

## The Age of Allegory

by Vladimir Brljak

*The article traces the emergence of the myth of the Middle Ages as the “age of allegory”—from the formative developments of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, through its classic statement in the work of Jacob Burckhardt, to its consolidation at the hands of John Addington Symonds and other British and American authors—and discusses its continuing influence on English literary historiography.*

### I

THE so-called Middle Ages were certainly an age of allegory, in the sense that allegory—the cluster of interrelated phenomena that have borne various names in the course of their long history but are now most commonly subsumed under this slippery Hellenistic coinage—played an important role in European culture between the fall of Rome and the fall of Constantinople. This should not be a controversial proposition and is not the subject of this article. Rather, the subject of this article is the historiographical topos or myth, as it is perhaps best described, according to which the Middle Ages were *the* age of allegory: according to which allegory, to quote a representatively explicit statement by the unrepresentatively young Umberto Eco, is “perhaps [the] most typical aspect” of “medieval aesthetic sensibility,” “the one which characterises the period above all others and which we tend to look upon as uniquely medieval.”<sup>1</sup> Amassing further examples seems superfluous at this point: readers of this journal will know that many

<sup>1</sup> Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* [1959], trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 52.

more could be submitted, and many will be encountered in the ensuing pages. What is at stake is not the myth's existence but its origins, development, and influence.

What should also no longer be controversial is that the myth of the Middle Ages as the Age of Allegory is indeed a myth, long overdue to join the Flat Earth, the Chastity Belt, the Angels Dancing on the Head of a Pin, and other denizens of that strange limbo of exploded superstitions about the period. The state of modern allegory studies simply no longer allows one to single out this epoch as somehow essentially allegorical in character as opposed to those which preceded and followed it. Instead, what has emerged is precisely the remarkable continuity of the allegorical tradition: more than two millennia of it, from some of the earliest interpreters of Greek mythological poetry in the sixth century BC to at least the sixteenth century AD. When exactly allegory loosened its grip remains a matter of debate, and in resisting the decline-of-allegory narrative some have now pushed the revisionary, persistence-of-allegory thesis to an equally unacceptable extreme, extending it uncritically even beyond the point—the later eighteenth century or so—where anti-allegorical aesthetics assumes an increasingly explicit and influential form. Here we go from a crudely simplistic view of allegory's history to one that comes dangerously close to denying it a history altogether: two equally unprofitable alternatives, neatly encapsulated in C. S. Lewis's old claim that allegory, "in some sense, belongs not to medieval man but to man, or even to mind, in general."<sup>2</sup> And then there is the additional complication of the late twentieth-century "return of allegory": an impulse, emerging from the rediscovery of Walter Benjamin's writings on the subject, to proclaim a new reign of allegory after what can, in some corners of contemporary arts and academia, easily begin to seem like a brief and anomalous anti-allegorical interregnum. Thus the past of allegory has deepened, its present has knotted, and its future floats unmoored—yet be all that as it may, it has little bearing on the subject at hand, for whatever scholars of allegory might disagree about today, and whatever schools and camps they might belong to, they will easily agree that the myth of the Middle Ages as *the* age of allegory is, precisely, a myth.

Taking, then, these two premises as granted—that there is a myth of the Middle Ages as the age of allegory, and that it is, in fact, a myth—the

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936; repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 44.

article examines when and why this myth came into being and what influence it has had in one particular field of intellectual inquiry, namely the history of English literature. It is hoped such a survey will be of interest to a range of specializations within English studies and beyond, especially since the myth's influence continues to be felt and continues to evade sustained metahistorical scrutiny.<sup>3</sup>

## II

Beginning with the question of when, there are several stages of development to be discerned. There is, first of all, the matter of the very notion of the Middle Ages, and more specifically, of when this notion first appears in literary-historical contexts. In England, we can safely date this moment to the early seventeenth century, when we find it operative in William Camden's 1605 *Certain Poemes, or Poesies, Epigrammes, Rythmes, and Epitaphs of the English Nation in former Times*, which has been identified as the first systematic historical account of English authors earlier than Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower.<sup>4</sup> Between antiquity and "this our learned age" is interposed a "middle age, which was so ouercast with darke clouds, or rather thicke fogges of ignorance, that euey little sparke of liberal learning seemed wonderfull."<sup>5</sup> Thus at least from Camden onwards, the "Middle Ages" are a working concept in English literary history, regardless of how precisely they are called, when they are believed to begin and end, and what exactly their defining features are presumed to be, all of which remains debatable for a long time to come.

About the same time, there begins to emerge a sense of allegory as an outdated literary and artistic mode, belonging to a past literary epoch. This past epoch is not, however, identified with the Middle Ages. Things are well underway by 1695, when, for example, Richard Blackmore finds the earlier allegorical epics of Ludovico Ariosto and Edmund Spenser to be "so wild, unnatural, and extravagant, as greatly displease the reader. This way of writing mightily offends in this Age; and 'tis a wonder how

<sup>3</sup> See, however, Marcia L. Colish, "Medieval Allegory: A Historiographical Consideration," *Clio* 4 (1975): 341–55; precisely as Colish notes, "allegory in the Middle Ages has served as a touchstone of the attitudes which modern commentators have taken toward medieval civilization as a whole," and "a common denominator in medieval literature" (341 and 351).

<sup>4</sup> In Camden, *Remaines of a Greater Worke, Concerning Britaine . . .* (London, 1605); cf. Richard Terry, *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past, 1660–1781* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chap. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Camden, *Remaines*, second pagination, a1r–v.

it came to please in any."<sup>6</sup> Blackmore, as we see, does not identify himself against the Middle Ages, as we know them, but against what we think of as the Renaissance, and furthermore, the reason does not reside in allegory as such but only a particular, dated style of allegorical writing—after all, the statement comes from the preface to Blackmore's own allegorical epic, in which allegory is explicitly listed as a defining element of the genre.<sup>7</sup> By this point, however, Joseph Addison, eighteen years Blackmore's junior, had already expressed an even stronger disaffection with the manner of "Old *Spencer*" and his "Barb'rous Age":

now the Mystick Tale, that pleas'd of Yore,  
Can Charm an understanding Age no more;  
The long-spun Allegories fulsom grow,  
While the dull Moral lies too plain below.  
We view well-pleas'd at distance all the sights  
Of *Arms* and *Palfries*, *Cattel's*, *Fields* and *Fights*,  
And *Damsels* in *Distress*, and *Courteous Knights*.  
But when we look too near, the *Shades* decay,  
And all the pleasing *Lan-skip* fades away.<sup>8</sup>

The sense of historical distance has deepened, and more importantly, Addison's objection is no longer, like Blackmore's, to any particular manner of allegorical writing but to allegory as such.

