not been considered sufficiently qua allegorist. Bell investigates how Hawthorne's allegory comments on romance, but we might also read Hawthorne's allegory to comment on allegory. And a comment on allegory is not just a comment on an outdated and controversial literary

technique. Allegory stands for a way of thinking—for a broad epistemological paradigm that would permeate every facet of the thought of one who adopts it.

Allegory proposes that epistemological hangups undergird just about all thought: In essence, allegory is a way of knowing, and one that acknowledges the difficulty of knowing things head-on. And it is hard to refute the idea that everyone has epistemological hangups. Everyone thinks about questions, and to answer questions one must have some notion of how people might know things. Before we can even get to a battle between the midcentury scholars of romance and their historicist successors, then, we must face the question of how to know who is right. But the same epistemological question might be at play elsewhere: in a consideration of whether a whale's spout is made of water or air, say, or in a debate about moral justification for any action. It is impossible to know anything without some notion, whether explicit or not, of how we know. Both Hawthorne and Melville, in their strange allegorical practices, seem to recognize this fact. In a sense, epistemological questions are deeply personal questions; they afflict each person. To jump to settle matters of politics or ideology before spending great time on epistemology is to put the cart before the horse. Allegory is a way of thinking about epistemology.

And epistemology, for Hawthorne, must not overlook or overshadow the sympathetic, human side of the people involved. After all, if epistemology is an investigation of how we know, there must be people doing all that knowing—and they matter as living people perhaps before they matter as actors in the business of knowledge. Throughout his short fiction and elsewhere, Hawthorne is preoccupied by a quest to find, preserve, and embody a kind of vital human spirit, which he calls "human warmth" ("Rappaccini's

Daughter" 92). Although "human warmth" is by no means a technical term, it is an idea Hawthorne returns to again and again. His fiction is littered with references to warmth, sympathy, the human heart, living souls, and love, and this constellation of ideas is often posed in contrast to coldness, death, or solitude.[14] Hawthorne associates humanity with sympathetic connection, and his fiction deeply distrusts characters who threaten the vital forces that animate characters, connect them to each other, or make them fully human. It might seem odd that a writer so concerned with full, human, warm characters might turn to allegory, which is so often seen as a hindrance to those qualities. Even Hawthorne is skeptical of allegory's compatibility with characters who exhibit full human qualities, capable of real sympathy.[15] In the preface to *Twice-Told Tales*, Hawthorne writes of his own tales: "Even in what purport to be pictures of actual life, we have allegory, not always so warmly dressed in its habiliments of flesh and blood, as to be taken into the reader's mind without a shiver" (*Twice-Told Tales* 5). But he clearly writes allegories despite his wariness—so, once again, we are left to wonder why. Once we see that

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[14] Consider, for example, references to "warmth" and "human sympathies" in "Wakefield" (138), "the human heart itself" in "Earth's Holocaust" (403), "love and sympathy for mankind" in "Ethan Brand" (98), and "warmer light…communicat[ing], as it were, a heart and sensibilities of human tenderness" in "The Custom-House" (36). There are many more such references throughout Hawthorne's fiction, though they are unusually concentrated in "Rappaccini's Daughter." There, beyond the preface's discussion of "human warmth," we encounter "Nature's warmth of love" (107), "all the warmth of life" (124), and Beatrice's declaration that she "loved [a plant] with a human affection" (123).

[15] For a discussion of "human contact" in Hawthorne, and its relation to epistemology, see Marianne Noble's *Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Noble argues that, unlike his romantic and transcendentalist predecessors, who champion sympathy as a way of understanding the hidden fullness of another person, Hawthorne presents a vision of human contact that allows people to care for each other without knowing each other fully. Thus the hubris of the drive to know another fully is avoided. Noble's vision of human contact offers a way to escape the tension between people and ideas. A romantic notion of sympathy, Noble contends, suggests that the self, like an allegorical figure, is something to be probed for greater understanding; in essence, it turns all people one might seek to know into allegorical figures. But if, as Noble argues, Hawthorne removes the epistemological interest from the business of knowing other people—if human contact is more experiential than epistemological—then people might retain their mystery, their full humanity, and their human warmth.

Hawthorne's allegories loosen the ordinary constraints of allegory, it seems that it is actually the tightness of allegory, not the form itself, that endangers human warmth.

Closely related to Hawthorne's conception of human warmth is his devotion, in much of his fiction, to identifying what he calls "the Unpardonable Sin." It is the chief concern of "Ethan Brand," in which the title character defines it as "the sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man, and reverence for God" (90). The term comes up again in the *American Notebooks*:

> The Unpardonable Sin might consist in a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul; in consequence of which, the investigator pried into its dark depths, not with a hope or purpose of making it better, but from a cold philosophical curiosity,—content that it should be wicked in whatever kind or degree, and only desiring to study it out. Would not this, in other words, be the separation of the intellect from the heart? (106)

Bell proposes a seemingly simple definition: "Allegory is the Unpardonable Sin" (140). Several of Hawthorne's characters, he argues, read their worlds allegorically, and in doing so they overlook life itself (139). But it is not just *allegoresis* that is a sin; the writer of allegory, too, sins in fashioning a fiction that puts people in the service of ideas, thus valuing ideas over people. Owen Warland and Aylmer, in "The Artist of the Beautiful" and "The Birthmark," respectively, are most obviously guilty of this sin; both damage beauty—real, warm, human life—because of their fixation on abstractions. In a sense, their stories illustrate the commonplace critique of allegory, that it diverts attention away from the fullness of human characters, or, as Hawthorne puts it in his preface to "Rappaccini's Daughter," that it depletes characters' human warmth.

But if allegory is a sin—the greatest sin, the Unpardonable Sin—Hawthorne seems to suggest it is a sin we cannot avoid. After all, the allegorical impulse runs deep; it is the embodiment of the human longing to know noumenal things, to find order in—or at least impose it on—the world. And if a writer does not put allegory in his tales, his characters or readers might find it despite him. Bell argues that Young Goodman Brown, not Hawthorne, is the allegorical mastermind in his tale. Similarly, Hawthorne might deny that a story is allegorical only for a reader to perform *allegoresis* nonetheless. And as we will see in "The Celestial Railroad," it is too late in the history of literature to turn away from allegory, because allegorical literature has already been written, and the world is littered with its remnants. The tradition is already there, permanently shaping the literary landscape.

So a writer cannot contain the allegorical impulse simply by refusing to write allegories, just as Hawthorne could not simply sever himself from his Puritan heritage. But what he can do—and what I argue Hawthorne does—is to corral the allegorical impulse to more productive ends, perhaps even towards a rehabilitation of allegory, seen in a new light. He cannot ignore allegory altogether, but he can write allegories that investigate whence and why the allegorical impulse. Or he can write allegories that clearly mark allegory as a sin, catching and condemning themselves and their readers in the act. Hawthorne can also play with the boundaries of allegorical convention. He doesn't have to write the kind of allegory Coleridge codified or Bunyan exemplified. "Rappaccini's Daughter" stands out among Hawthorne's tales for its refusal to write that sort of straightforward, traditional allegory. Instead, there, Hawthorne shifts to a new kind of allegory, one more like symbol, though still distinctly allegorical—and this type

of allegory may offer redemption from the sort of sin to which traditional allegory dooms us. In order to see all this, we need to consider Hawthorne's allegory not as a tool, a platform, or a proxy, as many critics have done, but as an end in itself.

Allegorical possibilities in "Rappaccini's Daughter"

"Rappaccini's Daughter" begs to be read allegorically. The first paragraph—part of an odd preface presenting the story as a translation of a work by the French writer M. de l'Aubépine—warns readers of the disguised Hawthorne's disposition to allegory: "His writings…might have won him greater reputation but for an inveterate love of allegory, which is apt to invest his plots and characters with the aspect of scenery and people in the clouds, and to steal away the human warmth out of his conceptions" (91-92). Presented with such a warning, one wonders how Hawthorne's tale refutes the criticism. The tale that follows is indeed allegorical, so the reader is left with a series of questions: How does Hawthorne's allegory manage, against the preface's suggestion, to endow human warmth? Why does Hawthorne write an allegorical tale? Or, if we take the preface's accusation at face value, why would Hawthorne want to write a tale whose formal organization would steal away its warmth?

"Rappaccini's Daughter" comes fairly early in Hawthorne's corpus; it was first published in 1844, under the title "Writings of Aubépine." Aubépine is a humorous pseudonym for Hawthorne, a literal translation of his name into French. So perhaps we ought to take "Rappaccini's Daughter"—which was later published with its ultimate title in the 1846 collection *Mosses from an Old Manse*—as a commentary Hawthorne offers on himself and his own work, as if to summarize his oeuvre as it stood in the mid-1840s.

In such a rendering, then, Hawthorne would seem to think of allegory as one of the chief features of his writing. Later, in the prefaces to his novels, the first of which was *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, Hawthorne would position himself not as an allegorist but a romancer. Perhaps, then, Hawthorne's concerns about allegory were transmuted into broader concerns about romance.

The problem with any potential allegorical reading of "Rappaccini's Daughter" is that the allegorical interpretations don't quite fit together.[16] Many allegorical readings are tempting—some even explicitly suggested in the story's narrative—but as one teases each of them out, things don't quite fall into place neatly. Often, other allegorical possibilities get in the way. But one cannot simply ignore the temptation to allegorical interpretation: The overtones are too ponderous, the explicit invitations too frequent, and the preface's remarks on allegory too inviting simply to conclude that the story is really no allegory at all. As a result, then, the reader is left to play out each seeming allegory and then to see where the remains of these failed allegories leave us once we have watched their prospects as interpretive keys wither.

Reading "Rappaccini's Daughter" with its preface in mind, any reader must naturally consider whence Hawthorne's "inveterate love of allegory," and why he so draws attention to his own failure. It is not quite normal for a writer to announce his own shortcomings before his tale has even begun. Should we distrust the writer who goes on to exaggerate mightily the length of several of his works? The preface presents itself as a commentary on translation, so perhaps somewhere along the way the translation has

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[16] Adopting Gary Johnson's terms, we might call "Rappaccini's Daughter" a weak allegory: "I propose that weak allegory involves transforming some phenomenon 'poorly' or distractedly, or with some or much irrelevance and indeterminacy, into a narrative structure. The result is a narrative that *evokes* allegory while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it" (54).

failed, and the story hasn't been rendered properly in the version we are left with. Perhaps the translator has somehow misunderstood. One must wonder, then, whether the preface's accusation is right—whether perhaps Hawthorne's allegories don't deprive his work of human warmth at all. Perhaps in some way, read with "precisely the proper point of view," the allegory of "Rappaccini's Daughter" in fact promotes a vision of human warmth. But to find out, one must play out the story's allegorical possibilities.

It is tempting, naturally, to read Rappaccini's garden as a perverted Eden. The story even tells us to:

> The man's demeanour was that of one walking among malignant influences, such as savage beasts, or deadly snakes, or evil spirits, which, should he allow them one moment of license, would wreak upon him some terrible fatality. It was strangely frightful to the young man's imagination, to see this air of insecurity in a person cultivating a garden, that most simple and innocent of human toils, and which had been alike the joy and labor of the unfallen parents of the race. Was this garden, then, the Eden of the present world?—and this man, with such a perception of harm in what his own hands caused to grow, was he the Adam? (96)

But even admitting the notion that Rappaccini has built his own Eden, the connections don't map out tidily. If the garden is Eden, surely Beatrice, who lives in it, tends its plants, and is ultimately poisoned and expelled—by way of death—out of the garden, is its Eve. But then her lover Giovanni, not Rappaccini, should be Adam. At the same time, perhaps Giovanni should be the snake, the one who tempts Eve to eat the poisonous plant. And Rappaccini, the garden's creator and guardian, ought to fill the role of God.

But by suggesting that Rappaccini is Adam immediately after proposing that the garden is Eden, the story undermines its own allegorical mapping. It is as if the story's narrator longs for allegorical clarity, but the story he tells defies such an impulse.

The story is littered with other allegorical suggestions, too: Beatrice, naturally, recalls Dante's Beatrice. She is Giovanni's "withered guide" into spiritual beauty and love (109). She is "like the light of truth itself" (112). The garden's geography resembles Dante's circles: "He was irrevocably within her sphere, and must obey the law that whirled him onward, in ever lessening circles" (109). Once again, the story seems very consciously to direct the reader to tease out the resonances of Dante. Giovanni's lodging features a painting about which Giovanni "recollected that one of the ancestors of this family, and perhaps an occupant of this very mansion, had been pictured by Dante as a partaker of the immortal agonies of his Inferno" (93). But with Dante, again, the allegorical reader encounters problems. First, it is unclear whether Rappaccini's garden is really hell or paradise. It is the heavenly Beatrice's domain, but it is poisoned and poisoning, literal death to any strangers who venture too far into it. Beatrice serves as Giovanni's spiritual guide—she allows him to see beyond the material nature of her poison, to see an essential purity. But she also lives, functionally, in a hellish prison, and one wonders if she might as easily be Dante's Virgil as his Beatrice.

The Dantean side of "Rappaccini's Daughter," too, is overdetermined. Rappaccini is "beyond the middle term of life" (95). The phrase recalls the opening line of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which identifies Dante as in the middle term of his life: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" (I.1). Lest we be satisfied with a conception of Beatrice as Beatrice (or Virgil) and thus Giovanni as Dante, here we get a rebuff to the notion that

Rappaccini might be Dante. Not that the thought of Rappaccini as Dante would have necessarily suggested itself without this remark—Hawthorne's narrator simultaneously introduces and rejects another layer of allegorical meaning. Once again, the story seems obsessively invested in presenting possible allegorical readings and then showing those possibilities to fail, whether because not all characters fit into the allegorical mold, because characters seem to be two allegorical figures at once, or because the narrative explicitly tells us to distinguish between a character and his allegorical figure.

Given all this confusion, one might doubt that "Rappaccini's Daughter" is really an allegory at all. Allegory is notoriously hard to define, and, as I have discussed, it had largely fallen from favor by the time Hawthorne wrote "Rappaccini's Daughter." I refer to the story's extended figurative resonances as allegory because they propose what at least initially seem to be more or less clear-cut typological characterizations, but also because there seems to be a significant critical consensus that allegory is a good way to classify the phenomenon at play in "Rappaccini's Daughter." That many critics say Hawthorne deals in allegory is on the face of it not a good justification to say that Hawthorne deals in allegory—it nearly begs the question—but when a term is so nebulously defined, the way it is employed can tell us perhaps as much about it as any necessarily tendentious definition might. Not least is it relevant that clearly, as the preface to "Rappaccini's Daughter" indicates, Hawthorne considered his own writing at least to have some relation to allegory.

The allegorical features of "Rappaccini's Daughter" present themselves as one-to-one mappings: The garden is Eden and Rappaccini is Adam, we begin, and it certainly seems that we could continue, pairing each figure in the story with an analogue. We can

continue collecting hints that this is the right way to proceed. Or we might begin differently: Beatrice is Eve, which makes Giovanni Adam, and so on. Or Beatrice is Eve, so Giovanni is the snake who tempts her to taste Baglioni's antidote, which proves really to be poison. Or Beatrice is Beatrice, so Giovanni is Dante. And so on. All the indications to launch each allegorical interpretation are in order. The problems begin when one realizes just how many there are, and that the various initiated allegories blatantly contradict each other. Each allegorical feature indeed launches a different line of allegorical reading. But if at least part of an allegory's purpose is to provide a sort of key to a story's meaning, each one in "Rappaccini's Daughter" fails. Each allegory cannot be carried through to fruition. Taken alone, not one of them provides a mapping a reader can declare a key.

"Rappaccini's Daughter" and *allegoresis*

In "Rappaccini's Daughter," there are allegorical possibilities beyond mappings to the story's more obvious literary precedents—allegorical readings more interested in the sort of comment Hawthorne might be trying to make about political or literary issues—and they might offer clues to the question of why "Rappaccini's Daughter" is such an allegorically laden story despite its preface's apparent distaste for allegory. Fundamentally, these readings are acts of *allegoresis*; they are not necessarily inherent in the story but the work of critics reading allegorical possibilities beyond what the text insists upon.

Don Parry Norford suggests that the purple plant in Rappaccini's garden be read as a figure of allegory itself. He notes the story's preface, which warns of allegory's habit of sapping away "human warmth," and sees Beatrice's plant doing much the same thing:

> These fantastic plants, then, would seem to be the poisonous blooms of allegory. Looking down upon the garden, Giovanni says that it will serve "as a symbolic language, to keep him in communication with Nature." And near the end of the story Rappaccini gazes "with a triumphant expression at the beautiful youth and maiden, as might an artist who would spend his life in achieving a picture or a group of statuary." Thus Rappaccini may be seen as the artist-writer, and his garden as that neutral territory in which allegory flourishes….[Grotesque emblems'] effect upon the reader may be compared to that of the plants and Beatrice upon Giovanni: they stimulate his imagination. (173)

Norford extends the allegory by figuring that "Beatrice is Eve, who tempts Giovanni-Adam to eat—or rather breathe the air—of the exotic tree of allegory" (177). But even if one is to see "Rappaccini's Daughter" as an explicit—or at least an allegorical—commentary on allegory, this is an act of *allegoresis*. As Deborah Jones says, allegory indicates a separation between an object and the thing it signifies, so "allegory presupposes a fracture with a once-Edenic referentiality" (154). If "Rappaccini's Daughter" is read as an allegorical comment on allegory itself, the story presupposes that the post-edenic structure Jones describes exists, that one cannot get at the deep truth except with the help of allegorical figures, which can bear meaning that may not be accessible to the bare human intellect. So, in Norford's conception, Beatrice may be the

Eve who tempts Giovanni to allegory, but in some inevitable way the very construction of the story is also Eve, tempting, with its allegorical setup, the reader to see the ontological divisions that then require an allegorical approach. From the moment of considering the meaning of Rappaccini's garden, then, we are pulled in to the practice of allegory; we have breathed the poisoned allegorical air and cannot but think in the way it beckons.

One might also read Rappaccini's garden as an allegorical depiction of the United States. It is a cultivated garden, set off from the world of tradition, the scene for a great experiment. Its fruits, seemingly lovely, are also poisoned, and Giovanni, the hero whose thoughts help us synthesize the phenomena before us, cannot make sense of the fact that Beatrice, the garden's tenant and guardian, might be both good and bad—pure in spirit but infected in body, just as America is built on pure ideas and a dangerous and sometimes violent and fatal history. Beverly Haviland notes that allegory admits "the difference between text and life" and so is traditionally used to value the ideal above the real (279). Perhaps, then, an allegorized America is better, or at least metaphysically truer, than the real America. But Haviland also claims that Hawthorne doesn't admit that traditional undervaluing of the real. "His allegory," she says, "first affirms the traditional distinction between the ideal and the real, but then refuses to reconcile them at the expense of the real simply because the real is deeply flawed" (279). Just so, his representation of America—Rappaccini's garden—is flawed and mixed, with overlapping allegories and resonances. We couldn't make proper sense of it even if we wanted to, or if the story seemed to want us to decode it cleanly.

Toni Morrison has argued that in an open literary landscape, where fear of expansive freedom haunted the literary mind, writers often sublimated their fears of darkness. But Hawthorne has no interest in hiding or ignoring the darkness of reality—perhaps even the darkness of America. Perhaps, then, the only way for him to go about exposing that darkness is by relocating it in Padua and proposing his observations by way of allegory. Hawthorne "could do his best work only when he was far enough from his subject so that the aspects of it to which he could not respond were not distracting," Hyatt Waggoner says (44). In the prefaces to his romances, Hawthorne makes more or less the same argument about himself. The preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* warns that if the reader thinks of fictional events as happening in a real, specific location, "it exposes the Romance to an inflexible and exceedingly dangerous species of criticism, by bringing his fancy-pictures almost into positive contact with the realities of the moment" (3). He is perhaps even more explicit about his intentions in *The Marble Faun*, which, like "Rappaccini's Daughter," is located in Italy: In the preface to that novel, Hawthorne writes, "Italy, as the site of [the writer's] Romance, was chiefly valuable to him as affording a sort of poetic or fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon, as they are, and must needs be, in America" (3).

As a comment on America, "Rappaccini's Daughter" requires its distance from its subject. And, historically, that allegorical distance suggests that the thing figured is of greater importance than the vehicle for its figuration, but that things of the world can be used to figure more transcendent ideas. When the signification doesn't play out properly, though—when tracing the allegorical method shows only that the figuration cannot be tidy, that the allegorical meanings the story insists on attaching to its figures do not lead

to clean distinctions or articulations of the ideal figures they mean to represent—we can see that perhaps the United States doesn't quite work as a neat allegorical subject. Bunyan's Celestial City may clearly figure heaven; Rappaccini's garden cannot do the same for America. And so while heaven is a good, transcendent concept to be understood loftily—a concept it is important, if difficult, to understand well—America cannot be. The failure of the allegorical vehicle is the best way to understand the distinct lack of sanctity of the allegorical subject.

Hardened metaphors

Haviland has also noted the essential failure of allegory in "Rappaccini's Daughter." She argues that "allegory cannot be used and interpreted simplistically as a set of correspondences….Nor can it be dismissed as nonsense. Allegory is neither morality in fancy dress, nor is it completely irrelevant to life" (292). She suggests that the messy, contradictory allegories that pervade "Rappaccini's Daughter" direct the reader to pay attention to the real, to note its complexity and to refuse its submission to the ideal. But I want to press the point further, to argue that Hawthorne's allegories' failure may be their success—that against the charge of allegory's tendency to "steal away the human warmth" out of Hawthorne's stories, a labyrinthine set of failed allegories actually in some ways endows "Rappaccini's Daughter" with human warmth and thus redeems allegory.

It's a good thing that Hawthorne's allegories don't work. Consider allegory as a sort of hardened metaphor. The idea is hinted at by Owen Barfield, who argues that language is a collection, over great expanses of time, of metaphor accruing to words. "From the

primitive meanings assumed by the etymologist," he says, "we are led to fancy metaphor after metaphor sprouting forth and solidifying into new meanings" (66). As a result, Barfield concludes, it ought to be that poetry gathers more vitality with time, but he finds that, empirically, the opposite is true in the history of literature. Perhaps the answer to that problem is to be found in Shelley: Poets' language, Shelley says,

> is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. (*Defence* 111).

Perhaps, then, we ought to conceive of a distinction between metaphor and hardened metaphor. Metaphor is vital, alive. It harnesses and reveals connections between seemingly disparate concepts. It shows ideas to be related and thus adds meaning. But metaphor that has hardened has no such vitality. As Barfield suggests, it can bear new meanings by imbedding associations in words, petrifying an old metaphor into a word's rock, making that once alive metaphor a mere additional layer of impacted meaning from which a word cannot dissociate. With a hardened metaphor, it is as if a switch is activated at the moment a word is deployed: If we hear that word, we must think of its attendant meaning, so that once vital meaning has no chance to suggest new meanings, to reshape understanding. George Orwell proposes a similar idea when he describes what he calls dead metaphors: "A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image,

while on the other hand a metaphor which is technically 'dead' (e.g. iron resolution) has in effect reverted to being an ordinary word and can generally be used without loss of vividness." Hardened metaphors may retain vividness, but they do not have the fluidity or possibility of vital metaphors.

We are left, then, with two categories of metaphoric language—metaphors and hardened metaphors—and it certainly seems that allegory is an example of the latter. An allegory offers a tidy correspondence: One thing stands for another, without the vital fluidity that allows the metaphors Shelley discusses to spur new associations. F.O. Matthiessen says that allegory is one species of symbolism or metaphor (270)—and I merely extend that taxonomy to call allegory a type of specifically hardened metaphor because allegory emphasizes the concretion of metaphor or symbol. In allegory, as Coleridge proposes, the symbolic associations are set, and the reader need only to follow them. Johan Huizinga proposes that allegory "aids symbolic thought to express itself, but endangers it at the same time by substituting a figure for a living idea," emphasizing the concrete manifestation of an idea, not the abstract idea itself (186).

The veil of bad allegory: "The Minister's Black Veil"

Among Hawthorne's tales, "The Minister's Black Veil" offers perhaps the clearest example of allegory that does not escape the fate of hardened metaphor—and that thus indeed deprives its characters of human warmth. Among Hawthorne's tales, it is the exception that proves the pattern of vital, broken allegory—but it also illustrates a problem in defining allegory that will help us understand how Hawthorne's allegories differ from the sorts condemned by his contemporaries and theorized by later critics.

Reverend Hooper wears a mysterious veil, and the tale is fundamentally about the ambiguous business of interpreting the veil. Hooper and his congregants, like the tale's readers, become allegorical interpreters. The story feels clinically removed from human warmth. Hooper becomes illegible, emotionally inaccessible to both congregants and readers. He is, as the common criticism alleges, flattened and rendered cold by allegory. But that is because the allegory in "The Minister's Black Veil" is a relatively tidy one, not the messy, broken sort Hawthorne explores in some of his other tales.

"The Minister's Black Veil" tells its readers that it is organized by a symbol. It begins with a footnote:

> Another clergyman in New England, Mr. Joseph Moody, of York, Maine, who died about eighty years since, made himself remarkable by the same eccentricity that is here related of Reverend Mr. Hooper. In his case, however, the symbol had a different import. In early life he had accidentally killed a beloved friend; and from that day till the hour of his own death, he hid his face from men. (37)

Of course, in the case of Moody, the veil doesn't sound like it is much of a symbol at all; it is, rather, a functional device that the wearer adopts because of specific circumstances in his life. He uses the veil to hide his face, presumably because he is ashamed—but the veil doesn't represent any grand meaning, doesn't stand for anything, and isn't infinitely meaningful, if we are to recall Coleridge's understanding of symbol. Hooper's veil, though, is quite different: Its meaning is constantly under scrutiny, its meanings promiscuous and, ultimately, to everyone who interacts with Hooper, somewhat obscure. He even tells his fiancée that "this veil is a type and a symbol" (46).

The story abounds with suggestions about the veil's symbolic meaning. Hooper suggests that the veil is "a sign of mourning" (46). It may signify Hooper's—or any man's—ineluctable separation from God: "It threw its obscurity between him and the holy page, as he read the Scriptures; and while he prayed, the veil lay heavily on his uplifted countenance. Did he seek to hide it from the dread Being whom he was addressing?" (39). It may stand for an essential incommunicability; after all, no one knows precisely what the veil is meant to indicate, and it distances the minister from his congregants and makes him seem illegible. Or it may stand for a fundamental sin that marks everyone—an original sin made visible in the case of Hooper, who is simply a bit more obsessively inclined to confession and piety than everyone else. It is not hard to read Hooper's veil as one of many examples in Hawthorne of a mark of separation between people, an impediment to human warmth or communion. The barrier is quite literal; Hooper's congregants and his fiancée cannot see him behind the veil, and so it is harder for them to interact with him genuinely: "All through life that piece of crape had hung between him and the world: it had separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman's love, and kept him in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart" (50). But the veil is also a figure. Hooper declares his veil "a type and a symbol," and even if that symbol takes a physical form, the reader, like Hooper and everyone else who sees his veil, is inclined to read it as a figure of some sort—something that stands for something else. The question, of course, is what precisely it stands for.

Hooper, like the reader and the story's other characters, seems interested in reading the veil, and at the end of his life, he finally unveils his interpretation. "What," he asks on his deathbed, "but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape

so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best-beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!" (52). At least in Hooper's estimation, the veil is only a symbol of what he sees to be true of everyone: that intimate communication is impossible. Hooper believes that everyone is effectively separated by black veils, and he has only decided to wear his openly, as if to criticize everyone else's invisible veils. But the problem with Hooper's reading of his veil is that he seems to have a muddled understanding of what a symbol is. A symbol, in Coleridge's taxonomy, is infinitely meaningful, but Hooper's veil is not, at least the way Hooper understands it. He takes his veil to be a literal rendering of an abstract concept. Really, then, he understands it to be an allegorical figure.

Hooper is not the only one to think about allegorical veils. In *The Veil of Allegory*, Michael Murrin argues that allegorical poets, beginning with Hebrew prophets, are the recipients of inspiration, and that they know that most of their audience cannot understand the truth they have to offer, so "the poet protects truth by the veil of allegory" (10). Murrin's argument is based on an analysis of ancient and Renaissance rhetoric, but some of his comments on allegory seem to describe Hooper and his veil exactly. Murrin's prototypical allegorists are ancient prophets; even Renaissance allegorists, he claims, follow in the mold of a poet whose wisdom is mythically or divinely inspired. ("Without divine truth," Murrin says, "allegory has no meaning as a rhetorical mode" (162).) Hooper, of course, is a minister, claiming revelation from God and thus unique access to truth. The poet, Murrin says, "did not really cater to his audience but tried to preserve his

truth intact and communicate it to those capable of understanding it. This requirement forced him to deal with two different audiences: the many who could never accept his revelation and the few who could. He had, therefore, simultaneously to reveal and not to reveal his truth, and for this double purpose he cloaked his truth in the veils of allegory" (168). Hooper's congregation, for the most part, is incapable of understanding the truth he thinks the veil stands for. But here Hooper diverges from Murrin's poet: According to Murrin, "the many reacted with pleasure to his symbolic tales" (168). None of Hooper's followers react with pleasure to his veil. Does that mean Hooper is just a bad allegorist, incapable of turning his dismal truth into figurative language the masses can enjoy? Or might Hooper and Murrin actually have some diverging views of the function of an allegorical veil?

At times, Murrin's descriptions of allegory sound like he is actually talking about symbol. At times he is even imprecise in his language. In one discussion of Spenserian allegory, Murrin inexplicably switches to the language of symbol: "The theme is the important thing—the truth behind the veil—, and the symbols may shift around or become distorted, without warning, if truth requires it" (145). Were he to accept Coleridge's taxonomy, Murrin ought, perhaps, to have said that the *allegorical figures*, rather than symbols, shift around. But the sort of allegory Murrin describes here in fact does sound more like symbol than allegory. The poet, Murrin says, "does not serve his symbols; they serve him. He throws out various images and shifts them around, trying to get his auditors to participate in his own train of thought, which is both concrete and abstract. He does not meditate upon his symbols and separate the mental from the concrete.…Allegories are open-ended" (146). Murrin's is thus surely a very different

vision of allegory from Coleridge's—it more closely resembles Coleridge's symbol than his allegory. In fact, Murrin does not seem to distinguish between symbol and allegory as different types of figures, with a clear hierarchy of complexity and value. In Murrin's view, symbols might best be understood as tools for allegory. In his conception, the truth rules, and the allegorical poet uses what Murrin calls symbols to try to convey it. These symbols—or what Murrin calls "veils"—might shift to accommodate elusive meaning or changing audiences. Allegory, then, for Murrin, is far from fixed or mechanical, as Coleridge claims it is. It more closely resembles the vital, unhardened metaphor Shelley uses, and, like Shelley's metaphor, it might allow us negative access to the deep truth.

And so in Murrin's account, allegory avoids the charge of mechanical simplicity that is so often leveled against it. If allegory is shifting, mutable, it is far from simple. Nor are symbols mere tools—or allegorical characters rendered flat—if they exist partially to entertain audiences who cannot understand their full figurative import. And if the symbols may shift, perhaps they are granted a little more room to take on lives of their own. This is the approach Hawthorne's more complicated allegories take.

But Hooper's veil is certainly a fixed image, probably no symbol at all. If Hooper is an allegorist, he falls short of being the sort of allegorist Murrin discusses. His veil does not please or entertain anyone, and it does not shift when it fails to convey its meaning to a select audience. Ultimately, Hooper has to abandon the veil, which has failed its primary duty of communication, and spell out what he means to convey explicitly in his deathbed speech. Hawthorne's story refers to Hooper as a symbolist, but really he is an allegorist, and a bad one—the sort of allegorist Coleridge criticizes, not the sort Murrin celebrates. Hooper doesn't even have sufficient faith in his own veil, so he undercuts its

function. He attempts to lift the veil of allegory by delivering the truth naked—but of course such a move is doomed to fail. In part, it must fail because the literal veil is still on his face. But it also must fail because if the congregants cannot understand the truth even when it is protected by the veil of allegory, surely they will not be able to face it unvarnished.

One might consider, though, that Hooper is stuck with his permanent veil because of his paltry understanding of allegory. Hooper is the sort of allegorist Coleridge describes—he takes allegory to be fixed, mechanical, a cheap tool. The way Murrin describes the veil of allegory, it is a mutable tool for the poet to use to best express the truth; it is flexible, and it facilitates important communication on multiple levels. But if an allegorist adopts Murrin's veil but not his concordant understanding of allegory, as Hooper does, things can go poorly. Then, the veil indeed becomes a barrier to communication, as it does for Hooper. Even after Hooper dies, his corpse is veiled (52). Even after he attempts to spell out what his allegory means, he cannot achieve any real communion, any human warmth. Because poor Hooper is a bad allegorist, he proves so many of allegory's critics right, and he is doomed to cold isolation.

And yet Hawthorne, unlike Hooper, is a good allegorist, even in Hooper's tale. Although Hooper reads his veil in a limited, mechanical way, that is very much his reading, not the story's. The tale veils its allegory by presenting in Hooper a character who presents a forceful, if not nuanced, reading. But there is no reason a good reader must trust Hooper. In this dual presentation of allegory, too, then, "The Minister's Black Veil" plays out Murrin's analysis of allegory. Murrin proposes that allegory works with two distinct audiences: the majority, who are uninitiated and from whom the allegorical

meaning must be concealed, and a smaller, enlightened group, who might understand the allegory's complex meaning (13). In "The Minister's Black Veil," Hooper is among the unenlightened majority. But those who can see past the veil of allegory—who can see Hooper's veil as a more robust symbol, and its bearer as a bad allegorist—might see the tale as a more complex and more sympathetic parable. Surely, though Hooper dies in cold isolation, he evokes sympathy in the enlightened allegorical reader. We see the consequences of his paltry understanding, and for that we pity him. Thus the tale offers two types of allegory through the same veil: For readers of Hooper's bad allegory, there is no human warmth to be found, but for those attuned to Hawthorne's good allegory, there is.

Hawthorne's allegory in "Rappaccini's Daughter," which refuses to harden properly as allegory should, also escapes the fate of hardened metaphor. This is a very different type of allegory from the one on offer from Hooper in "The Minister's Black Veil." In their failure, the allegories of "Rappaccini's Daughter" undo their petrification. They shift back into the realm of vital metaphor. They come to resemble Michael Murrin's description of Renaissance allegory—allegory that shifts as the poet needs it to. These allegories become supple, as an association between, say, Beatrice and Eve might have been had it not been mummified by centuries of such associations and readers' instilled habits of tracing them. Hawthorne's allegorical characters, then, are left more mutable than they would be if his allegories worked out as they promise to. They are not just figures—and if they are something more than allegorically defined figures, perhaps they do, after all, have some of the human warmth that allegory seemed to rip them of.

It is surely true that the characters in "Rappaccini's Daughter" do not have many moments of genuine emotional complexity or fullness of character. They are largely representative figures—overdetermined representative figures, sure, but representative figures nonetheless. The chief interest in Giovanni is in his inability to synthesize competing moral facts: He cannot reconcile Beatrice's spiritual pureness and goodness with her bodily poison, and so he is intriguing as a model of readers' ability to separate the ideal and the real, or as a comment on fideism, or as a figure of a failure in reading. But as a real character, one of interest simply as himself, he has not all that much to offer. Three years after the publication of "Rappaccini's Daughter," Edgar Allan Poe echoed Hawthorne's preface's criticism of allegory: "The deepest emotion aroused within us by the happiest allegory, *as* allegory, is a very, very imperfectly satisfied sense of the writer's ingenuity in overcoming a difficulty we should have preferred his not having attempted to overcome" ("Tale-Writing" 148). In "The Minister's Black Veil," Hooper the allegorist is compelled to spell out the difficulty for his reader, whom he does not trust to overcome the difficulty Poe sees. But in "Rappaccini's Daughter," the difficulty is not overcome. The allegory cannot be teased out. And so whereas Hooper dies alone, in cold isolation, one wonders if, in "Rappaccini's Daughter," perhaps the human warmth is, after all, actually not stolen away.