The eighteenth-century Spenserian revival might seem to contradict but in fact only reinforces Addison's claim. It is true that the period saw the rehabilitation of the neglected Elizabethan poet, resulting in hundreds of imitations and adaptations in the course of the century.<sup>9</sup> However, imitations attempting an original allegorical work on Spenser's model—"allegorical imitations" in Richard C. Frushnell's taxonomy—form only a portion of this corpus, and their allegorical aspect is typically restricted to thinly veiled topical reference.<sup>10</sup> "[C]haracterized by feeble, transparent allegory, absence of literary ornamentation, or *copia*, emphasis on instructive elements, and roots which cannot be tied to any specific episode, character, or meaning in Spenser," such imitations are "interesting as period pieces," yet few achieve genuine "lit-

<sup>6</sup> Blackmore, *Prince Arthur* . . . (London, 1695), b2r.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, a2v and b2r.

<sup>8</sup> Addison, "An Account of the Greatest English Poets," *The Annual Miscellany: for the Year 1694* . . . (London, 1694), X7v–8r.

<sup>9</sup> See Frushnell, *Edmund Spenser in the Early Eighteenth Century: Education, Imitation, and the Making of a Literary Model* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

erary excellen[ce]."<sup>11</sup> Two decades after he complained of Spenser's "long-spun Allegories," Addison himself tried his hand at reviving this "antiquated [way] of Writing, which . . . had been laid aside, and forgotten for some Ages," with a result that amply vindicates Frushnell's judgment.<sup>12</sup> He had intended, he tells us, to write "a whole *Canto* in the Spirit of *Spencer*" on the fashionable topic of "the comparative Perfections and Pre-eminence of the two Sexes," but finding "not time to accomplish this Work," he managed only a prose sketch: "the naked Fable, reserving the Embellishments of Verse and Poetry to another Opportunity." Yet the opportunity would never arise, and not because of a lack of time, but because allegory, banished from its ancient seat at the summit of Parnassus, had already begun its long retreat to the lower regions of satire, didacticism, and topical polemic. Another of Addison's allegorical vignettes is on an even more ephemeral subject: "the Decay of Public Credit, with the Methods of restoring it," starring Public Credit herself, "a beautiful Virgin seated on a Throne of Gold."<sup>13</sup> If anything, such works show that allegory was rapidly losing whatever genuine power it had left.

It is no coincidence that around this time, in 1715, John Hughes publishes his *Essay on Allegorical Poetry*, the first attempt in England—one of the earliest such attempts anywhere, to my knowledge—at a poetics of allegorical literature conceived as a "sort of Writing" in its own right, rather than a subordinate element or mode appearing in another literary kind.<sup>14</sup> Although the *Essay* prefaces Hughes's edition of Spenser, Hughes explicitly seeks to provide "some Remarks on Allegorical Poetry in general" and is very much aware of the novelty of this experiment, begging "the Indulgence of those who are conversant with Critical Discourses, to what I shall here propose; this being a Subject something out of the way, and not expressly treated upon by those who have laid down Rules for the Art of Poetry."<sup>15</sup> The appearance of such a work is of great significance, as the most eloquent testimony to allegory's dominance during the better part of Western literary history lies precisely in the absence of its theorization. "There is no doubt," Hughes writes,

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> *The Guardian* 152, 4 September 1713.

<sup>13</sup> *The Spectator* 3, 3 March 1711.

<sup>14</sup> *The Works of Mr. Edmund Spenser . . .*, ed. John Hughes, 6 vols. (London, 1715), vol. 1, xxxiii.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, xxviii.

but Men of Critical Learning, if they had thought fit, might have given us Rules about Allegorical Writing, as they have done about Epick, and other kinds of Poetry; but they have chosen to let this Forest remain wild, as if they thought there was something in the Nature of the Soil, which cou'd not so well be restrain'd and cultivated in Inclosures.<sup>16</sup>

But could they have? Or is it only once allegorical literature is sufficiently removed from established taste that it can emerge into view as an independent object of theoretical and historical inquiry?

I would suggest the latter is the case, and for the historical aspect of this development we can turn to the work of Thomas Warton. It is, indeed, a matter of considerable interest that the origins of the first genuine history of English literature are closely bound with its author's inquiries specifically into the history of allegorical literature in England. It has been shown that Warton was working on such a history already in the early 1750s, and one of his notebooks even contains what appears to be a prospective title: "The Rise & Progress of Allegoric Poetry in England 'till it's Consummation in Spenser; & it's Decline after him."<sup>17</sup> This is clearly the origin of the digression on allegorical poetry in Warton's *Observations on the Faerie Queene* and is consistent with statements in his other works, according to which the English tradition of allegorical poetry begins in the Middle Ages, culminates with Spenser, and only then enters a phase of decline, expiring at some indefinite point between the later seventeenth century and Warton's day, by which point it "appears to have been for some time almost totally extinguished in England."<sup>18</sup> In Warton's *History*, this view is not only retained but enriched with a classical background. In the last paragraph of the first volume, he comments on the "remarkable" circumstance of "allegorical personages" abounding in ancient Greek and Roman poetry, citing instances in Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Ennius, and Lucretius.<sup>19</sup> He then returns to the subject of allegory, with an emphasis on its interpretive aspect, in the closing passages of the "Dissertation on the *Gesta Romanorum*": "This was an age of vision and mystery: and every work was believed to contain a double, or secondary, meaning" — yet the "age," as

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, xlvi.

<sup>17</sup> See David Fairer, "The Origins of Warton's *History of English Poetry*," *The Review of English Studies*, n.s., 32 (1981): 51.

<sup>18</sup> *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* (London, 1754), Gg2r–Hh4r.

<sup>19</sup> Warton, *The History of English Poetry, from the Close of the Eleventh to Commencement of the Eighteenth Century*, 3 vols. (London, 1774–81; part of vol. 4 published posthumously, n.p. [1806?]).

Warton sees it, again extends throughout and beyond what would later be known as the "Renaissance," and he makes a point of noting that the last of the English editions of the *Gesta*, complete with the crudely allegorical "arguments" and "morals," appeared as late as 1689.<sup>20</sup>

To Warton, then, the allegorical tradition extends all the way from Homer to Spenser and beyond, and it is this whole tradition he has in mind when he writes that "As knowledge and learning increase, poetry begins to deal less in imagination: and these fantastic beings give way to real manners and living characters."<sup>21</sup> This is another key component of the myth: allegory's decline is due not merely to random or cyclical turns of literary taste but is symptomatic of a more profound teleological pattern—of literary progress rather than literary change, which is itself an aspect of the general progress of human civilization. Again to be emphasized, however, is that the "Middle Ages," in any sense that would make them sharply distinguishable from the "Renaissance," are still not a significant factor in this process.