Human warmth

Even beyond the preface, "Rappaccini's Daughter" is somewhat preoccupied with human warmth. Beatrice tends her flowers with human warmth: "Giovanni, at his lofty window, rubbed his eyes, and almost doubted whether it were a girl tending her favorite

flower, or one sister performing the duties of affection to another" (97-98). Beatrice's plants are frequently described as her sisters—just as she is described as Giovanni's sister (113)—but here Giovanni explicitly conflates human warmth and nature. Because of his inability to distinguish the two, human warmth has become embedded in his conception of nature. Baglioni echoes the understanding that warmth is an element of nature when he describes Rappaccini as having "a look as deep as Nature itself, but without Nature's warmth of love" (107). Rappaccini's plot to imprison his daughter, it turns out, was motivated, in his perverse way, by his desire to keep her apart and protected from the world, but he did want her to find a lover to join her in her world of poisonous purity. Even in a highly artificial world, human warmth survives: Rappaccini orchestrates the garden so that Giovanni can safely join Beatrice in her poisoned existence. One gets the impression that, even in a world of poison and artifice, human warmth is pretty firmly grafted onto human existence. Rappaccini, whom Baglioni accuses of lacking human warmth, is actually motivated to preserve it. Long lacking human companions, Beatrice treats her plants as replacements. "I grew up and blossomed with the plant, and was nourished with its breath," she tells Giovanni. "It was my sister, and I loved it with a human affection" (123). Not only does the plant take on a human role, but Beatrice, blossoming, comes to resemble the plant as well. But this is not her becoming inhuman so much as her uniting with nature and finding, together, that human warmth flourishes in nature, even a poisonous nature built by an overzealous scientist. If we press Norford's reading of Beatrice's plant as an allegorical figure of allegory, we find that even allegory cannot steal away Beatrice's human warmth, because she has humanized allegory by

making it her sister. Human warmth is a pretty persistent phenomenon—one that may not be so easy to steal away.

Of course, there are problems with arguing that Rappaccini's garden is just another self-enclosed natural world, hosting its own forms of human warmth. To begin with, the characters infected by the garden protest. Giovanni accuses Beatrice of trapping him: "And finding thy solitude wearisome, thou hast severed me, likewise, from all the warmth of life, and enticed me into thy region of unspeakable horror!" (124). And Beatrice is not so pleased with her father's plot, either: "I would fain have been loved, not feared," she says when she learns of his intentions (127). And the garden is not benign: Beatrice, that figure of human warmth, dies. For all the characters' and narrator's talk about human warmth, it is still under threat. Even in his own tale, the warmth Hawthorne cares so much about is in danger.

But perhaps the story's failed, unhardened allegory—its translation into vital metaphor—can redeem its human warmth. Shelley proves helpful in considering the human warmth inherent in vital metaphor. He takes both to be an essential undercurrent of human thought, sources of human energy that escape his otherwise hyperbolic skepticism. He puts the link between love and metaphor perhaps most explicitly in the short fragmentary essay "On Love:" "This is love. This is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists" (201). Love is a device of connection—that is, it is the basis of metaphor, or metaphor the basis of love. As metaphor draws connections between objects, love is the impulse that reaches outward, looking to draw those connections. And what better example of human warmth is there than love? Hawthorne's failed allegories, then, freed to flourish more like vital

metaphors than hardened ones, may be an expression of love's omnivorously sympathetic impulse to draw connections between things, to highlight their similarities.

We need not lean wholly on Shelley to grant that a failed allegory, one that is part of a mass of allegorical possibilities, has more energy than an ordinary successful allegory. Murrin understands allegory to work this way, and he doesn't categorize all Renaissance allegories as failures. Still, if we accept Coleridge's influence on the generally accepted definition of allegory, we ought to classify the sort we see in "Rappaccini's Daughter" as failed, by that mainstream standard, or at least broken. This class of failed allegory offers more possibilities for meaning, more messy resonances to be sorted through, more connections to literary and historical precedents and thus more kin for the figure onto whom each allegory is projected. If, through failed allegory, Beatrice can gather Eve and Dante's Beatrice as sisters in addition to her botanical sister, she has only greater opportunity to cultivate human warmth.

Inactive allegorical symbols: "The Celestial Railroad"

"Rappaccini's Daughter" and "The Minister's Black Veil" present two different kinds of allegory—good and bad, one might say, or vital and hardened, broken and standard, Murrinian and Coleridgean. We might even see these not as entirely discrete categories but as ends of a spectrum; allegory can fall anywhere between these two types. The former promotes human warmth; the latter freezes it. But Hawthorne is not solely concerned with allegory's relationship to human warmth; he also interrogates more formal aspects of allegory. "The Celestial Railroad," the story that seems most acutely aware of its place in the literary history of allegory, suggests an awareness of allegory's

low status and its assumed irrelevance in the landscape of 19th century American fiction. What, the tale seems to ask, is one to make of a form past its prime? What is allegory good for? And what is an American romancer to do with the remnants of a literary heritage for which the obituaries have already been written?

"The Celestial Railroad" offers a view of what happens when allegory loses its purpose. That was the state of the form when Hawthorne wrote; similarly, that is the state of the allegorical figures in Hawthorne's tale. The story is littered with allegorical symbols, but many of them no longer figure any real meaning. "The Celestial Railroad" borrows a densely allegorical landscape from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* for satirical effect. But Hawthorne's story doesn't just convey the same truth as Bunyan's. Hawthorne uses Bunyan's figures towards a new end—perhaps even as a commentary on the nature and purpose of allegory. As a result, though, "The Celestial Railroad" is stuck with symbols borrowed from Bunyan, even though they no longer bear Bunyan's truth. These, then, are allegorical shells, or inactive symbols, and they betray the frivolity of hardened allegory. They used to mean something, but they no longer do. They are reminiscent of the way Barfield describes words: Meanings have accrued to these symbols over time, even if those meanings are no longer relevant, and the symbols have become inflexible.

To understand the excesses of allegorical debris in "The Celestial Railroad," it's important to see how the story might be read not as a religious allegory but as an allegory about the very technology of allegory. It would not be difficult to parse Hawthorne's story as a fairly straightforward commentary on Unitarianism and Transcendentalism; in fact, that is the conventional reading. But while such a reading surely honors the tale's

humor and its deployment of Bunyan’s tropes to craft a new dogmatic allegory, the religious allegorical reading fails to account for the complexity of Hawthorne’s allegory. After all, allegory was the mode of medieval and Renaissance romance and of Puritan preachers, but it was hardly the default form for someone like Hawthorne. Any consideration of this perhaps mostly explicitly allegorical tale of his, then, ought to linger on its use of allegory. We ought to be interested in not just in what allegory is used to say, but in why allegory is used to say it.

If we think about why Hawthorne turns to allegory to tell this tale, we might unlock a great deal about not just his comments on religious sects, eschatology, and Bunyan but also the mode of allegory and its role in religious and literary discourse. Consider the story’s main innovation: Instead of going through the arduous journey that Bunyan’s Christian undertakes, Hawthorne’s pilgrim can just hop on a train. Of course, we might see the train as an allegorical rendering of the theological shortcuts offered by liberal religious movements like Unitarianism. Unitarianism adapts but rearranges the tropes of more staid orthodoxy, just as Hawthorne’s tale rearranges the landscape of Bunyan’s novel. But the Celestial Railroad also serves as a shortcut, not just for Christian salvation but for the dissemination of Christian meaning, or perhaps meaning more broadly. If Bunyan’s Christian has to trek through a great allegorical landscape to reach the Celestial City, his reader has to decipher that landscape to understand each element’s religious purpose. Of course, in Bunyan, the deciphering isn’t so difficult; his is a fairly straightforward allegory, with many figures—like Christian—explicitly named for the things they signify. But if we are to take to heart Coleridge’s criticism that allegory is a mechanical form, we can see how allegory sets a mechanical process in motion: We read

allegorical fiction, see signs that indicate that we have an interpretive task before us, and then make the mental calculation that this story actually means to tell us about something more abstract. The allegory works much like a train: Once it's set in motion, the reader just has to sit back and enjoy the ride to the figured truth.

In *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature*, Cindy Weinstein has rightly drawn attention to "The Celestial Railroad" as a seminal allegorical text among Hawthorne's tales. She notes that "few critics interested in Hawthorne's reconfiguration of allegory have taken seriously" this tale, perhaps because "the comic tone of the tale discourages readers from thinking about it as anything other than an affable, urbane, and humorous recasting of *The Pilgrim's Progress*" (54). But Weinstein focuses on the story for its allegorizing of labor; she argues that the Celestial Railroad makes the trip to the Celestial City easy, despite the fact that mainstream Protestant theologians in the mid-19th century tended to argue that religion—and, for that matter, life—should be difficult (57). Weinstein's purpose is to prove that the 19th century condemnation of allegory was part of a widespread antipathy to visible labor; after all, Coleridge's foundational critique of allegory was that it is mechanical. So Weinstein reads "The Celestial Railroad" as a critique of technology. She notes that the technology of the railroad is depicted in "decidedly corporeal terms," and that the world of the story as a whole is fueled by a market economy (60). And so, Weinstein argues, "The Celestial Railroad" far exceeds the landscape it inherits from Bunyan and comments instead on the technological, material, and economic markets of the 19th century—all seen through the workings of the tool of allegory. Weinstein is surely right—and unusual—in her focus on "The Celestial Railroad" as a text wrestling with allegory itself, not just using allegory for religious or

humorous purpose. But her historicist interest points her focus towards labor and markets. Maybe, though, it is equally useful to consider allegory itself as the technology "The Celestial Railroad" comments on.

Hawthorne's railroad, like an allegorical tale, is pleasant and fairly easy. The railroad's travelers, unlike Bunyan's Christian, undertake their journey "as cheerfully as if the pilgrimage were merely a summer tour" (188). The narrator doesn't have to carry his burdens on his back as Christian does; instead, he can load them on the train (188). The pilgrim's guide is named Mr. Smooth-it-away; he, like the mode of allegory, wants to make the journey easier, more palatable, to elide abstract confusions in a very practical rendering of the journey at hand. This is Christian pilgrimage made easy: Just hop on the train and it'll take you right to your destination. As a result of the story's allegorical posture, it's easy to forget or ignore the journey's ultimate, figurative subject. The story even tells us explicitly that's what happens: "Religion, though indubitably the main thing at heart, was thrown tastefully into the back-ground" (188-189). Because of the figure of the railroad—or, for that matter, any allegorical figure—the figured subject can recede from immediate attention. Surely this is a seminal feature of allegory: That's why, as Angus Fletcher notes, allegory can be such a useful tool to address topics censored by political regimes. If the real matter at hand is taboo, or if it's just too hard or weighty to discuss, allegory offers an easier way of addressing it—to the extent that the important bits might fall out of focus, leaving the reader's attention fixed on mere vehicles.

In some sense, Hawthorne's allegory mocks the mode of allegory. After all, his material—Bunyan's novel—is an allegory. Hawthorne's introduction of the railroad only exaggerates the setup Bunyan has already laid out. Yet Hawthorne is aware that he is in

some way flattening Bunyan's allegory, depriving it of its complexity by skipping over each difficult way station: "It was laughable, while we glanced along, as it were, at the tail of a thunder-bolt, to observe two dusty foot-travellers, in the old pilgrim-guise….The preposterous obstinacy of these honest people, in persisting to groan and stumble along the difficult pathway, rather than take advantage of modern improvements, excited great mirth among our wiser brotherhood" (191). Modern improvements include the railroad but also the romantic turn against allegory: To the savvy 19th century thinker, allegory might be seen as an old-fashioned or retrograde literary technology. The modern improvement, of course, might be the symbol, infinitely richer, more complex, more capacious than the simplistic one-to-one correspondences of allegory. How silly for Bunyan's Christian—and his readers—to trek along an allegorical path when they might have addressed the same meaning by way of either straightforward narrative or symbol. Why not just say what you mean? Or say something infinitely meaningful, because meaning is not so straightforward? Either way, surely the right response to anyone who still goes through the exercise of allegorical depiction is laughter and mockery. Hawthorne anticipates Poe's critique of allegory, which bears repeating once more: "The deepest emotion aroused within us by the happiest allegory, *as* allegory, is a very, very imperfectly satisfied sense of the writer's ingenuity in overcoming a difficulty we should have preferred his not having attempted to overcome."

At times, Hawthorne's allegory exposes the mechanisms by which traditional allegory works. The world of the Celestial Railroad replaces Bunyan's giants, Pope and Pagan, with a new one, named Giant Transcendentalist, who eludes description: "But as to his form, his features, his substance, and his nature generally, it is the chief peculiarity of this

huge miscreant, that neither he for himself, nor anybody for him, has ever been able to describe them" (197). If one of the traditional uses of allegory is to invoke abstractions in tangible form—to render the ineffable more approachable by means of figurative language, in a move that Jacques Derrida refers to as catachresis—Hawthorne's allegorical Giant Transcendentalist adheres to the letter of allegory but abandons its spirit or purpose. Of course, the description is a clear attack on transcendentalism, but it also makes a mockery of allegory: Transcendentalism, the argument goes, is vapid and indefinable, and so Giant Transcendentalism retains those qualities, and he, too, has no definite, discernable features. In a sense, that is how allegory should work—the figure stands in for the abstraction, and so it is natural that it should retain some of the same qualities—and yet it also belies allegory's purpose, which is to translate abstractions into concrete figures. Concrete figures ought to have concrete attributes—who ever heard of a giant who cannot be described?—but this allegory takes itself perhaps too literally and thus isn't particularly helpful for the reader who wants to remain in a world of representation. Perhaps allegory, exercised strictly, can be as vapid as transcendentalism.

And yet Hawthorne's supposed improvement is stuck with emptied vestiges of Bunyan's allegory. Mr. Smooth-it-away insists that hell "has not even a metaphorical existence" (194). He is concerned only with the literal and natural, and the narrator is perfectly eager to accept "Mr. Smooth-it-away's comfortable explanation" (195). In the prefaces to his novels, Hawthorne works out a defense of romance based largely on the fact that the genre is not bounded by literal truth or practicality. But Mr. Smooth-it-away clearly cares a lot about practicality, and he offers a scientific explanation for the smoky cavern he and the narrator pass: He says it is the remnant of a volcano (194). His affinity

for naturalistic explanations for everything is very modern. It replaces allegorical understanding; allegory, as a feature of romance, would justify the crater's existence not literally but merely by noting that it stands for something other than itself and thus doesn't have to be fully accounted for by the laws of nature. And yet, because Hawthorne borrows his landscape from Bunyan, the crater remains, so Mr. Smooth-it-away is left needing to supply a naturalistic, factual explanation where none existed before. The world of "The Celestial Railroad" is littered with allegorical shells. The material remains, but it has been rearranged, repurposed, and mostly stripped of its allegorical meaning. Those emptied allegorical materials look somewhat ridiculous, and while Mr. Smooth-it-away may strive to create valid explanations, he can't quite justify the crater's existence. The shift away from allegory leaves behind a world of inactive symbols, not quite legible with modern tools, even if one invokes inactive volcanoes.

One wonders, then, whether these inactive symbols promote or hinder human warmth. Surely they are ridiculous; they clue the reader in to the smallness of the exercise of allegory, because the practical considerations stemming from an attempt to reconcile allegorical figures with the strictures of the real world lead to such funny situations. Humor isn't really what human warmth is about, though. But "The Celestial Railroad" deprives us of a real answer to the question of warmth. The end of the story reveals the whole affair to have been a dream. In a sense, the dream is a cop-out. By revealing the allegorical story of the train to the Celestial City to be nothing but a dream, Hawthorne punts on the question of allegory's warmth. The reader doesn't have a chance to judge the allegory on its own terms, to assess whether the trouble of deciphering allegory was worth it, before we learn that it is not real. There is in fact considerable resemblance

between allegory and dreams in general. After all, it is not just Freud who reads dreams as allegorical totems of reality; at their base, dreams, like allegories, are invitations to interpretation. But the revelation that the whole world of the Celestial Railroad is the product of the dreamer's subconscious pulls back the curtain on the artifice of allegory. Dreams can be interpreted, sure, but their events have no material consequences. Someone can die in a dream, and the next day he will still be alive. A dreamer can reach the Celestial City but derive no religious benefit. Dream objects, in that sense, are frivolous. So what does it matter if they have human warmth?

The sin of allegory

Ultimately, while Hawthorne's failed allegories in "Rappaccini's Daughter" bring us closer to human warmth than an allegory that strictly adheres to Coleridge's model would, perhaps a story shouldn't present human warmth so easily. Hawthorne goes to great lengths to set up the premise that the cost of allegory is human warmth—and then he proceeds to write an allegorical story. So the reader is left to tease out why he might write allegory nonetheless, or how human warmth might be saved even in an allegorical landscape. But perhaps the implication of a story that willfully ignores its preface's warning against allegory is that human warmth isn't all it's celebrated to be. It matters that the preface precedes the story—had the note about allegory and human warmth come after the story, one might take it to be a true assessment of the story. But though the preface is postured as a translator's note, it is clearly Hawthorne's, and it clearly sets up the story that follows it. And so a line of reasoning presents itself: You say allegory steals

away human warmth—so, yes, sure, I'll go ahead and write an intensely allegorical story. Wouldn't want too much human warmth anyway.

Hawthorne's allegorical characters, in "Rappaccini's Daughter" and elsewhere, are trapped in their allegorical worlds. This is the fundamental insight of the "Rappaccini's Daughter" preface: that allegory hems characters in, limits their fullness and their ability to reach beyond the allegorical construct in which the writer has imprisoned them. Such an allegorical construct is cold, not warm, because it is sterile, academic—it is the realm of ideas. It is no accident that allegory has historically been deployed for the promotion of prefab schools of thought. Platonic philosophy, Christian theology, specific political regimes, or other self-contained systems of belief are the most promising backdrops for allegory because allegory can be used as a tool to promote packaged ideas. Those ideas needn't be simple, but if they have been teased out thoroughly outside the allegory—if they are true systems of thought, with each part falling into its place in relation to each other part—the one-to-one mechanism of allegory will work nicely to expound the ideas. The kinds of allegories Hawthorne writes—overdetermined allegories, mutable ones, Murrinian ones—complicate systems of belief; just so, an idea that isn't fully or neatly worked out on its own will lead to a messy or unclear allegorical rendering. If it's not clear what kind of salvation Christian needs to achieve, the allegorist will not be able to depict him going to the Celestial City.

But Hawthorne's concern with "human warmth" is far from a set system of belief—and in fact such systems seem to be precisely what Hawthorne abhors. "Earth's Holocaust" is a fantasy of such systems, in every conceivable physical incarnation, being thrown to the bonfire. Systems package thought in a way that subsumes human vitality.

People become servile to ideas. They become imprisoned. And so not just allegory but the necessary precondition for allegory turns out to be what Hawthorne identifies as the Unpardonable Sin: the subjugation of people to ideas.

Hawthorne, in “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” insists on demonstrating the effects of the imprisonment of allegorical characters, but he also refuses to assume the necessary precondition for allegory—he refuses to build his allegory upon a prefab system of ideas. And in doing so he insists that his readers consider their own role in the business of allegory.

Maureen Quilligan proposes that allegory engages its reader in a way other genres do not. Other genres, she says, elicit emotional reactions from their readers. “After reading an allegory, however,” she says, “we only realize what kind of readers we are, and what kind we must become in order to interpret our significance in the cosmos. Other genres appeal to readers as human beings; allegory appeals to readers as readers in a system of signs” (24). Readers of allegory must consider whether they buy into the construct of allegory. That is, they must consider whether they believe the system of ideas the allegory points to—but beyond that, they must consider whether they believe in the very mechanism of allegory. Thus, allegory forces its readers to consider the most fundamental epistemological questions: Can a text convey ideas? Can the ideas a tale conveys possibly be the truth? Can, in other words, the truth be made knowable through fiction? “The allegorical poet,” Quilligan says, “simply asks in narrative form what the allegorical critic discursively affirms; are my words lies, or do they in fact thrust at the truth?” (46-47).

Shelley, as we have seen, seems to ask the same question by way of his mutable metaphors. Hawthorne extends Shelley's question's scope. No longer is the question about just one image and whether it might offer a glimpse of the truth; now, we see the effect of the extension of images or metaphors into allegory. In an allegory, Shelley's "frail spells" are extended into systems of ideas that permeate the whole text. We see that when one believes fully that an allegory can convey the truth, characters get trapped. Human warmth gets depleted. And the reader is complicit, because he has taken the story to be an allegory and thus bought into the premise of allegory, the subjugation of people to ideas. The reader is implicated, whether he wants to be or not, in the Unpardonable Sin.

Allegory, we have noted, is a sin, not only unpardonable but inevitable. We are all doomed to participate, both because of the urge to *allegoresis* and because writers of allegory pull their readers into their sin along with them. Quilligan emphasizes the reader's essential role in allegory: "The reader's involvement in allegory is perhaps more arduous than in any other genre…; while the allegorist may limit the reader's freedom by showing him how his commentary ought to proceed, yet at the same time, that commentary becomes part of the fiction, and what the reader loses in freedom, he makes up in significance" (225-226). "Rappaccini's Daughter" involves its reader in both allegory and *allegoresis*; as we have seen, there are requisite allegorical readings baked into the story, but the reader is also free—as many readers have done—to discover new allegorical interpretations, ones external to the tale.

Hawthorne, like Shelley, suggests that the greatest aim, and perhaps the best salvation man can achieve, is in some sort of human communion or sympathy—something we

might call love or human warmth. But Hawthorne diverges from Shelley in his assumption of the precondition of the sin of allegory. Whereas metaphor is, for Shelley, an expression or at least an imitation of love, Hawthorne's allegory is the sinful backdrop against which love must struggle. So whereas Shelley must wonder how love asserts itself against skepticism or epistemological uncertainty, Hawthorne doubts whether love or human warmth can survive despite the omnipresence of the Unpardonable Sin.

Richard Brodhead argues that Hawthorne shifted his attention from tales to novels because he was disheartened by the tales' "sense of unreality and isolation" and found the novel a better opportunity to "deal with physical substance, not shadows" (31). But perhaps Hawthorne didn't just need "a new form for his art"—after all, the novels, too, have their share of allegory, and it is allegory that dooms his tales to deal with shadows (31). In Hawthorne's 1834 story "The Devil in Manuscript," a tormented writer named Oberon laments the effects of composing tales: "I am surrounding myself with shadows, which bewilder me, by aping the realities of life. They have drawn me aside from the beaten path of the world, and led me into a strange sort of solitude—a solitude in the midst of men—where nobody wishes for what I do, nor thinks nor feels as I do. The tales have done all this" (172). Oberon and Hawthorne may explicitly trace the root of the problem to tales, but it is really allegory they are blaming—the sort of allegory that threatens human warmth. But if an allegorical writer is doomed to find his writings cold and sterile—if Hawthorne, like Oberon, must find himself tormented by his own tales—his reader, wrapped up in the business of interpreting allegory, may not be.

Perhaps an answer to the threat to human warmth is to be found in the same literary tradition that bequeathed the sin of allegory. Despite their imprisonment in allegory,

allegorical characters—and particularly overdetermined allegorical characters—might borrow some human warmth from their forebears. Beatrice and Giovanni, for example, verge on humanity at times, especially when they face each other in the garden: “They stood, as it were, in an utter solitude, which would be made none the less solitary by the densest throng of human life. Ought not, then, the desert of humanity around them to press this insulated pair closer together? If they should be cruel to one another, who was there to be kind to them?” (125). The account this time poses the lovers not as the biblical Adam and Eve but as their Miltonic counterparts: The two are united in solitude, undisturbed by a throng of people, just as, as they leave Eden, Milton’s Adam and Eve take “their solitary way” (12.649) and pass through “the gate / With dreadful faces thronged” (12.643-644). For this moment in “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” at least, two elements of allegory have coincided: Together, Beatrice and Giovanni stand as Eve and Adam, undisturbed by the throng of other allegorical mappings that hover elsewhere in the story. In this allegorical rendering, Beatrice and Giovanni are genuinely united, and, because one imagines Milton’s Adam and Eve in their stead, they provoke significant sympathy.

And perhaps, too, the reader’s dual role as reader of allegory and practitioner of *allegoresis* allows some redemption from the sin of allegory. A practitioner of *allegoresis* has some sort of control—or freedom, as Quilligan calls it—that a reader of allegory does not. In *allegoresis*, the reader can form his own interpretations. And thus he can choose, if he wants, to find Murrinian, not Coleridgean, allegories. He can see in a story the sort of allegory that doesn't imprison characters, that doesn’t hew to orthodox systems, that might, in its untidiness, grant characters at least the prospect of human warmth. Of

course, in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” as in so many other tales, the reader must also recognize the allegory the tale presents to him, so he must see the ways in which characters are trapped, the ways in which they become victims of the cold sin of allegory. But Hawthorne leaves room for glimpses of human warmth nonetheless. Hawthorne is doomed to write allegory, but he can choose what kind and thus invite his reader—and himself—to attempt to atone for the inevitable Unpardonable Sin.

Chapter Three: The Overreaching Allegory of *Moby-Dick*

Moby-Dick often seems to reach beyond itself, probing ever deeper. Ishmael says that to explain Moby Dick would be "to dive deeper than Ishmael can go"—and yet, just a few sentences later, he launches into an extensive exegesis of the whale's whiteness, one of many chapters that attempts to expound on the whale's meaning (187). Ishmael—and the book—seems determined to dive deeper than he can go, at every turn. As I have argued thus far, the longing to dive deeper, to understand what Shelley calls "the deep truth," can lead to an allegorizing impulse, and if the ensuing allegories are simplistic, they are so because of an innate desire to understand, which may involve simplifying things to make them more comprehensible. Despite—and perhaps even because of—the prevailing view in the 19th century of allegory as mechanical and simplistic, Melville, like Hawthorne, cannot ignore allegory altogether. Allegory is too baked into the history of literary thought simply to ignore; moreover, it is too effective—too natural—a way of thinking to want to overcome. So in *Moby-Dick,* despite the romantic taboo against it, Melville uses allegory as a potent way to test the limits of how meaning is figured. Melville, perhaps despite himself, does not simply attempt to move beyond allegory. He recognizes it as a way of thinking he cannot escape, so, instead, he wrestles with it profoundly. *Moby-Dick* takes up the problem of allegory head-on, considering, often with allegory as a method as well as a subject, the nature, purpose, and efficacy of allegory. That is, I read the novel, with its epistemological bent, as not just failing to move beyond allegory but as actually being about allegory.[17]

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[17] There are, of course, plenty of critics who deal with the substance of allegories in *Moby-Dick.* There are far too many to list in full, but Wai Chee Dimock's seminal *Empire for Liberty* considers *Moby-Dick* as an

While there has not been much attention, lately, to 19th century American allegory, a number of critics and philosophers have taken up the matter of reading Melville as a philosopher.[18] It's not clear precisely what it means to take up *Moby-Dick* as a philosophical book. Does it mean to mine the book for its philosophical assertions, to treat it as a philosophical treatise that just happens to be disguised as a sea adventure story? Some philosophers writing about the novel seem to treat it as such (McCall and Nurmi's volume is a prime example), even if they also consider the ways in which literature can allow for affective nuance in a way straightforward philosophical tracts perhaps cannot. Is Melville thus a philosopher? Or might his characters be philosophers? Is hunting for a murderous whale an act of philosophy? Is Ishmael, in many ways Ahab's reader, *Moby-Dick*'s philosopher?

What is clear is that *Moby-Dick* is a book obsessed with epistemology. It's been read that way by many scholars: For example, Lisa Ann Robertson argues that the novel offers physical human contact as the solution to uncertain epistemology. Chad Luck offers the wonder-closet, or *Wunderkammer*, as the novel's means, presented in "A Bower in the Arsacides," of subverting dominant Enlightenment epistemology. Paul Hurh sees *Moby-Dick*'s epistemological concerns as the occasion for terror: "The diverse fears in

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allegory of "the author's battle for sovereignty" (114). Brian Pellar's *Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-Slavery Allegory* considers the novel as an allegory about the Fugitive Slave Act. Ilana Pardes' *Melville's Bibles* considers biblical allegories. For a consideration of *Moby-Dick*'s allegory as a commentary on allegory itself, see Bainard Cowan's *Exiled Waters: Moby-Dick and the Crisis of Allegory*.

[18] There have been several books suggesting his philosophical relevance: among them, Corey McCall and Tom Nurmi's *Melville Among the Philosophers* (2017), Branka Arsic and K.L. Evans' *Melville's Philosophies* (2017), Evans' *One Foot in the Finite: Melville's Realism Reclaimed* (2017), Mark Anderson's *Moby-Dick as Philosophy* (2015), and a chapter in Maurice Lee's *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth -Century American Literature* (2012). Paul Hurh's *American Terror: The Feeling of Thinking in Edwards, Poe, and Melville* (2015) "treats literary affect as a philosophical mode and joins an ongoing discussion about American literature's relation to philosophy" (20).

Melville's fiction" he says, "are almost always touched with epistemological ambiguity" (161).

But even in the midst of the recent proliferation of studies of *Moby-Dick* as philosophy, and especially as epistemology, what critics have not attended to is the way in which the novel's treatment of allegory reflects and shapes its philosophical investigations. Allegory presupposes a certain epistemology. Its metaphysical premise is that the world is dual, that there are two levels of things we might know about—what we might call, with Kant, the phenomenal and the noumenal. Allegory, as an approach to understanding and communicating the world, suggests that there are things we can experience or write about (phenomena), and that they might figure or stand for abstractions, deeper things, things of real meaning or significance (noumena). Allegory proposes itself as a means of navigating our investigations of noumena, which we cannot know directly. It might be necessary for reasons of political expediency, but it might also be necessary to approach noumena obliquely because there simply is no other way—because such weighty matters must be translated into terms more comprehensible to the paltry human mind.

If that is allegory's metaphysics, it contains an implied epistemology: It is possible to access, if remotely, the figures allegory attempts to approach. Allegory requires a certain faith in itself—that it works, that allegorical figures do indeed stand for something about which something can be known or understood. That faith turns out to be significant: By the time Melville got his hands on the mode of allegory, such faith in the capacity of knowledge was far from given. Melville's skepticism is hyperbolic, letting nothing outside its reach. He seems to ask at every turn: What can we know with any certainty?

How do we know? Each time he retreats to any sure epistemological footing he can find, he turns the question on that ground, too: What if this, too, is not to be regarded with any certainty?

Allegory's primary historical functions—as vehicle of religious truth, connection between dogma and history, disguise for politically dangerous ideas—require some degree of certainty in one's convictions, and certainly in one's ability to be convicted at all. As a vehicle for the transmission of ideas, allegory—or at least allegory as Coleridge construes it—seems to bypass the question of how one arrives at ideas. It is a practical, mechanical tool; it does not invite its user to wrap himself up in anxiety about how and whether to use the tool. But that is exactly the kind of anxiety from which Melville cannot—and indeed does not want to—escape. Why, then, should we regard Melville as an allegorist? Why is it useful? I propose that allegory, as precisely the blunt tool against which every fiber of Melville bays, provides a means through which Melville might interrogate his own epistemological hangups.

In some sense, then, we might read *Moby-Dick* as an allegory—or perhaps more precisely, a series of allegories—about allegory. That is, Melville cannot but see meaning and figuration as piled on, layered, beckoning deeper and deeper investigation. Melville urges us always to plunge deeper, just as Ahab tells Starbuck on the Quarter-Deck as he presents his quest to hunt Moby Dick: "Thou requirest a little lower layer" (163). Melville, like Ahab, has no idea what that little lower layer holds, nor even, really, whether it exists. But he is plagued by the inkling that there must be something—that the world he sees cannot be all there is, that things must *mean*, that profundity must exist, even if it is utterly out of reach. And yet precisely that question—of whether profundity

exists, whether there is meaning, whether there's anything beyond—is what he longs to plumb most deeply, what he sees as the fundamental question of the world. Melville cannot escape epistemology.

But it is awfully hard, he also knows, to express his epistemological questions. Even here, it is hard for me to present them; we must turn to other thinkers' terms (Kant's noumena, Shelley's deep truth) or speak in vague, romantic-sounding platitudes (invoking words like "profundity," "meaning," "deep," "beyond").[19] So it seems for Melville, and for Ahab: But neither can get beyond the most extreme explorations of—and actions based on—such ordinary human wonderings. Yet without the vocabulary with which to convey the urgency of his anxiety, Ahab—like Ishmael and Melville, I will argue—grasps flailingly at whatever he can reach. I will propose that the word "some," which shows up often in *Moby-Dick*, encapsulates the grasping spirit that cannot quite put language to the magnitude of the problem of epistemological ambiguity. And yet, contra the ambiguity of "some," there is allegory, which, on its face, presents no ambiguity. Allegory provides an epistemological mooring post, somewhere from which to test the unsteady seas of knowledge. The problem is that *Moby-Dick* does not offer easy allegories, but that so many of its presentations of allegory insist on questioning the very premise of allegory. If allegory is traditionally a way of presenting a complete argument,

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[19] One thinks of the recurrence in high German romanticism of miners seeking gold; only so luminous a prize, so hard to reach, might help convey the depths to which one penetrates and the value of the goods that await there. A miner tells Henry, in Novalis' *Henry von Ofterdingen*, "Nor is it possible to describe or explain this complete satisfaction of an inborn desire" (67). Henry eventually moves from the allure of mining to the enchantment of poetry: "Precisely in this delight of revealing in the world what is beyond the world," Henry says, "of being able to do that which is really the original motive of our being here, therein lies the fountainhead of poesy" (116). His professor Klingsohr enjoins him that this is actually not the special function of poetry but that this quest is in fact "the mode of activity of the human mind" (116). And it is communicable only through figurative mining, and even then, Henry is anxious about really conveying the depths of his probing.

that's precisely the notion *Moby-Dick* challenges again and again. Just as the "Extracts" and Ishmael's attempt to compile a thorough taxonomy of whales in "Cetology" reveal, completeness is impossible. "God help me from ever completing anything," Ishmael says. "This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught" (145). *Moby-Dick*'s use of allegory makes the same point in figured form. By using allegory to tackle the problem of allegory's virtue, the question of whether it can in fact reveal complete ideas at all, Melville reinvigorates allegory itself.

In *Early Modern Poetics in Melville and Poe*, William Engel makes a similar argument to what I am suggesting: that Melville writes allegories about allegory—though the text in which he treats the phenomenon most thoroughly is "The Encantadas." Engel relies on Merton Sealts' study of Melville's reading to suggest that 17th-century rhetoric and literature suffused his writing. Engel argues that Melville uses early modern allegorical structures, along with chiasmus, to evoke a sense of melancholy and decay. Following Walter Benjamin's reading of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Engel sees "allegory itself to be an emblem of ruin" (48). So the isles in "The Encantadas," Engel says, "can be seen as prefiguring the exhaustion of all such comparisons [between images that rely on each other to draw out their meanings]—and hence of allegories" (49). And so Melville presents "an allegory of the dissolution of allegory" (50). Engel sees similar phenomena at play in *Moby-Dick*, though he focuses his discussion on "The Encantadas"—but I argue that there is a difference in *Moby-Dick*, which does not seem to associate allegory with ruin or decay, as Engel suggests.

Rather, *Moby-Dick* seems to suggest the stubborn immortality of allegory. Although the form may be on life support—as Engel notes it is, as Coleridge doomed it to be—

Melville indeed uses allegory to confront or process the demise of allegory, just as Engel suggests. But then we are confronted with an inescapable fact: Allegory simply will not die. If the response to the demise of allegory is to create more allegory, then allegory, like a cancer, keeps insisting on its own survival. It's a self-reflective phenomenon: Declaring the death of allegory, it seems, only revivifies allegory. I propose that that irrepressible energy echoes the persistence of the questions and ideas that so task and heap Ahab. Ahab tries to reason his way out of his epistemological wonderings, but he simply cannot evade them. Just so, one may doubt allegory's efficacy or relevance—one may dismiss it as simplistic, outdated, or tedious—but its swan song brings it rearing back with gusto. Thence some of the fiery energy of *Moby-Dick*: The ideas in it simply will not be contained, and any effort to contain, to move past, or to place into balanced stability cannot last. Allegory, it turns out, proves both inescapable and essential as a point from which to confront the immense problem of knowing in *Moby-Dick*.

Ahab and Ishmael's opposing stances on allegory

To consider the novel's use of allegory, we might first examine how its two central characters treat allegory. Ahab and Ishmael are frequently seen as opposing poles. Where Ahab is furious and fearful, Ishmael is calm and meditative. Ahab is obsessive; Ishmael likes to consider everything. Ahab takes action; Ishmael likes to look out at the sea and contemplate. Ahab seems a solitary figure; Ishmael, though lonely, finds great friendship with Queequeg. And so on. We might even say that Ahab and Ishmael find themselves in a dialectic relationship that marks *Moby-Dick*'s inability to rest in one point of view. To

balance the fiery Ahab, we need Ishmael's musings. And the two central characters seem, at first glance, to stake out opposing territory on the matter of allegory, too.

Ishmael offers the novel's most direct claim about allegory: He is quite wary of it. In the middle of a long explanation of facts about the whaling industry, Ishmael assures his readers that the story he tells is not an allegory:

> I do not know where I can find a better place than just here, to make mention of one or two other things, which to me seem important, as in printed form establishing in all respects the reasonableness of the whole story of the White Whale, more especially the catastrophe. For this is one of those disheartening instances where truth requires full as much bolstering as error. So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical and otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory. (205)

Ishmael wants his readers to know that what he's talking about is real, because if we are convinced of its reality, we cannot mistake the whale for an allegorical figure. He emphasizes the reality and "reasonableness" of the story; how, then, can it be allegorical, considering allegory's artificiality? Ishmael seems to want to assure us that there is nothing resembling romance in his sea adventure story; even if most readers, not familiar with the sea and its creatures, have never heard of anything like Moby Dick, that doesn't mean the whale isn't real. These are facts of the world he is recounting, not fantasies cooked up for the express purpose of delivering some figured truth.