These developments can be further tracked through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The increasing hostility toward allegory eventually receives an articulate theoretical form in the symbolist aesthetics of Romanticism, which finds its earliest English representative in Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Around the same time, out of the deepening sense of historical distance there eventually emerges a notion of an age of allegory as an identifiable episode in literary history, and the phrase itself, "the age of allegory," begins to appear. Yet even at this late date, the age of allegory is not restricted to the Middle Ages, and in fact, in most instances up to the mid-nineteenth century the phrase refers explicitly to the Elizabethan period. In other cases, it is perceived to last well into the eighteenth century. In 1785, an author in *The Critical Review* censures a contemporary work of allegorical fiction as too old-fashioned: "The age of allegory," he asserts, "is now past."<sup>22</sup> Note that it is *now* past, still in living memory: "The luxuriance of [John] Hawkesworth, and the energy of [Samuel] Johnson"—both contemporaries of the author, and the latter only recently deceased—"for some time sup-

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, iii, xciv–xcv. There were in fact at least another ten editions, the final one in 1789, a year before Warton's death. This last edition is apparently pirated, and its title page, identifying it as "The Hundred and First Edition," is a fitting monument to the tradition. The first five editions contain only the "morals," while the remaining ones, beginning with Richard Robinson's of 1595, contain both the "morals" and the "arguments."

<sup>21</sup> Warton, *History*, vol. 1, 468.

<sup>22</sup> [James] Buckland, review of *The Adventures of the Six Princesses of Babylon*, by Lucy Peacock, *The Critical Review* 60 (1785): 221–22.

ported it; but their labours, in this mode of instruction, are, we believe, less popular than any other parts of their lucubrations."

Alternatively, even manifestly allegorical works can still be enjoyed if their allegorical dimension is ignored. "The fact," Arthur Schopenhauer writes influentially, "that Correggio's *Night*, Annibale Carracci's *Genius of Fame*, [Nicolas] Poussin's *Horae* are very beautiful pictures must be clearly separated from the fact that they are allegories."<sup>23</sup> Earlier in the same year, 1818, William Hazlitt had already chastised contemporaries who complained about Spenser's *Faerie Queene* because they could not follow the allegory: "If they do not meddle with the allegory, the allegory will not meddle with them. Without minding it at all, the whole is as plain as a pike-staff."<sup>24</sup> "It might as well be pretended," he snaps, "that we cannot see Poussin's pictures for the allegory, as that the allegory prevents us from understanding Spenser." The analogy with painting is not incidental. In painting, as in the other nonverbal arts, allegory involves not only multiple meanings but also multiple media. Thus to attribute an allegorical meaning to a painting is not only to superimpose a secondary onto a primary meaning but also to superimpose a verbal onto a nonverbal medium. Consequently, when the ideological currency of the allegorical meaning runs out, this meaning appears all the more arbitrary and detachable from the "work itself." "[G]iven a statue of a beautiful woman," Benedetto Croce writes, "the sculptor can attach a label to it saying that the statue represents *Clemency* or *Goodness*. This allegorical interpretation, which is added, *post festum*, to the completed work, does not change the work of art. What is it, then? It is an expression added extrinsically to another expression" — or more precisely, "nothing other than a word: 'clemency' or 'goodness.'"<sup>25</sup> Clearly such ideas influenced the treatment of allegory in imaginative literature, to be reformed on analogy with these "purer," nonverbal arts. Here the process is reversed: if allegory converts images, shapes, and sounds into words, anti-allegorical aesthetics is often conceptualized as the conversion of words into images, shapes, and sounds. A century after Hazlitt, we still read that "The problem of preserving interest in *The Faerie Queene* is one of the live problems of the modern teacher of literature," and that "The

<sup>23</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I* [1818], ed. and trans. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 264.

<sup>24</sup> Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets* . . . (London, 1818), 74.

<sup>25</sup> Croce, *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General* [1902], trans. Colin Lyas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 39.

most common advice . . . is to ignore the allegory, and to emphasize the pictorial and imaginative qualities, and the metrical beauty."<sup>26</sup>

## III

Thus all the main components of the myth are in place by the mid-nineteenth century or so, but the dots are not yet connected. Who connects the dots? Here, as in so much else, all roads would seem to lead to Basel: to Jacob Burckhardt and his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, the book in which we meet, perhaps for the first time, with the categorical claim that "The Middle Ages were essentially the ages of allegory."<sup>27</sup> There is some precedent for the substance of this claim, but not, to my knowledge, for the axiomatic force with which it appears in Burckhardt's book, making it the likeliest source for most subsequent developments.<sup>28</sup> In explaining how Burckhardt came to hold such a view, it is instructive to first take a brief look at his guide to Renaissance painting,

<sup>26</sup> H. W. Peck, "Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and the Student of To-day," *The Sewanee Review* 24 (1916): 347.

<sup>27</sup> *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* [1860], [trans. S. G. C. Middlemore] (1945; repr. London: Phaidon, 1995), 262. The original is perhaps even more emphatic: see Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien: Ein Versuch* (1860; repr. Leipzig: Kröner, 1926), 356, "Das ganze Mittelalter war die Zeit des Allegorisierens in vorzugsweisem Sinne gewesen."

<sup>28</sup> An identification of allegory with the Middle Ages is implied by Jules Michelet, when Michelangelo is said to have "spent his energy in trying to break down the life of the Middle Ages in order to escape into the future, to avoid conventional symbolism, [and] to express death and the spirit through the forms of life and nature" (quoted in J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], 159). There is criticism of literary allegory elsewhere in Michelet's work, as well as an emphasis on individuality as a hallmark of Renaissance literature, but the overall view is not reducible to axioms and binaries: see John R. Williams, *Jules Michelet: Historian as Critic of French Literature* (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 1987). Hegel writes that allegory "in general belongs less to ancient art than to the romantic art of the Middle Ages," but his explanation for this is thoroughly un-Burckhardian. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* [1835], trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (1975; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), vol. 1, 401–2: far from essentially, allegory is only accidentally medieval, for "as allegory it is not properly anything romantic." "On the one side the Middle Ages had for their content," as they emphatically do not for Burckhardt, "particular individuals, with their subjective aims of love and honour, with their vows, pilgrimages, and adventures. The variety of these numerous individuals and events provides imagination with a wide scope for inventing and developing accidental and capricious collisions and their resolution. But, on the other side, over against the varied secular adventures, there stands the universal element in the relations and situations of life. This universal is not individualized into independent gods as it was with the ancients, and therefore it appears readily and naturally explicitly sundered in its universality alongside those particular personalities and their particular shapes and events."