But Ishmael's strange claim may introduce more questions than it answers. Why exactly is he so fixated on assuring us that the whale is not allegorical? It seems, perhaps, that real facts might bear more credibility; he wants us to be sure that he is reacting to something concrete, and thus that his emotional and intellectual responses are justified. Were Ishmael to consider the difference between allegory and *allegoresis*, or allegorical reading of a text that is not necessarily intended as allegory, he might find a way around his problem: He might admit that *allegoresis* allows readers to both recognize the whale's reality and read it as allegorically figuring something beyond itself. With *allegoresis,* the whale could exist as an ordinary (if vicious) animal, unintended to mean anything more, but also stand, in a reader's mind, for something allegorically. In that case, Ishmael's concrete fears would be justified—he would really be confronted with a terrifying brute of a whale—but he might also be allowed to ponder whether the whale can be seen to stand for something more. Yet Ishmael does not entertain that possibility, at least not in "The Affidavit." For now, he seems to have a lot staked on the whale's remaining outside the realm of allegory. It's as if Ishmael intuitively understands Coleridge's critique of allegory, or that he fears, as Hawthorne does, that anything smacking of allegory might deplete his story of human warmth.

Ahab, by contrast, defaults to an allegorical understanding of the world, though he doesn't use the term. His famous Quarter-Deck speech is a proclamation of his allegorical vision:

> Hark ye yet again,—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the

> mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (164)

We're not going to get a much clearer articulation of an allegorical approach to the world than the statement that all visible objects are pasteboard masks. Ahab presents his vision as a lesson in reading; Starbuck has mistaken Ahab's hunt for Moby Dick as the ravings of a madman, but Ahab schools Starbuck, telling him he's not reading deeply enough, that he doesn't see that Moby Dick isn't just some beast who bit off Ahab's leg but that he stands for something much more. The question, of course—the very difficult, indeed unanswerable question—is what Moby Dick stands for. But that the whale is to be read allegorically is the fundamental assertion Ahab lays out in his speech. In order to win his sailors over, Ahab must convey to them that Moby Dick is a pasteboard mask, an allegorical figure.

But Ahab goes farther than that; his Quarter-Deck exegesis thrashes about in the questions that follow from its allegorical premise. He may not have answers, but that's what vexes him most, and he does lay out the territory for anyone who's game to join him in his intellectual project. He offers an answer to the question of what Moby Dick figures: "some unknown but still reasoning thing"—and a thing he wants to strike at. But then he

complicates the system. Whereas he has first proposed that Moby Dick is the mask, behind which is some unknown thing, now the whale is "that wall," the barrier between the mask and the thing behind it. The taxonomy doesn't quite work: How can Moby Dick be both mask and the wall separating the mask from the idea behind it? And he goes a step further: "Sometimes I think there's naught beyond." What if there actually isn't anything behind the mask, if the whale doesn't actually stand for anything at all but is just a vestige of an allegorical connection? Still, the figure itself torments Ahab, especially because its physical presence has come to remind him of the question of whether there's anything beyond. Then Ahab offers a third take: that Moby Dick may actually be the "unknown but still reasoning thing," or, in other words, the thing beyond. "Be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal," he says—it doesn't matter. The whale can be the thing on either side of the wall—mask or thing beyond the mask, phenomenon or noumenon—or it can even be the wall between those two layers. He doesn't know what, if anything, is beyond—maybe something unknown, maybe nothing, maybe the whale itself. He doesn't know, in other words, whether the allegory works or what it means. He just knows that he is faced with a whale, and that that whale forces him to think allegorically—to wonder about all these questions, all these possibilities he broaches in his response to Starbuck. The inscrutability of it all is what bothers him, and the whale—regardless of whether it is really agent or principal, mask or unknown thing, phenomenon or noumenon—reminds him of that inscrutability. It reminds him that he is an allegorical reader in a world he can't fully work out.

So we might see Ahab here to be working out some problems of literary interpretation. In some sense, he is wondering if Moby Dick is a case of allegory or *allegoresis*: Does

the whale actually mean something, or is he is just interpreting it? At the same time, Ahab teases out, obliquely, the difference between allegory and symbol, as Coleridge understands the terms. Nicholas Halmi poses Coleridge's distinction in terms of the wholeness of the world—allegory takes the world to be riven or dual, whereas symbol treats the world as whole, united.

In some sense, Moby Dick seems to play out Coleridge's definition, derived largely from German romantics, of symbol as simultaneously infinitely meaningful and irreducible. Were Moby Dick anything but himself, he would not be meaningful, and thus the possibility of allegorical interpretation shrinks away. Natural signs, a kind of figure Rousseau and Herder praised, could be all-meaning without requiring interpretation (Halmi 58). As Halmi explains, romantic theory proposed that "the symbol was supposed to be identical to, by virtue of being part of, its referent, and vice versa. The corollary of this line of argument was that anything whatever was inherently capable of bearing meaning, and that any seemingly atomized individual was in fact an integral part of an harmoniously structured whole" (25). In some ways, that seems to be the approach of *Moby-Dick*; every detail of the fishery seems to bear meaning, but not meaning reducible to other terms. The "resolutely anti-dualist" Herder suggested that the symbol's "meaning consisted in the essence of the symbolizing object itself" (Halmi 70). Thus it would be reductive—indeed incorrect—to say that Moby Dick allegorically stands for anything (God, evil, even some undefined and undefinable power or malignity), because he would lose his whale-ness, and thus the main thrust of his meaning.

And yet Moby Dick, to Ahab, also seems to be allegorical, not symbolic. Halmi proposes that romantic symbolic theory arose as a response to Enlightenment theory that

posited the translatability of signs. But in the Quarter-Deck speech, Ahab longs for just that sort of epistemology: He wants Moby Dick to be understandable as not a whale but a reducible, translatable emblem of something else. Ahab wonders whether the whale is agent or principal—something acting on behalf of a higher cause, or that first cause itself. We might then frame his inquiry as a question about whether the whale is allegory or symbol.[20]

But there, too, we see Ahab hung in a state of permanent indefinite ideological commitment. Halmi argues that the romantic theory of symbols arose not to explain symbols as they actually occurred in literature but to propound a theory about whence meaning: "the principal concern of their symbolist theory was not in identifying, still less in interpreting, actual symbols, but instead in establishing an ideal of meaningfulness

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[20] In her essay "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville's *Moby-Dick*," Elisa New casts the distinction between Ahab and Ishmael in terms of Hellenism and Hebraism. In doing so, she offers a new light in which to see Ahab's consideration of allegory. Given New's reading, the allegory/symbol dichotomy is eclipsed by the distinction between Hellenism, which would universalize meaning into Logos, and Hebraism, which opts instead for a more granular, historical, and multivalent approach. New sees Ahab, along with Father Mapple, as a Hellenic figure, whose "essentialist view, offered in the classical idiom, is that the random appearances of the world are united by one meaning, or Logos," and his "allegorical method makes violent defilers out of Hellenic adepts" (292). Ishmael, by contrast, is a scribe who walks around the world, gathering up "letters that are not assimilable to any unifying spirit but require the active and sustained process of learning" (294). Ishmael's interest is in law, not principle, and individual cases, not unified understanding; thus, his approach is Hebraic.

New considers one moment in which Ishmael is "converted momentarily to an allegorist after Ahab's dark training," but primarily she sees him operating in a non-allegorical mode, one in which there is no imperative to seek a grand, sustained understanding of the world (300). But while New is surely right that Ishmael is a cobbler of all materials and all perspectives he can get his hands on (much as Jerome McGann suggests of *Moby-Dick* in "The Great Final Hash of *Moby-Dick*"), he also tries his hand at allegorical interpretation, and I am interested in how and why he does so. At times, Ishmael's allegories are one-off lessons, commentaries on a particular element of the fishery or a single philosophical point, on which he puts little great emphasis. (Consider, for example, the allegory of "The Monkey-Rope," "Heads or Tails," or "The Fountain.") In that sense, his allegorical flirtations are part of his scribal, Hebraic approach—mere dalliances with ideas that do not define or dominate his thinking writ large. But he is more fixated on Moby Dick, and, especially in "The Whiteness of the Whale," he seems genuinely committed to figuring out the whale's broad significance. That's in part because so many of his shipmates are fixated on the whale, and, as a Hebraist, he wants to understand each particular person's thoughts—but he also admits his own perturbation and wants to get to the bottom of it. So while Ishmael may well be primarily a Hebraist, that fundamental approach does not save him entirely from Ahab's monomaniacal, Hellenistic longing to understand the great meaning of Moby Dick.

itself' (18-19). Their theory arose out of and in order to promote a preexisting ideological commitment. But Ahab has no such commitment; instead, he is all questions. The same seems to be true of Melville. So he does not fashion Moby Dick to play out his symbolic theory; instead, he proposes that the whale exists in the world, and there are people, Coleridge and his fellow romantics among them, who might have a specific reason to read it according to a particular symbolic theory, and there might be others, such as the Enlightenment practitioners of allegory that Coleridge derided, who might want to see Moby Dick as a mere emblem. What, then, is one without prior commitments to make of the whale? That is the question to which Ahab presents himself as an answer—and the result is his great torment. Without a reason to read one way or the other, Ahab is left in limbo.

One of the scariest things about Moby Dick is that he in fact is—or can be—either allegory or symbol; the world can be both allegorical and not allegorical. Talk about uncertainty, about the terrifying inability to grasp understanding: If the world is both allegorical and not, there is no stable understanding to be had. There are good arguments both ways; what matters is how one chooses to read. And if one doesn't have a reason for choosing one way or the other, one might be overwhelmed by possibility and uncertainty. If allegory's foundational premise is that it severs the world, creating two layers of meaning where there had once been one, one of the most baffling facts of *Moby-Dick* is that the novel's cosmos at once includes and does not include that rift. The world is somehow, impossibly, both riven and whole.

Allegory is the means by which Ahab teases out that inevitable impossibility. Allegory is thus a problem for Ahab, but it is an inescapable one. He resents it deeply and wants to

lash out against it, but he cannot but read the whale in some allegorical way. Ishmael, on the other hand, insists, perhaps because of a pre-existing commitment in the interest of saving face, on the opposite: that the whale is not "a hideous and intolerable allegory." Add one more pronounced difference to the list of ways in which Ahab and Ishmael offer diametrically opposed responses to the world.

Imageless allegory: "Some" as epistemology

Yet for all their differences, all their opposing insistences on whether to read allegorically, Ahab and Ishmael speak in such a way that betrays a fundamental acknowledgement of the world's ambiguity, and I propose that their common use of the word "some" indicates that they are much more similar thinkers than they might appear to be. Just as we saw in Shelley's poetry, the word "some" indicates a kind of linguistic shortcoming: It signals that the speaker and reader have a shared understanding that there is something worth conveying, something imaginable and suggestible but not fully graspable in words. There is an inherent vagueness to the word: I know a thing exists, it says, but I don't know anything about it. Ahab and Ishmael both use the word a great deal. Thus, they both take there to be something ungraspable in the cosmos—something they sense, something that bothers them, but something they fundamentally cannot understand or express.

Consider even just the two most explicit articulations of Ahab and Ishmael's views on allegory—the two passages discussed above. Ishmael mentions "*some* of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world" and "*some* plain hints touching the plain facts" (205; emphasis mine). Immediately following his comments on allegory, he says, "Most

men have *some* vague flitting ideas of the general perils of the grand fishery" (205; emphasis mine). Ahab refers to "*some* unknown but still reasoning thing" (164). Ishmael's "some" refers in these cases to more concrete items, but still, he cannot fully grasp them. But his reliance on the word "some" becomes much more extreme in his meditation on "The Whiteness of the Whale," and Ahab, too, finds his vocabulary marked more and more by the word.

Ishmael's narration is littered with the ambiguity of the word "some." He refers to "the invisible police officer of the Fates, who…influences me in *some* unaccountable way" (7). The Spouter-Inn reminds Ishmael of "one of the bulwarks of *some* condemned old craft"—even the physical remnants of the history of whaling are marked by incommunicable vagueness (12). "Some" infuses the way Ishmael describes emotions ("*some* unceasing grief," 36), rational thought ("*some* sober reason," 39), geographical location ("*some* twenty thousand miles from home," 50), strange foreign practices ("*some* sort of Lent or Ramadan," 69), Ahab's inscrutable nature ("*some* desperate wound," 123; "*some* mighty woe," 124; "*some* considering touch of humanity was in him," 127; a madness that is "transfigured into *some* still subtler form," 185; "*some* incurable idea" that besets Ahab, 186; "*some* infernal fatality," 187), and much more. "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael's most probing meditation, uses the word perhaps more than any other chapter.

Ishmael even starts his narrative with the indefinite suggestion of the word "some," telling us immediately after the novel's famous first sentence that his story begins "*some* years ago—never mind how long precisely" (3). This invocation doesn't work in precisely the same way as the "some" that indicates an incommunicable figure or idea;

here, the suggestion is less that Ishmael cannot say how many years but that it in fact doesn't really matter. But the sense of tenuousness remains: There is an indefinite quality to Ishmael's story, from its very beginning.

While it might seem unsurprising that the meditative, uncertain Ishmael's speech is so marked by the word "some," Ahab's is as well, more and more so as he descends deeper into hyperbolic doubt. After his initial pronouncements in the Quarter-Deck speech that introduce Ahab's sense of the word "some," he continues using the word. He refers to "some nameless, interior volition" (165). He wants to "in *some* sort revive a noble custom of my fisherman fathers before me" (165). Much later, gazing out at the sea, he wonders, "Canst thou tell where *some* other thing besides me is this moment living?" (501). He attributes the same indefiniteness to the person he takes to be manipulating the world: "Here *some* one thrusts these cards into these old hands of mine; swears that I must play them, and no others" (502). As he baptizes his harpoon, Ahab refers to "*some* stunning ground" and "*some* unsuffusing thing beyond thee" (508). Musing to himself as he descends deeper into his monomania, he wonders if "in *some* spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immorality preserver" (528). To Pip: "*Some* unknown conduits from the unknown worlds must empty into thee!" (529). In his final cerebral monologue, talking to Starbuck in "The Symphony," Ahab wistfully imagines his wife and son on "*some* summer days in the morning" (544) before losing his sense of personal integrity and wondering about "*some* invisible power" that moves the world (545). And in his final moments, Ahab continues to turn his doubt in on himself: "What breaks in me? *Some* sinew cracks!" (570). I'll have more to say later about the application of the word

"some"—and its attendant ways of thinking—to not just phenomena in the world but to Ahab himself, the man encountering that world.

It may seem trivial to fixate quite so much on just one word that two characters happen to use a lot. But "some" tells us a great deal about both Ahab's and Ishmael's epistemology. The word suggests that both characters fundamentally recognize something in the world that language cannot measure up to. If Shelley's Demogorgon reminds us that "the deep truth is imageless," perhaps we would do well to think of the word "some" as a kind of imageless allegory. When Ahab refers to "some unknown but still reasoning thing," or when Ishmael mentions "some incurable idea," for example, they suggest that there is meaning that can be conveyed only indirectly. In much the same way, the tenor of an allegory depends for communication on its vehicle. As Bainard Cowan puts it, "allegory centers on an experience it cannot really present but can only present in coded form" (122).

But in the case of the word "some," even the vehicle is not clearly defined or articulated. In an allegory, both tenor and vehicle are, or at least could be, definite. The sun outside Plato's cave stands for wisdom, for example. Rappaccini stands for Satan, or maybe Adam—but either way, the referent is discrete and articulable. Even if an allegorical figure is overdetermined, it is generally clear what it might stand for. But in a world governed by the language of "some," things get much thornier. Like an allegorist, someone who speaks of "some" assumes that correspondences exist, that there are meanings that lurk on some level beyond immediate experience. Cowan notes that Ishmael tends to prefer depictions of whales that are "nonmimetic," because "these [depictions] do not deceive the viewer about the impossibility of accuracy but rather

divulge their own status as conceptualizations" (123). But the word "some" goes still further than nonmimetic depictions of whales—it is still further removed from a literal depiction. When the only recourse is to use the word "some," the would-be allegorist knows that he doesn't—perhaps even that he cannot—know precisely what he is really talking about. He senses that the whale means something. But what? Dunno. *Some*thing. Something big and deep, something beyond grasp, beyond image, beyond the concrete articulation of allegory. The deep truth is imageless. Both Ishmael and Ahab know it, though it vexes them differently.

We might thus see *Moby-Dick*'s epistemology, marked by the word "some," as another kind of broken allegory. In a traditional allegory, the kind Coleridge talks about, we might be able to answer the question "some" suggests. In the case of "some incurable idea," thus: *What* incurable idea? A straightforward allegory might propose, if obliquely, an answer. Ishmael and Ahab do not—they cannot. Allegory, to them, does not and cannot offer answers or, really, clarity of any sort. Allegory—the very particular brand of allegory they use—instead is good for its ability to deepen uncertainty, to draw us away from any kind of seemingly stable knowledge. And I propose that, just as Hawthorne's broken allegories deepened his stories' ideas through their very brokenness, the imageless allegory in *Moby-Dick*—both in its use of the word "some" and elsewhere—tackles relentlessly the inescapable problems of meaning and understanding, or the impossibility of completion.

Ahab's assertion of allegorical meaning

Lest we rest too comfortably in a reading of Ahab's ambiguous epistemology, K.L. Evans offers a reading of Ahab that might allow us to see him as a more faithful allegorist. She reads *Moby-Dick* as a precursor to Wittgenstein: She presents an Ahab longing for connection with others, propelled by his insistence that others share in his understanding of the whale. As I have been suggesting, she sees that Ahab is above all else a reader, not a hunter, of Moby Dick. His quest is "an attempt to make his own private way of giving meaning to his life—a romance with the magnificently opaque and uncomprehending whale—compulsory for a crew who do not share his interests" (*Whale!* 65). Evans distinguishes between "whale," an utterance, and *whale*, "his conviction, his reading, his assumption of what this thing means" (65). The question, then, is whether "whale" and *whale* are the same thing, and Evans argues that Ahab asserts—optimistically, embracingly—that they must be. "Ahab's desperate *yes*," she says—his belief that communication is possible—"is an appeal for companionship," even though the mad chase it gives rise to drives companions away from the terrifying Ahab (66). Fundamentally, Ahab celebrates the possibility of reading. There is a danger of seeing words as mere tokens, whose intended, real meaning is unintelligible to anyone but the speaker. But Evans relies on ordinary language philosophy to propose Ahab's rejoinder to such a problem: We must treat words as public, functional communications. One might be hung up on the "distance between something said and something understood," across which it seems impossible to communicate (54). But Ahab "insists on his ability to say *whale*, to say it meaningfully, in a public way, without any attributive, qualifying

adjective. His 'whale' and his *whale* are the same; for him there is no distinction between saying a thing and meaning it" (56).

Evans doesn't use the term *allegory* in her discussion of Ahab's embrace of public language, but allegory indeed presents similar questions. "How to speak across this distance?" Evans asks (54). Speaking across a distance is in fact exactly what allegory does. Recall the etymological meaning: Allegory is speaking something other. I might describe a pig when I in fact mean to suggest a communist; though I am not speaking my meaning precisely, the link is understood. Allegory, then, is one way to speak across the distance Evans describes: If saying the thing one means is not going to work, one might utter another word, evoking another figure, understood to stand in for the one we really mean to talk about.

But for Melville, perhaps it isn't quite so easy. In a world in which Coleridge had rendered allegory taboo, out of vogue—and, more essentially, a world in which straightforward correspondences, like any form of certainty, seemed far too slippery—perhaps allegory doesn't work as a solution to the problem of speaking across distance. "An inability to answer this question," Evans says, "leaves one feeling that language must somehow be unfinished, or in disrepair" (55). Recall Maureen Quilligan's understanding of allegory as polysemous language (33). She sees language's ability to mean more than one thing as a rich opportunity; to Evans, on the other hand, it is a critical threat to the integrity of communicable meaning. Still, Quilligan sees, at least in Milton's treatment of it, allegory as "a genre for the fallen world," because "in a prelapsarian world at one with God, there is no 'other' for language to work back to, for there has been no fatal division" (182). In Evans' consideration of Melville, surely the

world is fallen, to the extent that one cannot even be sure if "whale" and *whale* mean the same thing. Quilligan proposes, though, that allegory is "a genre self-conscious of its own fallenness" (182). By suggesting from its very premise that the world is dual, allegory accounts for the problem Evans sees Ahab facing and proposes itself as a solution. If we can't be sure that a word will be understood to mean what it means, why not embrace the disconnect and exaggerate the need to speak something other by communicating via allegory? The question for us to attend, to, then, is whether Ahab seizes upon the solution of allegory.

Evans claims that Ahab does something that certainly looks pretty similar to allegory, or at least *allegoresis*: He reads Moby Dick as an "interpretable object" (Evans 90). He "insists that interpreting the whale is not only feasible but inevitable," and Evans calls that insistence "a defense of reading in general, and in particular of reading the incomprehensible other" (90). Of course, Ahab knows he is venturing beyond stability, beyond surety. He is undertaking a necessarily slippery project. Especially at sea, with its eternal waves, its ever-shifting vistas, its whales that continually elude capture, nothing can be certain. Evans notes that the "unpredictability of a sailor's life" and the "constant change in environment" also make interpretation a dangerous act (93). We might recall, here, the mutability that undergirds Shelley's poetry; he sees the world as constantly moving, such that steady metaphors cannot grasp truth's inconstancy. But, Evans argues, such mutability actually gives Ahab something to hold onto:

> Obscurity is his medium, but it is exactly this confinement that will free him. That only part of a thing can be seen by him, that something is missing, that he cannot see from all sides—these are the conditions that

> make human knowing possible. Ahab understands his limitations as *proof* of his ability to read the world; they are what make his world small enough to fit his conceptions of it. That is why he can do to his own miniature world what God can do to his infinite one—comprehend and interpret it. (95)

He interprets as an assertion against the universe, as a sort of battle-cry. Where Shelley sees the potential problem of vacancy and asserts the power of the human mind, or love, or imagination, Ahab sees the fundamental obscurity, ambiguity, and mutability of the world and defies it by insisting the he can interpret it. Ahab not only asserts that “whale” and *whale* mean the same thing, but that Moby Dick is a figure he can read—in other words, that Moby Dick is an allegorical figure.

Still, even if Ahab interprets, who is to say whether that interpretation is correct? Perhaps it doesn’t matter: “Thus the ‘meaning’ of the whale,” Evans says, “is not a property of the whale so much as a way for the people who involve themselves with the whale to come to terms with it. The whale would survive without these terms, but the people wouldn’t” (105). We might put her argument in terms of allegory: In *Moby-Dick*, the vehicle of the allegory comes to matter, having nothing to do with the tenor. The whale, Moby Dick, is what Ahab seeks; in some sense, it doesn’t matter if “there’s naught beyond” (Melville 164). Ahab is, fundamentally, practicing *allegoresis*, choosing to read Moby Dick as an allegorical figure. (Note that it is essential here that we are dealing with *allegoresis*, rather than allegory. If Ahab were reading Moby Dick as allegory, the whale would exist expressly for the purpose of conveying something beyond itself. It wouldn’t be able to exist independently. But in fact the whale is a real whale, just

a beast in the sea, created by a mother and father whale who had no notion whatsoever that their son might be a text for a deranged human sailor to decipher.) But there's a potential rebuke to *allegoresis*: not Coleridge's critique of allegory as mechanical and simplistic, but a charge that a particular case of *allegoresis* might in fact be incorrect. One might read a figure to mean something it does not in fact mean. Put more broadly: One might be wrong in supposing that the world itself actually can (not should, but can) be read allegorically.

If we cannot be certain of allegory's stability, if we cannot escape doubt that *allegoresis* is a fundamentally wrong practice, then, an extension of Evans' argument suggests that there may still be an important function *allegoresis* serves. Allegory—or *allegoresis*—allows stories to work. Evans argues that "the 'meaning' of the whale" exists more for the sake of the people who deal with it than for the world, or for the whale itself. The habit of *allegoresis*, then, works even if the content does not. It suggests the possibility of interpretation. Thus, in some way, *allegoresis* is practically necessary. It may well be that the epistemological suggestion of allegory (shared by *allegoresis*) is wrong—that the world, the deep truth, is unintelligible, that we cannot know things as they are. But by continuing to traffic in allegory, we can perpetuate a myth, defy the deepest skepticism, continue to operate and to think. It almost doesn't matter if the whale is just a pasteboard mask—allegory has become an act of faith. And so Ahab becomes a creator of meaning: "He tries to impress it onto that white surface, like ink on a page" (*Whale!* 108).

If this argument seems like a punt on the matter of meaning, or noumena, and whether and how it can be read, that may be correct. What I am suggesting—what I take Evans to

be suggesting, if we extend her thinking into the terrain of allegory—is that the virtue of *allegoresis* as Ahab practices it is not dependent on its accuracy or its reflection of the world as it is. Allegory is a fundamentally literary art, and if its history proposes a certain epistemology, we may be able to separate the genre or mode from that epistemology after all. Surely it is true that allegorical thinking, in its truest form, asserts some possibility of knowledge of noumena, even if obliquely. But as allegory provides a tool for that oblique access, the thing it purports to access becomes less important. Allegory diverts its reader's and practitioner's attention away from the thing it is really about and tells them to focus on the allegorical figure, the vehicle, instead. Even if the vehicle exists initially and primarily for the express purpose of conveying the tenor, the vehicle comes to take on a life of its own. We begin to talk about the vehicle as a proxy for the tenor. And thus, should the tenor's meaning or even its existence elude us, we are still left with the vehicle in our hands. We may then use the vehicle to assume a tenor we do not actually know. When Evans celebrates Ahab as a champion of communicative meaning, that is what she seems to be suggesting he has achieved.

In essence, the argument I am making about Evans' reading of Ahab boils down to something quite similar to what Kant calls transcendental idealism. Kant, posed with the problem of knowing noumena, suggested that they are fundamentally unknowable. He suggested instead that phenomena are what we can perceive with the senses; we can trust our sensory experiences insofar as they provide phenomenal knowledge, even if we have no idea if there is any right correspondence to noumenal knowledge.

But if, following from Evans' reading, Ahab is essentially a Kantian, Paul Hurh complicates things a bit. In Hurh's reading, Melville goes beyond Kant. Hurh argues that

Melville, like Kant, thinks dialectically: “The back-and-forth dynamic of Melville’s art, the way he poses the deepest questions within a flux of voices and mutually exclusive positions, enacts a dialectical logic” (168). In a revealing close reading of a sentence from Melville’s review “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” Hurh demonstrates how Melville sees the need, always, to “strike the uneven balance” (Hurh 163). At first glance, Hurh notes, Melville seems committed to seeing ideas alongside their opposites, in balance. And yet, upon closer examination, we see that that very balance is itself uneven: “The slippery nature of the passage—which teeters between balance and imbalance, literally balancing them but modally unfixing their commensurability—itself requires something besides logical proposition to parse” (166). Kant had a similar commitment to balance, but without the unevenness: Melville, Hurh proposes, takes the whole of Kant’s dialectic and turns it into one side of a pair of arguments to balance (173). Melville gets so caught up in matters of epistemological method that even Kant’s dialectic is not sufficient for him. Rather, he needs to unsteady even the seeming equilibrium Kant’s dialectic presents. Even dialectic is, to Melville, an occasion for epistemological anxiety.

If Melville thus transcends Kant’s dialectic by demanding that it be balanced by something else, where does that leave him on the matter of Kant’s transcendental idealism? One might see transcendental idealism as a potential solution to—or, in more negative terms, a punt on—the problem of knowledge about noumena: If, taking up a question about noumenal truth, we are confronted with two equally true opposites, we might conclude that actually we can know nothing. As Hurh puts it: “We cannot compare, Kant says, the consequences of transcendental deduction with the consequences of empirical deduction. But this conclusion does not satisfy Hegel, and one suspects that

it would not satisfy Melville" (176). The punt of transcendental idealism does not work for Melville because he keeps tugging at the question of the deep truth, even when he seems to have sidelined it with the punt of transcendental idealism. We can't know the deep truth, Kant proposes—but Melville still cannot stop wondering about the deep truth, so even if he rationally were to buy into Kant's reasoning, he cannot go along with it unless he truly gives up his anxiety about knowing noumena, which he seems fundamentally unable to do. Perhaps that inability to move on is attributable to the terror Hurh sees running throughout Melville's work, which he sees as an expression of what he calls "the feeling of thinking."

But we must be careful to distinguish between Melville and Ahab: It is Ahab who seems to be the transcendental idealist, and Melville who cannot rest there. And so perhaps it is fruitful to read Ahab as one side of an uneven balance, an anxious dialectic between the approaches embodied, respectively, by Ahab and Ishmael. That dialectic—the way Ishmael and Ahab balance each other, and how each of them is caught in his own individual dialectic, too—and its implications for *Moby-Dick*'s exegesis on allegory are what I'd like to focus on in the rest of this chapter.

Allegory's overreach

If Ahab and Ishmael present explicitly opposing views of allegory but nonetheless reveal themselves to share a fundamental epistemological approach, what might the two poles they represent reveal about the broader treatment of allegory in *Moby-Dick*? In a world that includes both Ahab and Ishmael and their divergent approaches to allegory, what more general conclusions ought we to draw about allegory? Jerome McGann

proposes that *Moby-Dick* is above all Melville's account of the telling of the story: "Melville invents Ahab's unheard-of quest and then runs *Moby-Dick* as a program for investigating the invention itself" (61). If Ahab and Ishmael each present a discrete (if strangely similar, at times) approach to allegorical thinking, what does Melville's "final hash" make of allegory as a mode of storytelling (*Letters* 191)? Is it entirely doomed to fail, as McGann suggests the novel's hash warns us it must do?

Given allegory's inclusion in *Moby-Dick*'s pastiche of forms and modes of thinking, is there a particular kind of allegory Melville's characters turn to that reveals something about how the outdated genre might be repurposed in the 19th century? If in Hawthorne's tales, particularly in "Rappaccini's Daughter," we saw overdetermined allegory, in *Moby-Dick* allegory reveals itself to be uncontainable, to grow beyond its allotted territory—perhaps, we might say, to overreach. In the cases of both Ahab and Ishmael, allegory exceeds its bounds; that is, the would-be allegorist is engulfed by the subject of allegory. Neither Ahab nor Ishmael, it turns out, can simply consider the potentially allegorical world from a distance. Ishmael says that to explain he must "dive deeper than Ishmael can go"—and that deep diving requires full immersion, such that the allegorist finds himself enmeshed in the object of his study (187).

Allegory, in *Moby-Dick*, is often closely related to or dependent on the allegorical reader. Each character is prone to read in different allegorical ways. In "The Doubloon," the chapter in which several characters in turn approach Ahab's doubloon and try to make sense of its meaning, we see an exercise in the variations allegorical interpretation can yield. First, Ishmael presents the doubloon's physical nature; then several denizens of the Pequod proceed before the doubloon, each musing on it. Ahab sees himself reflected in it

and reads the doubloon to suggest the inevitability of pain. Starbuck offers a pious reading; Stubb, so often wiser than he realizes, thinks more about the business of interpretation than about creating his own reading, and he says that though books “give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts” (433). Then along come Flask, the Manxman, Queequeg, Fedallah, Pip, and other unnamed characters. Each offers a radically different interpretation, according to his own personality and character. As one unnamed character comments, “There’s another rendering now; but still one text. All sorts of men in one kind of world, you see” (434). Pip’s interpretation consists of mere conjugation: “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look” (434). In essence, though, that may be the best articulation of the phenomenon at hand: Each person looks upon the doubloon and reads, each differently. It is as if the doubloon becomes a verb to be conjugated according to who looks at it.

Pip also suggests the frivolity of allegorical interpretation. “Here’s the ship’s navel, this doubloon here,” he says, “and they are all on fire to unscrew it. But, unscrew your navel, and what’s the consequence? Then again, if it stays here, that is ugly, too, for when aught’s nailed to the mast it’s a sign that things grow desperate” (435). Pip understands, through his madness, that the doubloon is the thing holding the Pequod together, that the crew is united by its longing to understand the world presented allegorically. The crew is “all on fire to unscrew it,” to figure out its meaning. The unscrewing, then, might be the untangling of meaning as it is contorted by allegorical rendering—that is, the straightening out of terms, distilling an allegory into a simple, clear message. But Pip understands that to unscrew a navel is a dangerous thing; the navel holds the body together. So Pip sees that the Pequod’s crew is doomed either way: To figure out the

allegory is to lose the ship's integrity, but to leave it screwed reveals the crew's desperation. Pip, like so much in *Moby-Dick*, presents a binary that cannot be resolved. Here, the Pequod's crew is wrong to unscrew the navel and wrong to leave it screwed; turned around, they are right to leave the allegory unpacked and also right to try to unpack it. We are stuck with a sort of dialectical response to the question of whether to go about the business of allegorical interpretation at all. And it is worth noting, too, that that dialectical balance is delivered by way of a madman's ravings, in a sort of allegorical language. The allegorical knot grows ever thicker; allegories are piled on to each other, even in the attempt to work out a stance on allegory.

What we do not hear, among the many allegorical exegeses in "The Doubloon," though, is Ishmael's interpretation. At the beginning of the chapter, he offers his only commentary: "And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher" (430). But Ishmael says nothing about what that "some certain significance" is; in fact, his voice vanishes from the chapter completely once Ahab starts talking. It's as if Ishmael wants to believe in a meaning he can pinpoint, but that goal is lost in the noise of so many different possible interpretations the parade of doubloon-readers offers. We are left with the suggestion that, despite Ishmael's wishes, there is no allegorical interpretation with any authority above the others. Melville seems thus to be teasing us with the possibility of allegorical meaning. Even the doubloon, a hard, physical object that doesn't have the seeming malice of a creature like Moby Dick, can yield many interpretations, and Ishmael—and in turn Melville—refuses to weigh in on any of them, to privilege any one interpretation above the rest. Still, that doesn't necessarily mean that the world is, as Ishmael fears, "an

empty cipher." For each interpreter, "some certain significance" does indeed lurk; the problem is just that the various interpreters do not agree, and there is no arbiter fit to judge among them. So significance indeed lurks—indeed, many significances lurk. The cipher is by no means empty; instead, it may be overfull. But we are faced with the daunting suggestion that allegorical interpretation is a personal task.

But if allegorical interpretation is personal, the person interpreting becomes, in some way, a subject of allegory. If one cannot separate the allegorical reader or writer from the allegorical material—if allegory's meaning is contingent on person—then perhaps the person in question becomes wrapped into the very substance of allegory. Such phenomenalization of allegory, as we might call it, plays out in the cases of both Ahab and Ishmael, such different allegorical readers. Both treat allegory as intensely personal, and both find themselves pulled into their allegorical practices, unable to pull off a dispassionate, impersonal reading. Both Ahab and Ishmael come to resemble the phenomena they read allegorically, and to turn onto themselves the questions they ask of those phenomena.

Ahab

Ahab's fixation on Moby Dick gradually makes the captain resemble the whale. Immediately after his Quarter-Deck speech, Ahab muses about himself in terms that might as well describe Moby Dick: "I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks, where'er I sail. The envious billows sidelong swell to whelm my track; let them; but first I pass" (167). Like the lonely and unwitting whale swimming along in the sea, Ahab cuts his own white path of oblivious destruction. Ahab, like Moby Dick, has a

"deeply marked chart of his forehead" (198). Ishmael describes a sperm whale similarly: He has "one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles" (346).

Ahab watches a whale and sees his kinship with it. "He too worships fire; most faithful, broad, baronial vassal of the sun!" he says (497). Ahab has recently baptized his harpoon in blood, in a pagan, fire-driven festival. "In vain," Ahab laments, "oh whale, dost thou seek intercedings with yon all-quickening sun, that only calls forth life, but gives it not again" (497). Perhaps Ahab just imposes his understanding of himself onto the whale; just as likely, though, he has ceased to be able to tell the difference between himself and the animal he has become so obsessed by. Ahab, who says he would "strike the sun if it insulted me," sees the whale to bear the brunt of the sun's torture. So here, before his final wrangling, Ahab seems to have found a home—not a hospitable one, but one in which he sees himself and finds kindred beings—in the sea, as he proclaims at the end of his soliloquy: "Ye billows are my foster-brothers!" (497).

By the end of the novel, the whale's ambiguity has infected Ahab's view of even his physical self: "What breaks in me?" he asks. "*Some* sinew cracks!—'tis whole again" (570; emphasis mine). Not only does Ahab use the same word—"some"—that he has so often used with reference to Moby Dick, but he rapidly reverses course in describing himself, switching immediately from an account of himself as cracked to a restoration of wholeness. That balancing of opposites is reminiscent of his oscillating postulations about the whale's nature—only now, Ahab is equally unsure about his own nature.