*The Cicerone*, published five years before the *Civilization*, in 1855. Unlike the *Civilization*, *The Cicerone* contains explicit statements of Burckhardt's distaste for allegory, which also occasionally rise to the level of axioms. "A work of art," we read, "will be impressive in proportion as it contains less allegory and more living distinct action."<sup>29</sup> Ideally, art "ought never to be founded on" it, for the result is "necessarily false," and a modern aesthetic sensibility cannot fail to note the "insufficiency of all Allegory." An illuminating palette of epithets is bestowed upon it: "absurd" is a favorite, but allegory is also "false," "quaint," "naïve," "insignificant," "unpleasing," "comically pitiful," and so forth.<sup>30</sup> And yet, allegory is everywhere in Renaissance painting. The solution, ultimately, is to approach an allegorical Renaissance painting as the work of two rather than a single author: the painter, who produces the material object of aesthetic appreciation which is the sole concern of the modern viewer, and the patron peering over his shoulder, typically an ecclesiast, who commissions the subject, including its invisible, hence irrelevant, allegorical meaning. Thus the "great questions" that the paintings pose for Burckhardt are "how much was prescribed to the painter? what did he add himself? for what parts did he with difficulty gain permission? what suggestions did he reject?"<sup>31</sup> He hastens to add that these "can never be answered," yet elsewhere he seems quite certain that, "left to their own powers," the painters "would have expressed the given fundamental ideas in a far more noble and beautiful manner."<sup>32</sup>

Here, finally, is where the dots connect, for while the formal aspect of a Renaissance painting is a genuine expression of the Renaissance *Zeitgeist*, its allegorical content is dismissed by Burckhardt as a specifically

<sup>29</sup> Burckhardt, *The Cicerone: or, Art Guide to Painting in Italy . . .* [1855], ed. A. von Zahn, trans. A. H. Clough (London, 1873), 39.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 170 and 216.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 42 and 152. This was a crucial problem for Burckhardt, and he continued to discuss it in later writings. "Left to itself," he asks in the posthumously published manuscript on Renaissance painting, dating to 1885–93, "would art ever have created allegorical figures? The question is unanswerable for there is no such thing as art 'left to itself.' No sooner does the capacity from formal creation emerge than it is summoned into the sanctuary, or to some other repository of power, there to pass the whole of its youth. There, it receives the impressions that never fade. Even at an early stage, however, both religion and power may well need to convey their nature and their demands through the abstract concept and its personification" (*Italian Renaissance Painting according to Genres*, trans. David Britt and Caroline Beamish [Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2005], 63). In this late study, Burckhardt acknowledges allegory as an integral aspect of Renaissance art, but of course its influence cannot be compared to that of *The Cicerone* and especially the *Civilization*.

medieval atavism: "And whence we may ask arose the impulse towards this allegorising taste which pervades the whole (also the Byzantine) middle ages? It was originally a remnant of antique mythology, which Christianity had deprived of its true signification. The progenitor was Marcianus Capella, and lived in the fifth century."<sup>33</sup> This is of course erroneous, and it is easy to assume that Burckhardt is simply uninformed. After all, even in classical studies, the presence of allegory in early antiquity was systematically suppressed until very recent times, and this tendency has still not been completely abandoned.<sup>34</sup> We need not look further than Johann Winckelmann, however, to see that Burckhardt must have known better. Yet for him to acknowledge this—to accept the existence of allegory long before the advent of Christianity and recognize the allegorical impulse in medieval culture as ultimately a classical inheritance—would have been intellectual suicide. Decades later, he still writes that mythological allegoresis emerges "Only at the tail end of late antiquity."<sup>35</sup> This mirage of an allegory-free antiquity, legitimizing allegory's erasure from the supposed rebirth of that antiquity, was absolutely essential to his purpose.

The myth of the Middle Ages as the age of allegory is thus the logical outcome of the need to reconcile several factors in Burckhardt's theory of the Renaissance: specifically, the claim that the Renaissance represents the origin of Western modernity; the primacy given to individualism and secularization in defining that modernity, and the sharp

<sup>33</sup> Burckhardt, *Cicerone*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> See Andrew Ford's *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* ([Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002], 81–85), and more cogently, Peter T. Struck's *The Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* ([Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004], 1–20), explicitly challenging the "view expressed among some scholars that allegorism is rare in the extant evidence, outside the main currents of ancient reading, and generally concentrated in the later periods. . . . At least half a dozen major allegorical tracts survive . . . roughly equivalent to the number of major tracts that survive from the rhetorical tradition of reading, and allegorical commentary is as well represented in the scholia as other kinds. . . . Considering time distribution, a large group of allegorical works survives from the early and late Roman periods—but this is not much different from the distribution of tracts of rhetorical criticism. . . . we have indication enough that allegoresis forms a more or less continuous strand of literary thinking through the classical, Hellenistic, and early- and late-Roman periods." Even in recent publications, however, we are still likely to read that "allegorism properly speaking . . . was a product of the early Roman Empire and became a clearly defined activity only in the context of the culture wars between the polytheist tradition and the monotheists (the 'peoples of the book')—that is, from the 1st century CE to the 6th" (Robert Lamberton, "Allegory," in *The Classical Tradition*, ed. Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and Salvatore Settis [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010], 34–35).

<sup>35</sup> Burckhardt, *Painting*, 67.

contrast drawn in this respect with the culture of the Middle Ages; the aesthetic distaste for allegory as a mode of artistic representation; and finally, the cultural historian's conviction that art, like all other aspects of a culture, is an emanation of a *Zeitgeist*. Once these claims are in place, the presence of allegory in the Renaissance becomes a serious problem, and the intuitive, almost inevitable solution is to quarantine it in the Middle Ages. If the Middle Ages were the age of the collective, the age in which "Man was conscious of himself . . . only through some general category," then it is only natural for that age to express itself in the art of universals, just as it is natural for the new age of the individual to express itself in the art of particulars.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, any presence of allegory in the Renaissance is now to be explained as a residuum of the Middle Ages rather than a genuine aspect of the period.