Note, too, that Ahab's unsurety about himself hints at the dissolution of his allegorical vision: Ahab declares "'tis *whole* again" (570; emphasis mine). Wholeness is, after all, an attribute of Coleridge's symbol, not allegory. But in allowing himself to be broken down

and immediately put back together, Ahab emblematizes a rapid-fire shift from allegory and back to symbol. In just one sentence, we experience the allegorical rupture—the result of a postlapsarian, necessarily dual world—and then a restoration of symbolic unity, all within the person of Ahab. Ahab is fully out of control of himself, but he has come to embody a vision of the history of the tension or dialectic between allegory and symbol.

Ahab's last great speech, in "The Symphony," shows him at the height of his self-doubt, and the way he ranges through possible interpretations of himself recalls the ever-shifting, all-entertaining uncertainty of his thinking about Moby Dick in the Quarter-Deck speech. By now, Ahab has lost his grip on even the integrity of his own person:

> What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. (545)

Just as Ahab plumbs the depths of possible interpretations of Moby Dick in his Quarter-Deck speech, now he turns the same tactic onto himself. He takes his own will to be dual;

he separates his body from some unknowable volitional power controlling him, and he is as unsure of the nature or identity of that controlling power as he is of the noumenal spirit of Moby Dick. In some sense, the self is the thing least allegorizable; people generally see themselves as whole, not figurative, and more or less knowable. But that unity of self dissolves here: "Is Ahab, Ahab?" The fragmentation of the self is so extreme it forces a comma error: One ought not put a comma between a subject and object of the same verb, but when the subject and object are the same word—the same person—the sentence looks so funny the comma seems to invite itself to show the split, to indicate that Ahab, one man, with one name, has become two different things whose identity is in question.

In the passage's final sentence, too, grammatical organization is on the verge of dissolution. The sentence begins as the first half of a conditional statement: "if the great sun move not of himself," *then*—well, we don't get the second half. Instead, the statement is transformed into a question: "how *then* can this one small heart beat" (emphasis mine). But we are not allowed the end of the question (and an ensuing question mark), either, because Ahab explicates the question so extensively that it becomes, once again, a statement. Given different punctuation (and a few syntactical changes to accommodate the gentler punctuation), the sentence might be easier to follow: "The great sun moves not of himself, but is as an errand-boy in heaven. Nor can one single star revolve, but by some invisible power. How then can this one small heart beat, this one small brain think thoughts? Unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I." Reframed thus, the passage may be easier to follow, but it has lost virtually all of its energy and urgency. And in fact the individual thoughts no longer seem to follow necessarily one from the other—as, in Ahab's articulation, they surely do.

Ahab's repeated questions, his inability to distinguish question from assertion, and his consequent jerking changes of direction seem to give us a vision of fragmented thought, of an inability to follow one thought through to completion. But in fact it may be just the opposite that causes the speech's disjunction: Ahab cannot think in a straightforward manner because too many thoughts keep piling on top of each other, each pushing the last out of the way before it is even fully uttered.

While that sort of thinking characterizes Ahab's thought in much of *Moby-Dick*, here it is turned fully on himself as subject. This is the terminus of his excessive, all-questioning habit: Even the self becomes something about which he cannot make a concrete, complete statement. As in the Quarter-Deck speech, here Ahab suggests several possibilities: that the volitional personality moving his arm could be himself, or God, or someone unknown. Once again, he is left unable to answer the question—but instead of accepting that uncertainty or moving on, he tumbles into only more questions, more hypothetical scenarios that only add to his terror. If some great power moves the world, Ahab surmises, it moves even the sun (that mortal enemy)—but then is that power responsible for Ahab's thinking, too? Ahab cannot answer at all; he can only remark on the mildness of the wind, which he can perceive regardless of who controls it or him.

At the end of both this speech and the Quarter-Deck speech, Ahab turns to Starbuck. On the Quarter-Deck, his appeal is practical; he wants to know the first mate's response. Standing on the deck with Starbuck the final time, though, Ahab looks to the mate as if for consolation. But Starbuck is aghast both times. After the Quarter-Deck speech, Starbuck is quiet for a while, then murmurs, "God keep me!—keep us all!" (164). After the "Symphony" speech, "blanched to a corpse's hue with despair, the Mate had stolen

away" (545). The grounded, practical, pious Starbuck is horrified by both speeches in which Ahab succumbs to total doubt. He knows they can lead nowhere good, and, unconcerned by what seems to Ahab the necessity of such probing, Starbuck can only react in horror. Still, this is Ahab giving himself the same treatment he gave to Moby Dick at the beginning of the Pequod's voyage; he has realized that his wonderings about an allegorical object cannot stop with something external to himself. Instead, he has to follow his questions to their absolute end, so he ends up applying the same questions he asked about the whale to himself.

Ishmael

For Ishmael, as for Ahab, contemplation of the whale is a personal matter. Consider his most explicit phrasing of the problem, at the beginning of "The Whiteness of the Whale":

> What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid.
>
> Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick, which could not but occasionally awaken in any man's soul some alarm, there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here;

> and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught. (188)[21]

What's most striking about this passage—Ishmael's attempt to explain why it is so important that he convey his understanding of the whale—is that Ishmael feels the whale's significance to be personal rather than objective. It's not just that he has to explain the whale; he wants to "explain *myself*" (emphasis mine). Ishmael immediately brushes aside "those more obvious considerations" that would "awaken in any man's soul some alarm." Although he is not specific about what those considerations are, he's not interested in the things that would bother anyone. (In fact, he uses the word "some" to describe their effect—but this "some" doesn't seem to have any of the urgency the word so often has when Ishmael uses is. It's okay if the obviously troubling features of Moby Dick are vague; that's not what Ishmael is interested in.) His real interest is in what bothers *him*—and here, the problem is not just whether he can articulate his reaction clearly; he is in fact afraid of the possibility that he might make his point clear, because clarity of articulation might actually undermine the emotional force of the terrifying ambiguity of whiteness.

So if the main thrust of what Ishmael hopes to convey is his own reaction, deeply felt, there is a clear connection between the objective phenomenon of the white whale and Ishmael's own person. Although he says his purpose is to "explain myself," Ishmael runs through an extensive discourse about the color white. He says he is explaining himself, in other words, but he is in fact not—he proceeds immediately to talk in a rather encyclopedic manner about what seem to be phenomena wholly external to himself. The

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[21] For particularly illuminating readings of "The Whiteness of the Whale," see Paul Brodtkorb and Paul Hurh.

discourse he offers in "The Whiteness of the Whale" leans on all sorts of authorities other than Ishmael's own thoughts and feelings: He turns to historical, natural, literary, and scientific explanations—ranging widely through history and geography, seemingly encompassing all avenues of thought, all possible authorities except his own response. We hear little else about Ishmael's personal response for the rest of the chapter.

By the end of his explication, Ishmael's person seems to have vanished almost completely—but his final question invites the reader into a personal relationship with the question of whiteness: "Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?" (195). Suddenly, the personal investment has shifted from Ishmael to the reader. What was once personal to Ishmael has now become personal to everyone who thinks about the whiteness of the whale. Even without explaining himself at all, then, Ishmael has forced his feeling—his visceral reaction to the whiteness of the whale—onto his reader, and thus, perhaps, he has in fact explained himself, or at least conveyed himself, without "putting [the horror] in a comprehensible form." In some sense, Ishmael suggests that the personal turn of allegory is inescapable. If allegory pulls in both Ishmael and Ahab, then the reader, too, if we are going to read and think along with their wonderings about allegory, is endangered. Allegory cannot but engulf anyone who considers it. To wonder about the theory of allegory is to think in allegorical terms and thus to practice allegory, or at least *allegoresis.* (That may be why the Unpardonable Sin of allegory, to Hawthorne, seems so inevitable.) The whole matter of allegory cannot be considered purely abstractly.

Alternatively, one might see that final question as Ishmael's appeal to himself. He sets out at the beginning of the chapter to explain himself *to himself*. Now, having gone through a thorough examination of whiteness, he turns back to that original question:

Why am I so horrified by Moby Dick? Fundamentally, as he admits, Ishmael does not understand why he is so appalled. But he is; naturally, then, he proposes to figure out why. And though he doesn't offer any completely positive answer—he can't pinpoint the exact cause of his distress—he generally satisfies himself, if indirectly. Although he doesn't answer the question, he has taxonomized whiteness so thoroughly that one begins to feel its magnitude. That's not an answer, but it's a hell of a lot to contend with. As if he is convincing himself that it's okay to be appalled, that it's right to go along with "the fiery hunt"—the response not just of Ishmael but of the whole crew—Ishmael punts on full understanding.

There's one other moment in "The Whiteness of the Whale" when Ishmael addresses himself, doubting his own explanation: "But thou sayest, methinks this white-lead chapter about whiteness is but a white flag hung out from a craven soul; thou surrenderest to a hypo, Ishmael" (194). Here is perhaps the most personal, most vulnerable moment of the chapter: Ishmael is concerned that he is actually a spiritless coward, fallen victim to a mental insufficiency. Recall that it was a hypo that set Ishmael out to sea in "Loomings":

> Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my *hypos* get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. (3; emphasis mine)

Hypos, Ishmael knows, can drive him to the brink of lunacy, and he goes whaling specifically to avoid such a fate. So it is particularly aggrieving that the whale, the alternative Ishmael chooses instead of his strange behavior on land, might mark him as just as depressed, just as contemptibly afraid, as he finds himself to be in the novel's opening pages. White, after all, is the color of surrender, and perhaps at sea Ishmael has just met an excuse to turn back to his hypochondriac ways. Perhaps, then, Ishmael fears, the problem is really in himself, not in the whale, and has been there all along, before he even heard of Moby Dick.

But although the problem may be in Ishmael, there is something about the whale—or the whiteness of the whale—itself that drives Ishmael's concern back towards himself. Most obviously, the emotional response to the whale is etymologically connected to the whale's whiteness. Ishmael frequently describes the emotional effect of the whale as "appalling." The verb "to appall" comes from the Latin *pallere*, "to be pale" (Online Etymology Dictionary). If Ishmael is appalled, he has become like the white whale. The whale's nature, then, is infectious. So thinking about the whale makes Ishmael resemble it, much as Ahab comes to resemble the whale as a result of his hunt.

And the whiteness that so infects and appalls Ishmael resembles closely the epistemological difficulty Moby Dick presents. Whiteness is fundamentally blankness, but it is also, as Ishmael explains, "the concrete of all colors" (195). It is everything and nothing, all at once. Similarly, the whale is meaningless—it's just a dumb brute—but it is also all-meaningful. It is a potential allegorical figure, but, as Ahab knows, it's not quite clear whether it actually figures anything, or what precisely it might figure. It is agent or principal, or both; it is vehicle or tenor, or both. It cannot be known, and it reveals the

degree to which knowledge more broadly is deeply fallible. Its whiteness, then, reflects its epistemological ambiguity. So Ishmael's response is to turn towards himself—to see an external object that refutes understanding and to realize that perhaps the more fundamental problem is not external but internal. John Wenke traces a similar phenomenon in his discussion of *Mardi*: "The problem of epistemological uncertainty leads Babbalanja not outward, toward a consideration of empiricism, but inward, toward his most teasing, least knowable subject—himself" (55). Moby Dick presses upon Ishmael the most fundamental questions—and so Ishmael turns to the most fundamental element in his encounter with the world: himself. Knowing the world requires a knowing subject, so if the whale raises all kinds of doubts about how and what one might know, the discerning thinker will question himself.

Both Ahab and Ishmael thus illustrate the ways in which the questions about the whale cannot be confined to the whale. One who attempts to confront Moby Dick—whether by hunting him or wondering about him—finds oneself drawn into the whale's inscrutability. If, then, we consider Moby Dick as an allegorical figure, we find ourselves facing an odd kind of allegory: one that consumes its reader. Or are Ahab and Ishmael writers rather than readers? Do they affix meaning to Moby Dick, or do they read the meaning already latent in him? To know, we must determine whether their approach to Moby Dick is allegory or *allegoresis*—and we have established that that is precisely the question that so vexes Ahab, because it is impossible to know.

Still, Ahab and Ishmael proceed as if they are readers, only with a nagging doubt that perhaps they are actually more active than an ordinary reader. But an active reader, Maureen Quilligan argues, is the hallmark of allegory. The reader must choose whether

to buy the notion that a text can convey some kind of grand meaning: "in his rejection or acceptance, the reader of an allegory does not merely reject or accept a text, he embraces or denies his own capacity for rejecting or accepting meaning as a coherent unifying truth, or as a coherent unifying untruth" (241). In a sense, allegory proposes a pact with the reader, who must assent to the idea that a text can transmit meaning. Thus Quilligan arrives at a somewhat iconoclastic way of distinguishing between allegory and *allegoresis*: "*Allegoresis*, elder cousin to narrative allegory, begins by saying that texts are, superficially lies; they must be interpreted, or 'allegorized' into telling the truth. The allegorical poet simply asks in narrative form what the allegorical critic discursively affirms; are my words lies, or do they in fact thrust at the truth?" (46-47). Ahab and Ishmael, left wondering whether they are dealing with allegory or *allegoresis*, must think about their own role in judging meaning. But that question forces itself upon them either way: If they are allegorical writers, pinning meaning onto the whale, their role is active and obvious—but if they are allegorical readers, assenting to some cosmic writer's posture that the whale bears meaning, their role is no less essential. Either way, they find themselves indispensable participants in the transmission of meaning, whether they create it or simply choose to buy into the pact allegory makes with its reader. We are left, then, with a strange situation: The allegorical reader, choosing to see the world allegorically, finds himself wrapped into the allegorical scenario.

In some dim, random way

What we have seen is a great spreading out of allegory—a sense that *Moby-Dick*'s allegory cannot be tamed, nor fully understood. Its meaning is unclear; its rightness is

unclear; even the delineation of its subject is unclear. Allegory, reviled by Coleridge for its simplicity, is anything but simple here. (Note, though, that its complexity comes not because Melville treats allegory differently from Coleridge, but that *Moby-Dick* constantly undermines the very nature and structure of allegory—if we could just get a hand on what, precisely, is allegorized, and how, and by whom, Coleridge's criticisms might well remain relevant. But Melville's allegories are messy.) Yet although Ishmael may disavow allegory, there are too many allegorical suggestions in the novel to accept fully his claim that this story is no allegory at all.

Moby-Dick is obsessed with meaning—with figuring out what meaning is true, whence meaning, who can discern meaning, whether stable meaning is possible. I have posed that obsession as a fixation on epistemology—on understanding the mechanisms by which people know things—but we might also think of it as an obsession with allegory. And, as we have seen, allegory is, time and again, a way of teasing out questions about meaning. Allegory, in *Moby-Dick*, is not just a tool but a subject. And so *Moby-Dick*'s allegories, unlike most, don't really lead us to any conclusions. Instead, they are often self-reflexive, and they beget more and more questions.

Why, then, does it matter for us to think about *Moby-Dick*'s obsession in terms of allegory? Allegory is a pretty direct way of confronting the problem of meaning. When allegory is a tool, rather than a problem, it can figure meaning quite clearly, presenting one-to-one correspondences, or, as Paul Brodtkorb puts it, "the substitution of images for ideas" (141). But for Melville, allegory is a problem—as just about everything is.

Put the question bluntly, then: Is it wrong to see the whale as an allegory?

Well, yes, of course, because allegory, in its most straightforward, traditional form, is a) reductive, as Coleridge reminds us, and b) ostensibly objective, revealing ideas through images in the phenomenal world. (Quilligan emphasizes the importance of the reader, but she also notes that although the reader is significant, he is not free to interpret as he wishes—there is a right interpretation the text suggests for him (225-226).) Moby Dick, on the other hand, is nothing if not complicated, and his full force is a personal assault, demanding to be understood personally, or, as Brodtkorb argues, phenomenologically. Besides, Ishmael explicitly tells us the story of Moby Dick is not an allegory. So it's definitely wrong to read it allegorically.

But it's also right: Allegory is the clearest, most direct way of expressing the human longing for meaning. "All commentary is actually *allegoresis*," Quilligan reminds us, and *Moby-Dick* offers an overwhelming amount of commentary (224). Ahab and Ishmael both prove themselves to be obsessed with nailing down the whale's meaning, even if they can't—but surely the attempt marks them as allegorical thinkers. And if they are thinking allegorically, and if they invite us to think along with them, then surely we, too, are right to think of the whale allegorically.

Moby-Dick thus presents two opposite arguments, equally compelling, about whether its story is an allegory. In some sense, that's a typical move for the novel: As Paul Hurh and others have argued, Melville resolves each question by refusing to resolve it, by presenting instead a dialectic of opposing arguments, both true.[22] Caught between two

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[22] Nicholas Carr argues for a "dialectical treatment" of the relationship between allegory and symbol in American romantic history (171). He proposes that the Great Man theory of history posits a synecdochal relationship between the Great Man and his nation and thus suggests a vision of unity, or a symbolic theory of history. But history is inherently temporal, and a consideration of the present in relation to the past suggests a rupture and thus an allegorical theory of history. Carr shows, then, that each attempt to conceive of history as allegory soon turns into a symbolic account, just as any symbolic theory turns into allegory—and we are thus left with a dialectical relationship between allegory and symbol.

correct arguments, Melville insists upon an ongoing, unending process of figuring out whether the whale is allegorical, of arguing about allegory's merits.