The model did not work quite as well in literary history, however, and if we now return to Burckhardt's *Civilization*, it seems that this explains the very limited, selective, and incidental treatment of imaginative literature in that book. Of its forty-eight chapters, only one is specifically devoted to this subject, even this one chapter is restricted to neo-Latin poetry, and even neo-Latin poetry is not discussed for its own sake but because it "lies within the limits of our task to treat of it, at least in so far as it serves to characterize the humanistic movement."<sup>37</sup> It also seems indicative that Burckhardt went on to write separate studies of Renaissance art and architecture but not of Renaissance literature. The problem, apparently, was that one could not as conveniently split the Renaissance poet in two, with the allegorist dictating to the artist. In *The Cicerone*, Burckhardt poses the question of whether Dante was a "great poet . . . on account of his symbolism or in spite of it," and finds it impossible to answer: in painting, the allegorical ("perishable and feeble") is easily divided from the non-allegorical ("immortal"), but in Dante "all is inseparably woven together; he is just as much a scholar and a theologian as a poet."<sup>38</sup> Consequently, Burckhardt treats of those genres of writing, and those aspects of imaginative literature, which support the central narrative of the "discovery of the world and the discovery of man"—genres of internal and external realism: biography, autobiography, descriptions of nature—while consistently understating, and wherever possible avoiding altogether, the allegorical element in the period's literary output.

<sup>36</sup> Burckhardt, *Civilization*, 87.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>38</sup> Burckhardt, *Cicerone*, 38.

It was thus left to Burckhardt's successors to take up the ungrateful task of accommodating his theory to specifically literary materials, and a key role here, in the English context, was played by John Addington Symonds and the two literary-historical volumes of his *Renaissance in Italy*.<sup>39</sup> Symonds was an early and eager devotee of Burckhardt, and a phrase employed in a diary entry of 5 April, 1866—"the English Renaissance, the Elizabethan Age"—has been quoted as the earliest instance of Burckhardt's period-concept being grafted onto what seemed its obvious native analogue.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the whole entry is of interest in exemplifying the degree to which Symonds's Elizabethan Renaissance is a projection of his own modern condition. Not only is the Elizabethan spirit analogous to that of the Italian Renaissance, it is also analogous to that of the age immediately preceding Symonds's own: "the two ages . . . are similar: freedom of religious thought, political freedom, a new impulse given to all speculation, the movement of the French Revolution answering to that of the Reformation." The Romantic poets, and even Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning in his own day, share a "common Elizabethanism"—remade, obviously, in their own image as non-classical, residually medieval, "Gothic." But while the Elizabethan spirit may linger in some of its poets, the totality of nineteenth-century civilization, the *age*, could not be farther from it, and the Elizabethanist finds himself stranded in a disenchanting, bourgeois world of noninterventionist politics and global capitalism. "[T]here is no El Dorado now," sighs the Elizabethanist, "but California." It is no surprise to find, at the end of this "diatribe," Symonds's confession that he wrote it in an attempt to combat an episode of that "clinging lethargy" with which he was continually plagued: "It did me good; and the afternoon spent with C. among the gigantic olives, deep grass meadows, and clear streams of the Val des Oliviers pleased me. I walked in a dream. Scirocco was blowing."

That the Burckhardtian Renaissance enters English literary historiography as an attempt at psychological self-help bears, perhaps, more than anecdotal relevance. What is certain, however, is that Symonds not only reiterates the attribution of allegory to the Middle Ages—"The spirit of the epoch inclined to Allegory"; it is the natural expression of

<sup>39</sup> Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: Italian Literature*, 2 vols. (London, 1881).

<sup>40</sup> See John Hale, *England and the Italian Renaissance: The Growth of Interest in Its History and Art*, 4th ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 110; and Horatio F. Brown, *John Addington Symonds: A Biography Compiled from His Papers and Correspondence*, 2 vols. (London, 1895), vol. 1, 345–63.

"the medieval mind"<sup>41</sup>—but outdoes his master in this respect, separating what Burckhardt had found inseparable, the allegorist and the poet, now internalized as competing elements of a single personality. Exemplary in this respect is his view of Dante: where in Burckhardt's Dante all was "inseparably woven together," Symonds's Dante "stood, as a poet, at a height so far above his age and his own theories, that the cold and numbing touch of symbolism rarely mars the interest of his work."<sup>42</sup> This is then expanded into a general principle of literary history. Many later works, even into the fifteenth century, are similarly "twy-formed," with "one foot in the middle ages, another planted on the firm ground of the modern era," wavering "between the psychological realism of romance and the philosophical idealism of allegory."<sup>43</sup> Consequently, allegory becomes the index and litmus test of literary modernity, and the progress of literature becomes measurable in degrees of its abandonment of "the allegorical heresy."<sup>44</sup>

And that, more or less, is how the Middle Ages became the Age of Allegory. This is the myth in its fully developed form; all that remains is its further consolidation and dissemination. This process involves dozens of further late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century publications and cannot be fully surveyed here, but already by 1886 an American author, James Baldwin, is able to include a section on "The Age of Allegory," now delimited to between the twelfth and the fifteenth century, into a school textbook of English and American literature.<sup>45</sup> The section is part of a chapter on "Allegories," preceding sections on "The Faerie Queene" and "The Pilgrim's Progress"—in other words, while Spenser and John Bunyan wrote allegorical works, it is only "From the middle of the fourteenth to the middle of the sixteenth century" that "the taste for allegory colored almost the whole texture of literature."<sup>46</sup> The "Questions and Exercises" appended to each section are particularly revealing. Thus two of the study questions for "The Age of Allegory" are "How do you account for the popularity of the allegory in the middle ages," and "Give some reasons why these old allegories have not the interest for us which they possessed for the people for whom they were written."<sup>47</sup> In relation to *The Faerie Queene*, however, pupils are to

<sup>41</sup> Symonds, *Italian Literature*, vol. 1, 74.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 81.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 229.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 82.

<sup>45</sup> Baldwin, *Essential Studies in English and American Literature* (Philadelphia, 1886).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

be asked "What peculiarities of character distinguish such men as [Sir Walter] Raleigh, [Sir Francis] Drake, [Sir Philip] Sidney, and Captain John Smith," and whether they think "Spenser had such men as these in mind when describing his ideal knights."<sup>48</sup>

In Britain, an important role was played by George Saintsbury, to whose numerous distinctions is to be added that of being one of the most loquacious allegory-haters on record, with a particular flare for metaphors of castration and disease: allegory is "the Delilah of criticism," its Circe, its Calypso, its "congenital or endemic disease," its witch midwife, who "not too profitably assisted at the cradle of Greek literature" and returned to infest "its death-bed in her most decrepit and malignant aspect."<sup>49</sup> The myth takes firm British roots in the landmark *Periods of European Literature* series, published under Saintsbury's editorship between 1895 and 1907, especially at the hands of his junior colleague at Edinburgh, G. Gregory Smith, and his volume in the series, on *The Transition Period*. Building on Symonds's notion of the "twy-formed" fifteenth century, Smith's volume is perhaps the first comprehensive, book-length deployment of the myth, consistently equating the transition from "medieval" to "Renaissance" with that from allegorical to non-allegorical literature and listing the periods in the history of English poetry as "allegorical, Elizabethan, Augustan, Pre-Raphaelite."<sup>50</sup> In less than half a century, from that one sentence, one thread in the vast tapestry of Burckhardt's *Civilization*, an entire history of literature had been extrapolated.

#### IV

Once fully consolidated, the myth begins to recede from open view, disappearing into broad structural patterns on the one hand and seemingly inconsequential detail on the other. Early twentieth-century studies abound in such tell-tales. The word *allegory* acquires a set of fixed epithets—*medieval*, *old*, *tedious*, etc.—which encapsulate the myth in miniature form. Previously neglected figures burst into the foreground.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 144. Cf. *The Famous Allegories*, ed. James Baldwin (New York, 1893), the second volume in a series of Select English Classics. The selection again extends to Johnson, yet the Middle Ages are singled out: "From the twelfth to the fifteenth century was the age of vision and mystery. Hence it was preëminently the age of allegory" (16).

<sup>49</sup> Saintsbury, *A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe from the Earliest Texts to the Present Day*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1900–4), vol. 1, 67–68, 187, and 393.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *The Transition Period* (Edinburgh, 1900), 323. The most frequently cited authority is Symonds (126 et passim).

Stephen Hawes is suddenly a milestone: a belated allegorist who would have dragged English literature “back in the Middle Ages” had not Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey “come to the rescue.”<sup>51</sup> Conversely, previous milestones, such as Spenser, must now blend into the background. “Hazlitt said that the allegory ‘won’t bite’: one is sometimes tempted to wish that it would, for it does something far worse, it growls”—yet there is always the “word-music,” “lines and stanzas of silvery melody, musical cadences, perfect portraits of women, conceptions of rare imaginative beauty.”<sup>52</sup> And ultimately, who can really stop you, once your heart is set on it, from deciding that “*The Faerie Queene* is not an allegory”?<sup>53</sup> Obviously things have changed in the meantime, both with respect to specific interpretive detail and especially the broader picture. We have grown wary, or so we like to think, of “grand narratives,” indeed to the point where any historical narrative, insofar as it is genuinely a narrative, is likely to appear somewhat “grand” in its pretensions. But again, this only means we have entered a particularly insidious phase of the myth, which now hides in plain sight, absorbed into the ubiquitous period concepts that govern the discipline and in whose formation it played a decisive role. The “Middle Ages” and the “Renaissance” do not emerge as fully formed units in English literary history until these concepts intersect with the anti-allegorical aesthetics of Romanticism. Only then, only once the progress of literature and literary criticism become measurable in degrees of their abandonment of allegory, do historians get a tangible criterion on the basis of which the medieval-Renaissance divide could be instituted and around which a narrative could crystallize.

It could now be further shown how the myth manifests itself in particular contexts within English literary historiography. The history of the drama is a particularly good example, since the trajectory of the English drama over the course of the sixteenth century—from religious to secular subjects and from personified abstractions to characters bearing proper names—would seem to offer the ideal illustration of the Burckhardtian model. In fact, right at the heart of the *Civilization*, in the key chapter on “The Discovery of Man,” we stumble on a passage in which Burckhardt himself implicitly affirms this view. “Why,” he suddenly pauses to ask, “did the Italians of the Renaissance do nothing above the

<sup>51</sup> A. J. Wyatt, *The Tutorial History of English Literature* (London, 1900), 32.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Seccombe and W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Bookman Illustrated History of English Literature*, 2 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906), vol. 1, 80.

second rank in tragedy? That was the field on which to display human character, intellect, and passion, in the thousand forms of their growth, their struggles, and their decline. In other words: why did Italy produce no [William] Shakespeare?"<sup>54</sup> Nothing in the preceding discussion quite prepares the reader for this question, so radically at odds with the book's central thesis. How is it, indeed, that the model premised on the uniquely suited *Volksgeist* of the Italians—for "We must insist upon it, as one of the chief propositions of this book, that it was not the revival of antiquity alone, but its union with the genius of the Italian people, which achieved the conquest of the Western world"<sup>55</sup>—comes to fruition, in the prized sphere of the drama, at the far end of the continent, in eminently un-Italian England?

Ironically, the increasing evidence of the extent of Shakespeare's debt to "medieval" literary and intellectual traditions suggests an answer opposite to Burckhardt's intuitions. Other things being equal, notably the decisive yet elusive factor of individual temperament and talent, it seems very plausible to say that "Whenever you have a gap between what Classical writers were doing and what Renaissance writers do, it is almost always because of what happened in between."<sup>56</sup> And if so, then it is further plausible to suggest that Shakespeare emerged in England precisely because there was less Renaissance there than in Italy, and that far from being problematic, the absence of his Italian counterpart is precisely what one would expect to find. Obviously to Burckhardt this was unthinkable: the "people which possessed the power, perhaps to a greater degree than any other, to reflect and contemplate its own highest qualities in the mirror of the drama" simply ought to have produced a brilliant and lastingly relevant playwright.<sup>57</sup> Again the unruly domain of literature threatens to collapse the whole culture-historical edifice, and the forestalling of this collapse requires, literally, a *deus ex machina*: "It is an obvious reply that all Europe produced but one Shakespeare, and that such a mind is the rarest of Heaven's gifts."<sup>58</sup> Nothing could be less obvious under the terms of a *Volksgeist* theory of culture, and in fact, while England is thus deprived of a defining role in the creation of Shakespeare, the Italian failure to produce an equivalent playwright is

<sup>54</sup> Burckhardt, *Civilization*, 204.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>56</sup> Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages: Inaugural Lecture delivered 29 April 2005* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>57</sup> Burckhardt, *Civilization*, 208–9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

still blamed on corrupting foreign influence. Italy may have been on its way to a Shakespeare when “the Counter-Reformation broke in upon it, and, aided by the Spanish rule over Naples and Milan, and indirectly over almost the whole peninsula, withered the best flowers of the Italian spirit.”