The novel posits Ishmael and Ahab as representatives of those two poles—Ishmael seems to reject allegory, while Ahab acts according to it— and they seem to be eternally locked in a battle over allegory. But even within each of those two characters' thoughts, there can be no stability. Eyal Peretz argues that Ishmael, like Ahab, "refuses to stop and be satisfied by any temporary meaning, and seems overcome by some insatiable drive and a desire for a final meaning and a forever unreachable place of rest" (76). And both Ishmael and Ahab are too smart not to see the merits of both arguments about allegory. Still, on a whale ship, one cannot determine one's actions by a commitment to dialectic. Ahab and Ishmael, as captain and storyteller, respectively, have to act, in some way. So although Ahab doubts ("sometimes I think there's naught beyond"), he proceeds with his allegorical reading; although Ishmael entertains allegorical musings frequently, he insists that his story is no allegory. Neither character can resolve the question for himself, but

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Carr's argument is useful for our purposes not just for its insight into the need for a dialectic consideration of romantic allegory; his framework also offers a new light in which we might consider Ahab. Ahab stands as a good candidate to embody the figure of the Great Man. He is indeed great, and he embodies, in many ways, his country. He leads a diverse crew on a capitalist hunt to range and conquer the great seas; he is of old New England stock but is solitary in his dogged commitment to ideas. But although Ahab is great, and greatly admired, he is also dangerous and tyrannical. We might then think of Ahab as a sendup of the Great Man. He reveals the danger of conceiving of history through a single figure, of such a narrow consolidation of power. But whether as Great Man or anti-Great Man, Ahab conforms to Carr's vision of the coexistence of allegory and symbol. As we have seen, Ahab extends his allegorical interpretation to himself. If we add Carr's commentary on the Great Man, though, we can see Ahab's ambivalence on the matter of allegory even more pointedly. As a Great Man, Ahab unites, or proposes to unite, his crew in his hunt for Moby Dick, and stands thus as a champion of symbol. But Carr notes that the Great Man also must remind us of disunity and allegory: "As the symbol of the nation, [the Great Man's] raison d'etre is the bridging of the gap between leaders and followers….But the critical aporia of the Great Man emerges at this same moment, for his defining feature—his greatness—of course sets him apart from 'the people.'…The Great Man himself, then, always carried a reminder of disunity" (178). Carr proposes that "this tension—between stasis and movement, unity and progress—can be seen as reflecting Romanticism's fundamental ambivalence about history, progress, revolution, and imagination" (182). And if we are stuck seeing the intractable dialectic balance between allegory and symbol, we, like Ahab, and like Melville, turn away from judgment about the history on which an allegorical reading might bear and focus instead on the prior matter of whether to read allegorically at all.

they also can't just sit around thinking about allegory forever, as true commitment to the dialectic response would have them do. They use vocabulary like the word "some" to register the ambiguity they understand to undergird everything, but one cannot act on the principle of "some." They are trapped, then, committing at least half-heartedly to one position or the other.

But the reader, who has a full view of both Ishmael and Ahab, can see the dialectic the two of them form together. We can see the ways of thinking that unite them, and we can see the different tacks each takes in acting on the question of allegorical interpretation. And we, then, unlike Ishmael and Ahab, are actually stuck forever going back and forth on whether allegory can get us anywhere, whether it's a useful or right way to read, to write, or to think. Thus Melville's allegory insists upon the problem of allegory—and what better way is there to redeem allegory from Coleridge's condemnation? In Melville's hands, Coleridge's critique becomes moot: It doesn't matter if allegory is simplistic, because it's hard even to know how to practice allegory, or how to practice it well. Allegory becomes not a genre or a tool but a question, and no question, Melville understands, is simplistic.

In chapter two, I argued that Hawthorne's self-aware allegories left readers with a choice. The reader, embracing the freedom of *allegoresis*, might choose to read pat allegories, delivering hardened, prefab systems of belief—the kind of allegory Coleridge frowns upon. Or the reader might choose to see the sort of allegories that don't imprison characters, don't subjugate them to ideas, don't necessarily deplete them of human warmth. Hawthorne's allegories reveal the contours of that decision: "The Celestial Railroad" shows us how ridiculous allegory can be, but also how we are stuck with it

because of a literary history we cannot simply ignore. “The Minister’s Black Veil” shows us that allegories can function on two levels simultaneously—that Hooper, a bad allegorist, might read his own allegorical veil simplistically, but his story might offer a savvier reader a chance to see Hooper implicated in his own downfall, and to pity him for the way his limited insight cuts him off from human connection. And “Rappaccini’s Daughter” shows us the way allegories, in their overdetermination, might seem broken or messy but actually thus reveal a great deal about the workings of allegory. Altogether, then, a witting reader of Hawthorne’s self-consciously allegorical tales might see that allegory may well be what Hawthorne calls the Unpardonable Sin because it subjugates people to ideas. But if we are aware of that sin, and aware of its overwhelming temptation, we might use a more complicated, messier form of allegory to investigate the sin and how to atone for it.

If Hawthorne exposes the allegorical scene as thornier than one might imagine, revealing the form’s dangers as well as its potential redemption and allowing the reader to decide how to read allegorically, Melville offers a vision of the terror that can ensue when a reader does not know how to decide. In some sense, across the tales, Hawthorne has precisely the kind of prior ideological commitment Ahab and Melville lack: He is committed to his fear of the Unpardonable Sin. He is afraid of what happens when one is committed to an idea—but as a result, he can commit himself to people, to human warmth, over ideas. And though that may be a more human commitment than an ideological one, it is still a strong inclination towards a certain kind of thinking or reading. It is still some kind of moral mooring.

In *Moby-Dick*, even such a genial commitment is impossible. Ahab, for one, is utterly alone—or at least he seems to be and thinks himself to be. He does in fact have a family—a wife and child at home in Nantucket, whom he thinks of wistfully in "The Symphony." Starbuck seems on the verge of convincing Ahab, finally, to abandon his chase for Moby Dick by admiring the pleasant sky and sea and recalling the family he has abandoned. But then Ahab remembers himself and dives into his profoundest questioning, turning his allegorical thinking on himself, wondering, "Is Ahab, Ahab?" (545). His wife and son offered the last chance for escape, for him to decide that human connection—human warmth—matters more than philosophical diving. But he cannot choose that route. As happens again and again, Ahab finds himself utterly unable to assert his own will. He cannot choose one side of any dialectic question. He cannot see what Hawthorne reveals to us about the dangers of allegory and choose to read in a more sympathetic, gentler, more humane vein. Perhaps he cannot choose because he sees that the choice is real—that each way of reading is just as true as the other, and to privilege a human reading would require not a commitment to the truth but to decide there is something more important than the truth. Ahab cannot act on that freedom. And thus he is doomed to swim along his fated, monomaniacal quest after the truth, even if he knows it must elude him and dash him.

Of course, Ahab's is not the only way. Ishmael survives, and, floating on Queequeg's coffin, on the last vestige of the friend he loved, he finds the Rachel, "that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan" (573). One is reminded of one of Ishmael's more beautiful meditations:

> There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:—through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling's father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it. (492)

The Rachel's search is "retracing," just as movement through life, Ishmael says, cannot be "unretracing." There is a great deal of emotion—deep sadness and loneliness, which are perhaps expressions of human warmth—in Ishmael's fate, which he does not choose. Perhaps Ishmael's orphanage is the condition begotten by Ahab's longing—but it is hard to blame Ahab entirely. Ishmael finds himself vexed by the whale, too, thinking in so many similar ways to Ahab. While he doesn't lead the Pequod to doom, he is not so different from Ahab, really. If Ahab and Ishmael hang together—together offer a dialectic response to the problems of allegory, interpretation, and epistemology—their ultimate fates, too, offer complementary outcomes. We are left to retrace from Ishmael's lonely floating orphanage to Ahab's ignominious violent death and back again.

Melville does not see allegory as a sin as Hawthorne does. Though it is monstrous and terrifying, *Moby-Dick* is in some sense an amoral book. It would be awfully hard to

condemn Ahab, knowing him as we do, understanding so well his longing to understand. Even the pious Starbuck cannot defeat Ahab and turns away from his moral conundrum in "The Musket" without reaching any conclusive argument. In *Moby-Dick*, the intense urgency of epistemological and ontological curiosity overrides the desire for human connection; while surely there is connection to be had and celebrated, it is out of a human sympathy that we are forced to forgive those who privilege the longing for understanding over people. Balance, sadness, connection, uncertainty—all that *Moby-Dick* gives us. But it does not offer the freedom to choose or even to grow. We cannot rest in the "pondering repose of If," as Hawthorne gives his reader the freedom to do. Instead, we are fated, with Ishmael, to retrace eternally, to read allegorically and not, sympathetically and selfishly, probingly and uncertainly—because to think and to wonder, without answer or knowledge or rest, are our eternal sentence.

Conclusion: Allegory as Problem, Once More

My students often ask a question that, though they don't realize it, cuts to the heart of the problem of allegory: Are you sure the writer meant that? How can we know what this text is supposed to mean? Often, I tell them of course I don't know and, usually, can't. But I ask them if it matters. Then I explain to them the difference between allegory and *allegoresis*. I tell them that Northrop Frye proposes that all literary criticism is really the practice of *allegoresis*, of mining texts for meaning beyond what they say explicitly (82). I tell them that *allegoresis* comes before allegory in the history of literary thought, that people were reading into texts before they were writing dual meanings into them intentionally. So I ask them: Why does a writer have any final say on what his text means? Why don't you, as students—provided you do your job well, responsibly, with great learning and thoroughness—have as much interpretive authority as anyone else?

Sometimes, then, I tell my students about my dissertation, that I am interested in why Coleridge so strongly rejected allegory and in why allegory—with some help from the writers I have discussed here—simply refused to die. They find this stuff very interesting. And that seems intuitively right: that 15-year-olds should be compelled by questions about how to interpret, how texts mean—how they, as readers, fit in to a scheme of the dissemination of meaning through narrative fiction. In the process of learning to read and to take their first steps as critics, my students get stuck on the question of *allegoresis*. They, like Ahab, become anxious when they suspect that they might not be right, that they might be overstepping the bounds allotted to them as interpreters.

My students want to have someone tell them, definitively, that their interpretation is correct. That means they also want there to *be* a correct interpretation. It is difficult, at first, for them to swallow the idea that no one can really say what the right answer is, that there is no sure picklock to profoundest meaning. Sometimes that idea, which they've vaguely gleaned from English classes throughout their lives, leads them to say something goofy: "You can't be wrong in English class." Of course you can be wrong, I tell them. You can say lots of things that are just not what a text says: You can misread the words on the page, get the literal sense of things wrong, base a reading on incorrect facts, offer a reading without the support of a strong argument. And those are just the most flagrant types of wrongness—you can also say things that are not wrong, per se, but are just stupid. So don't worry, I tell the kids: Just as in math or biology class, you can definitely be wrong. What's harder, though, is to be right. You can say something compelling or revealing or beautiful, but does that make it right?

I have been struck by how often and how fully young kids arrive at the same sorts of concerns as the 19th-century allegorists and critics of allegory in this dissertation. My students are bright, but they are by no means well-versed in the theory of allegory. But they ask whence meaning and how we might verify it. Sometimes they complain that an analysis of a character depletes their affection for him—in essence, that an allegorical reading is a threat to human warmth. Sometimes one kid asks why a writer can't just say what she means, and another responds that she *is* saying what she means.

I am left to conclude that these concerns—about allegory's relationship to epistemology, to human warmth, to the vitality of thought; about the plaguing matter of knowing the deep truth, and how best to attempt it—will not die, not if they are the

foremost things on the minds of reading American teenagers two centuries after Coleridge seemed to have closed the case on allegory. I tell my students, whose curiosity really seems insatiable, that the writers I study were asking similar things, and the kids are invigorated—they understand that they are asking important questions, and finally they seem to get what it means for a question to be worth asking but not fully answerable, at least in any final way.

Sometimes I tell my students that I am curious about why some of these questions seem to be acutely important to Americans. Although my attention in this study has not focused on history—it has perhaps been more in line with a Bloomian genealogy of influence, focusing on the transmission, even unconscious, of ideas—it seems significant that Hawthorne and Melville's responses to Coleridge's condemnation of allegory are more explicit than Shelley's. Shelley presents a general approach to love and figure that reveals the hole in Coleridge's seemingly airtight association of allegory, dualism, fancy, and metonymy or substitution. But it is the Americans who take up Coleridge's critique as a problem. Whereas Shelley's thought simply offers a potential alternative to Coleridge's, Hawthorne and Melville agonize over the implications of Coleridge's ideas, not by name but in their obsessive questionings about the inner workings of allegorical reading and writing.

We might account for that difference by leaning on the notion—expressed, for example, by Feidelson—that American literature is particularly fixated on ideas. As Anthony Trollope wrote in his commentary on Hawthorne, "The creations of American literature generally are no doubt more given to the speculative,—less given to the realistic,—than are those of English literature. On our side of the water we deal more

with beef and ale, and less with dreams" (207). But there is an anxiety not to be overlooked: The American frontier and the American political experiment promised not just a chance for a culture to strike out and create something new. But that perception of blank novelty came with a ponderous inheritance, a sense of a burden from across the ocean. As Weisbuch puts it: "I believe that the American writer begins from a defensive position and that the achievements of British literature and British national life are the chief intimidations against which he, as American representative, defends himself" (xii).

One sees that anxiety transmuted into Melville's championing of American possibility in *Hawthorne and His Mosses*:

> There are minds that have gone as far as Shakespeare into the universe. And hardly a mortal man, who, at some time or other, has not felt as great thoughts in him as any you will find in Hamlet….Besides, this absolute and unconditional adoration of Shakespeare has grown to be a part of our Anglo Saxon superstitions. The Thirty Nine articles are now Forty. Intolerance has come to exist in this matter. You must believe in Shakespeare's unapproachability, or quit the country. But what sort of belief is this for an American, a man who is bound to carry republican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life? Believe me, my friends, that Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio….You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in; especially, when it seems to have an aspect of newness as America did in 1492, though it was then just as old, and perhaps older than Asia, only those

> sagacious philosophers, the common sailors, had never seen it before; swearing it was all water and moonshine there. (245-246)

Melville sees that the European explorers of the New World were wrong to think they were discovering a new land; he knows the land was there all along—peopled, even, and perhaps even home to valuable local ideas. But on that matter as others, as Weisbuch suggests, Melville takes their conclusion as his starting point. He builds upon the colonists' error: If they saw America as a blank slate, a new land, Melville takes the whole world to be one. The "sagacious philosophers," the European colonists of America, become "common sailors," and all of a sudden they start to resemble the crew of the Pequod, for whom the whole world really is something close to "all water and moonshine." If the colonial vision sees America as a sea, Melville takes their thinking to the real sea, and he turns that into his world. Thus he grants himself—and anyone else—the whole world of freedom, all the while admitting that it is not so, in the most literal sense, that America was already old when the colonists discovered it. But it seemed new because the colonists "had never seen it before." Just so, Melville embraces the vastness, the possibility inherent in the error and takes the whole world as something he has never seen before. He approaches each question as if anew, as a new world—as if no one has ever thought it, let alone answered it.

Given such an approach, allegory simply cannot be a settled matter. Melville and Hawthorne cannot let Coleridge have the final word on allegory. Weisbuch divides American responses to English literature into two categories: actualism and ontological insecurity. Melville and Hawthorne fall in the latter camp: "If actualism tells the Englishman, 'You have not meant what you said,' ontological insecurity taunts, 'You

have not searched deeply enough; what you imagine as answers are merely beginning questions'" (Weisbuch 258). That, I argue, is how Hawthorne and Melville respond to the atmosphere of hostility to allegory that Coleridge fathered.

Hawthorne and Melville reanimate allegory by conceiving of it as a problem, and not one to be dismissed. Critics have long debated how to label allegory. Is it a genre, a form, a feature, a quality, or what? Angus Fletcher broadens allegory from a genre into a mode (3), but I want to recast it as a problem. Allegorical writing, whether it be a whole text or just valences in a non-allegorical whole, betokens a very specific literary or epistemological posture. One cannot take such a posture as allegory, Hawthorne and Melville understand, without inviting questions, without provoking a bevy of anxieties that necessarily follow dogmatic assertions.

Gary Johnson proposes that one way in which allegory has survived past its supposed death is its tendency to show up as a quality or theme in works that are not, on the whole, allegorical. When a text is about allegory (or *allegoresis*) but is not itself an allegory, Johnson calls it "thematic allegory" (141). His archetypal example is Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, which he calls "a narrative haunted by allegory, a haunting that makes allegory one of the novel's central themes" (137). By offering the Swede as an allegorical figure filtered through the vision of Nathan Zuckerman, Roth shows an allegorical reading in action and thus questions the value and nature of allegory—but refrains from writing in the allegorical mode himself. Zuckerman's presence in the narrative allows allegory to appear at a remove, for the reader to see it from a distance without having to engage in allegory himself.

Hawthorne and Melville, as I have shown, similarly take up allegory as a theme. We see, for example, Ahab wondering about whether his allegorical reading of Moby Dick is right and Reverend Hooper musing on his allegorical reading of his veil. Hawthorne and Melville even offer removed presentations of allegorical practice—characters who think about other characters' allegorical tendencies, as Zuckerman does for the Swede. For example, Ishmael thinks about Ahab's interpretation of the whale, and Hooper's congregants wonder about his allegorical fixation on the veil. "The Celestial Railroad" takes up the theme of allegory, demanding, through fictional removal from the allegory itself, that we consider the merits of the form. But Hawthorne and Melville's concern about allegory is not quite the thematic allegory Johnson discusses, because they, unlike Roth, cannot just treat allegory abstractly, from a distance. Allegory is indeed a theme for Hawthorne and Melville, but it is not just a theme; it is also a method. They cannot divorce the two. Practice and content become fused. Just as I argued that Ahab and Ishmael become infected by their allegorical thought and come to resemble the objects they think about through allegorical interpretation, Hawthorne and Melville, as they consider it as a subject, are pulled into the act of allegory.

That's in part because Hawthorne and Melville, seeing allegory as a problem, cannot let it go. And the method of allegory is well suited to the questions to which the practice of allegory gives rise. In some sense, the apparently cut and dried method of allegory is the perfect vehicle for the Americans' concerns about the theory of allegory, perhaps because, as Weisbuch's theory of actualism maintains, there is an American tendency to fuse thought and action. Any theoretical concerns about allegory, then, are best tested out by actually practicing allegory. Shelley doesn't raise such concerns explicitly; they are

more or less inconsequential to him, given his conceptions of love, divinity, and figuration that diverge so radically from Coleridge's thought. Hawthorne and Melville, on the other hand, confront the problem of allegory head-on, and so their fictions come out looking much more like allegory. Allegory works as a sort of contagion, remaking its practitioners in its own image—but it turns out it is Hawthorne and Melville who are in control all along, letting themselves fall into the contagion of allegory to probe its farthest depths, its innermost workings.

So Coleridge's closed door, in the Americans' hands, turns allegory into a starting place. Allegory posits a particular, knowable place for people—for readers and writers—in the world. It suggests, in some sense, that the world is ours to read and to write, to corral into a highly artificial, intelligible, communicable form. If we embrace allegory, we assume that our access is mediated—a dual system is necessary, and we cannot simply understand the world in its unified fullness, as a symbolist might suggest—but it is possible. But that is a huge thing to suggest—a huge thing to get beyond. Hawthorne and Melville cannot sit still with that suggestion. Instead, they recognize the many troubling implications of allegory. They recognize the problem—indeed, the many problems—of allegory: its implications for epistemology, sympathy, language, and more. Through allegory—both traditional, one-to-one correspondences and broken or failed allegories of various stripes—they interrogate those problems of allegory, again and again, without answer.

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