The maneuver is all the more remarkable considering the fact that the Romantic view of Shakespeare operative in this passage, which Burckhardt shared with many readers of his age, had up to this point been premised on the very antithesis of his Renaissance. When it did not dismiss him, or adapt him to suit contemporary tastes, the neoclassicist sensibility of the later seventeenth and eighteenth century could extend only a limited amount of appreciation to Shakespeare, as a master of a dead rather than a living art. Alexander Pope revered Shakespeare but still likened him to “an ancient majestick piece of *Gothick Architecture*”: although it may “strike us with greater reverence” than the “neat Modern building” of regular classicist drama, it is nevertheless the latter that we should adopt as our model.<sup>59</sup> Subsequently, the Romantics turn the tables on such judgments: Shakespeare is indeed Gothic, and precisely because he is Gothic he is revealed to be precociously modern. Now, in the space of three pages of Burckhardt’s book, the tables turn again, into a configuration that would have been as unacceptable to Pope as it would have been to Coleridge. Shakespeare remains modern, and the substance of this modernity remains Romantic—the unprecedented insight into human nature and a godlike ability of creating inimitably life-like, fully individualized, psychologically complex characters—yet the Romantic explanation of this modernity is completely evacuated and replaced by its exact antithesis.

This Renaissance rebranding of Shakespeare, and more importantly, this Shakespearean rebranding of the Renaissance, soon came to influence scholarship on the English drama. As elsewhere, prior work had already established the key coordinates of secularization and deallegorization, but these did not yet coincide with the medieval-Renaissance divide in either conceptual or chronological terms. Robert Dodsley, Bishop Percy, Thomas Warton, Edmund Malone, John Payne Collier: one after another, they all tell increasingly elaborate versions of the same story of how the drama liberated itself from allegorical personifications—a story paralleled, it may be noted, by related editorial and critical developments, such as regularized speech prefixes and *dramatis*

<sup>59</sup> *The Works of Shakespear*, ed. Pope, 6 vols. (London, 1725), vol. 1, xxiii–xxiv.

*personae* lists, or the advent of "character criticism." So far, however, the cause of this transformation is either deemed inexplicable in literary-historical terms, an outburst of unprecedented and ineffable "genius," or is attributed to categories which presume no sharp distinction between "medieval" and "Renaissance." The account in Dodsley's *Old Plays* affords a good example of the former, Collier's *History* of the latter. For Dodsley, the "true Drama" arrived "as it were, all at once," receiving simultaneously both "Birth and Perfection from the creative Genius of *Shakespear, Fletcher and Johnson*"; for Collier, it "reached maturity at the hands of Shakespeare" but was, "in truth, created by no one man, and in no one age; and whatever improvements Shakespeare introduced, it will be seen that when he began to write for the theatre, our romantic drama was completely formed and firmly established."<sup>60</sup>

Enter Burckhardt. Some influence is felt already in Adolphus William Ward's *History* of 1875, where the passage from "allegorical abstractions" to "real human personages" is now partly ascribed to the "Renaissance," but although he was familiar with Burckhardt's work, this is a concept that Ward still inherits primarily from Matthew Arnold.<sup>61</sup> Ward's "Renaissance" is still not a comprehensive historical epoch and is most often referred to in Arnoldian terms, as an intellectual and artistic "movement," in tandem with the "movement" of the Reformation.<sup>62</sup> Chronologically, the movement's lower limit is "the close of the so-called Middle Ages"—mind the "so-called"—but its heyday does not coincide with the "Jacobethan" golden age of later orthodoxy. The "Renaissance movement . . . reaches its height in the earlier part of the reign of Elisabeth" and remains, for all its positive impulses, a foreign import cultivated by a social elite centered on the court. Lacking genuine popular support, it easily degenerates into pedantry, which includes its continuing participation in "the ancient and enduring national predilection" for allegory. Chaucer alone had escaped it, but he had no followers, and at the summit of the Renaissance we still find the "cold and tame" allegories of Sidney and Spenser.<sup>63</sup>

The drama is no exception. Not only do the "tedious" morality plays

<sup>60</sup> *A Select Collection of Old Plays*, ed. Dodsley, 12 vols. (London, 1744), vol. 1, xxi; Collier, *A History of English Dramatic Poetry to the Time of Shakespeare: and Annals of the Stage to the Restoration*, 3 vols. (London, 1831), vol. 1, x.

<sup>61</sup> See Ward, *A History of English Dramatic Literature to the Death of Queen Anne*, 2 vols. (London, 1875), vol. 1, 78–79, n. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Social and Political Criticism* (London, 1869), 159–62.

<sup>63</sup> Ward, *History*, vol. 1, xxiv, 56–57, 66–68, 91–92, and 154–56.

survive throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century, but the same impulse finds its authentic Renaissance expression in the work of John Lyly: a “deplorable . . . aberration from the true principles of poetic creation,” contributing “nothing to the legitimate drama” of the later period.<sup>64</sup> A further innovation is a distinction between three rather than two stages in the deallegorization process—from allegories to types, and from types to individuals<sup>65</sup>—which loosely correspond to the three periods in the drama’s history, namely the (so-called) Middle Ages, the transitional period of the Renaissance, and finally, after about 1590, the “legitimate” drama of the later Elizabethan and Jacobean period. At most, pre-1590 playwrights made the transition from allegories to types, but even this was not an exclusively Renaissance achievement and had been “asserting itself in individual instances” already in medieval times.<sup>66</sup> Thus the Renaissance “contributed to prepare and fertilise the soil into which was to descend the seed of genius, the gift of Heaven”—a direct translation of Burckhardt’s “Geschenk des Himmels”—but was not remotely sufficient for, and was in some respects an impediment to, the additional “great step” from types to individuals.<sup>67</sup> Although he is happy to agree that “a genius such as [Shakespeare’s] belongs to no age and to no country exclusively,” Ward does have a historical explanation for “the outward conditions” that made its expression possible, and these are both decidedly national and decidedly anti-Renaissance.<sup>68</sup> Other things being equal, we owe the decline of allegory and type to the emergence of a stable, financially self-sustainable, and genuinely popular stage, governed not by aristocratic patronage but “the verdict of popular applause,” and this stage, endemic to England, we owe to specifically national developments in “the great national age of the latter half of Elisabeth’s reign.”<sup>69</sup>

Enter Symonds. The new gospel came just too late to claim Ward, but in Symonds it found a true convert. Not only did the *Civilization* furnish Symonds with a direct precedent for identifying the Elizabethan Age as the English Renaissance, it also spurred him to return to his unfinished history of pre-Shakespearean drama. In the preface to the book, published in 1884, Symonds says that he began working on it in 1862 but abandoned it in 1865, “discouraged partly by ill-health,

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 78, 134, and 263.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 140 and 260.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 91.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, xxxii, 140, and 510–11; Burckhardt, *Kultur*, 274.

<sup>68</sup> Ward, *History*, vol. 1, 246 and 271.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 247 and 481.

partly by a conviction that the subject was beyond the scope and judgment of a literary beginner."<sup>70</sup> Perhaps, but one wonders whether the conceptual backbone provided by Burckhardt's work, encountered in the meantime, and the "Italian Shakespeare" passage in particular, may not have been a more decisive factor. "Three centuries of militant and triumphant humanism, of developed art, and of advancing science," Symonds writes,

have rendered allegory irksome to the modern mind. We recognise its essential imperfection, and are hardly able to do justice to such merits as it undoubtedly possessed for people not yet accustomed to distinguish thought from figured models of presentation. It is our duty, if we care to understand the last phase of medieval culture, to throw ourselves back into the mental condition of men . . . men who naturally thought their deepest thoughts out into tangibilities by means of allegorical mythology.<sup>71</sup>

And conversely, it is our duty, as archaeologists of our own aesthetic modernity, to locate the moment when this condition dissolves, the moment—Symonds finds it in Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister*, printed in 1567—when English playwrights "emerge from medieval grotesquery and allegory into the clear light of actual life, into an agreeable atmosphere of urbanity and natural delineation."<sup>72</sup>

This is the familiar account, developed over several generations of historians, of the transition from allegories to "real personage[s], who would have been at home in ordinary English households."<sup>73</sup> Only with Symonds, however, does this account assume its now-familiar periodizational shape, acquiring in the process a new and unprecedented, almost mystical significance. The drama of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is now the very "embodi[ment]," "mirror," and "compendium of all that the Renaissance had brought to light."<sup>74</sup> Indeed it is even more than that. For the English, the drama is not merely the supreme expression of the Renaissance—it quite literally *is* the Renaissance. The drama, Symonds rhapsodizes,

meant for England the recovery of Greek and Latin culture, the emancipation of the mind from medieval bondage, the emergence of the human spirit in its freedom. It meant newly discovered heavens, a larger earth, sail-swept oceans, awakened continents beyond Atlantic seas. It meant the pulse of now ascen-

<sup>70</sup> Symonds, *Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama* (London, 1884), vii.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 203–4

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

dant and puissant heart-blood through a people conscious of their unity and strength, the puberty and adolescence of a race which in its manhood was destined to give social freedom to the world.<sup>75</sup>

As should be clear, all this proceeds from Burckhardt's Italian Shakespeare passage and is indeed nothing else but Burckhardt's argument in inverse form. What was to be lamented in the case of Italy, which had everything except the drama, can now be turned to advantage in the case of England, which had nothing but the drama, yet such a drama as "conveyed to English minds what Italy, great mother of renescent Europe, had with all her arts, with all her industries and sciences, made manifest."<sup>76</sup>

## V

"And here I do not use 'myth' in any technical sense," accused James Franklin in one of the more spirited attacks on the myth of the Renaissance, "as some *avant garde* theologians are said to do, according to which a myth may be in some way essentially true. By 'myth' I mean 'lie.'"<sup>77</sup> Admittedly, the Age of Allegory is also, in the final analysis, a lie. Yet it is also a myth in a sense not unlike that of the theologians, and its appeal is the appeal of all myths. It transforms a hostile chaos into a hospitable cosmos, endowing the sprawling wastes of the literary past with historical form, and setting that form in teleological motion. It disembarks us safely, along with the Elizabethans, on the hither side of the great divide, whence we behold, with a mixture of curiosity and pity, our junior brethren wandering the far shore, lost in the labyrinths of their allegorical minds. It fulfills, this ritual sacrifice of allegory at the altar of an ever-receding modernity, deep intellectual and even emotional needs, and it is built into the very foundations of the current configuration of the discipline. Thus to simply dismiss it as a lie would be to severely underestimate its power. If forced to choose between truth and myth, most will choose myth.

Most, but not all. Not long after the Age of Allegory attains its fully developed form do we also begin to encounter resistance to it, and unsurprisingly, some of the earliest and most forceful statements come from scholars of allegory, who repeatedly find themselves driven to question the established boundaries and concepts. Quite simply, alle-

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>77</sup> Franklin, "The Renaissance Myth," *Quadrant* 26.11 (1982): 51.

gory confounds periodization because periodization confounds allegory. Thus already by 1936, Don Cameron Allen's research on color symbolism leads him to observe that "The indebtedness of the so-called Renaissance to the Middle Ages increases with every new investigation of their relationships; and one is often led to wonder if the term 'Renaissance' is a misnomer and if one would not be right, if one referred to this period as 'the later Middle Ages.'"<sup>78</sup> "As the Middle Ages and the Renaissance come to be better known," writes Jean Seznec at the beginning of his classic study, "the traditional antithesis between them grows less marked."<sup>79</sup> We do not know whether Seznec read Allen, but we know that another major scholar of the allegorical tradition, Lewis, read Seznec, for he quotes the above sentence in his inaugural lecture to the newly founded Cambridge Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature in illustration of "a change which has been coming over historical opinion within my own lifetime," and which, he felt, was being given "official sanction" by the creation of such a post:<sup>80</sup> "From the formula 'Medieval and Renaissance'. . . I inferred that the University was encouraging my own belief that the barrier between those two ages has been greatly exaggerated, if indeed it was not largely a figment of Humanist propaganda."<sup>81</sup> Similar claims could be multiplied, and the intervening decades have only gathered further evidence in their support, yet however imminent the paradigm shift may have seemed back in the 1950s, it has proved slow in coming. Here we are in the 2010s, still waiting, and it looks like we may be waiting for a long time to come.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Allen, "Symbolic Color in the Literature of the English Renaissance," *Philological Quarterly* 15 (1936): 81.

<sup>79</sup> Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art* [1940], trans. Barbara F. Sessions (1953; repr. New York: Harper, 1961), 3.

<sup>80</sup> Lewis, *De descriptione temporum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 1.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>82</sup> Some of the material in this article was presented at the following events: *The Middle Ages in the Modern World*, University of St Andrews, 25–28 June 2013; *Research Day in Medieval English Studies*, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Piliscsaba, 4 April, 2014; and the Renaissance Research Workshop, Faculty of English, University of Cambridge, 3 November, 2015. I would like to thank everyone who shared in the discussions on these occasions. The article has also benefitted from the comments of Catherine Bates, Jeff Dolven, and Ivan Lupić.