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1
The *Commedia* and Medieval Modes of Reading

(i) Allegory and Vision

It often looks as though medieval poetic theory is lamentably incapable of characterising, or even of recognising, what it is in medieval poetry that still moves and excites us today. Nowhere has there seemed to be a greater chasm between theory and poetry than with regard to Dante's *Divina Commedia*. Is this because of the poverty and inadequacy of medieval notions of poetic interpretation? Or do we as modern readers fail sufficiently to perceive the 'otherness' of medieval poetry,[1] so that our responses to it are in large measure subjective and anachronistic? Should we, to achieve a more authentic approach, return as far as possible to that of the medieval interpreters, and resign ourselves to their limitations, even if our poetic response is diminished by this?

There is a disconcerting unanimity about those old interpreters of the *Commedia* in some of their basic assumptions.[2] The problem is made more acute by the fact that one of the earliest testimonies to these assumptions purports to be a statement by Dante himself about the lines along which his poem should be interpreted. In six of the nine extant manuscripts, Dante's letter dedicating the *Paradiso* to his patron, Cangrande della Scala, continues with a general introduction to the *Commedia* and an exposition of the opening verses of *Paradiso*.[3] The author of this introduction affirms that the whole *Commedia* has many meanings, and he proceeds to distinguish these as if the poem could be read as the Bible was traditionally read:[4] it has a literal meaning, and another which can be alternately allegorical, moral, or anagogical (leading the mind aloft to contemplate the heavenly). The *Commedia* has a twofold subject (*duplex subiectum*): literally, its subject is 'the condition of souls after death, considered in itself'; allegorically, its subject is 'man, inasmuch as he is exposed to the justice of reward and punishment, through the merit and demerit he has attained by free will'.[5]

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I shall say a little more about the vexed question of whether this passage is by Dante presently. For the moment, I hope it is not irreverent to suggest that, if this is indeed the mature Dante's own definition of the subject of his *Commedia*, he has not defined it well. It is true that many poets and artists, even today, can say little that is satisfying about their own work – yet Dante had previously, in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, shown exceptional critical acumen, about his own earlier lyrical poetry as well as that of others. 'The condition of souls after death' might seem superficially to correspond to the literal subject of the *Commedia* – yet it could apply equally to any of the dozens of medieval visions of the otherworld that were set down in literary form; it in no way indicates that Dante's poem is radically different from these.[6] The authors of such visions, who claimed to have been shown diverse conditions of souls in the beyond, never made claims as far-reaching as those that Dante makes within the context of his poem. No medieval author before Dante had measured himself against Aeneas and St Paul,[7] as one impelled by divine grace to undertake an otherworld journey for the sake of mankind, in order to right the world's injustices at a crucial moment of its history.

At the opening of the second canto of *Inferno*, Dante, alone with Vergil, reveals both the height of his conception of his own mission as poet–prophet (*vates*) and his intense fear of embarking on it:

> O muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate;
> o mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,
> qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.
> Io cominciai: 'Poeta che mi guidi,
> guarda la mia virtù s'ell' è possente,
> prima ch'a l'alto passo tu mi fidi . . .'
>
> Muses, high imagination, help me now –
> you, memory that have written what I saw,
> here will your worth be seen.
> I began: 'Poet, you who guide me,
> see if my nature has strength enough
> before you commit me to the vast leap . . .' (7–12)

Aeneas' political mission and Paul's spiritual one were divinely sanctioned, it was not unfitting that they should have journeyed into the beyond –

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'Ma io, perché venirvi? o chi 'l concede?
Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono;
me degno a ciò né io né altri 'l crede.'

'But why should *I* go there? or who allows it?
I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul –
neither I nor others think me worthy of that.' (31–3)

And Vergil, though in this very scene he is called both *magnanimo* and *cortese*, answers Dante with a brutal reproach: he accuses him of baseness of spirit (*viltade*), of an ignoble cowardice, because of his hesitation before so great a venture.

For Dante the unswerving truth of his memory is vital, since, however much literary elaboration we may have to reckon with, this begins from the visionary perceptions which had ignited his mind and which it mattered to him intensely to record aright:

O isplendor di Dio, per cu' io vidi
l'alto trïunfo del regno verace,
dammi virtù a dir com' ïo il vidi!

Oh splendour of God, through which I saw
the high triumph of the true kingdom,
give me the power to tell how I saw it! (*Par.* XXX 97–9)

Dante is not embodying familiar ideas about the conditions of souls in hell, purgatory, and heaven in a poetic fiction;[8] he is not 'feigning', in the way he had done, with keen self-consciousness, in his *Convivio*, as he unfolded the tale of his love for the Donna Gentile, Filosofia – the lady whose eyes are her demonstrations and whose smile, her persuasions.[9]

The early commentators on the *Commedia*, however, speak again and again of Dante's feigning – at times probably in order to shield the poet and his poem from accusations of hubris, indeed of blasphemy. Even St Paul had thought it unlawful to utter the words he had heard in the third heaven. At other times the commentators seem to attenuate the reality of Dante's mental experiences because they can hardly conceive that so great a claim as Dante appears to make could have been meant literally. But Dante is uncompromising. He intimates many times throughout the poem that he has had visions in the same sense as Paul and the prophets had, and that his concern is to remember and relate these faithfully.[10] This visionary element tells us little of itself about his poetic and imaginative processes. Dante was clearly an intellectual

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as well as a seer; his prophetic insights were nourished by, and developed out of, what he had read and thought. Yet his insistence on memory, on the experiential aspect of his work, remains important. It is for this reason that, setting forth on the task of remembering, he prays for aid: the muses and high imagination (*alto ingegno*) are not only the poetic powers within him, they embody his sense that a force greater than himself is at work in him as he writes.

It is a question of striving for absolute fidelity to the inner imaginative process and reality that are his own, but are also beyond him – that are at moments perceived as the god speaking in the vessel he has chosen. These moments of conviction of divine direction also reveal the deepest aspect of the bond between Dante and Vergil, his cherished guide. Vergil, who had imaginatively experienced an unearthly journey, by taking Aeneas through the underworld, is equally the poet in whom an *alto ingegno* had been at work greater than he could consciously express: it was a true prophetic gift that had led Vergil to foretell a divine child in his *Fourth Eclogue*, and to show in the *Aeneid* the divine revelation which led to the founding of Rome, and, through Rome, to what Dante saw as the order that God's providence had established for the world's just government. As poet, Vergil became the prophet of that world-order, Roman flowering into Christian, prophet of 'that Rome of which Christ is a Roman' (*Purg.* XXXII 102).

Through Vergil's answer to the frightened Dante, we learn that Dante's venture – as visionary and as poet – has been granted to him solely because of Beatrice, whom he had loved since boyhood. It is not because Dante is more perfect than other men. On the contrary, as Beatrice tells Vergil –

> . . . temo che non sia già sì smarrito,
> ch'io mi sia tardi al soccorso levata,
> per quel ch'i' ho di lui nel cielo udito.
>
> . . . I fear he may already be so far lost
> that I have moved too late to rescue him –
> by what I have heard in heaven about him. (*Inf.* II 64–6)

No, Dante's special capacity to experience and record the more-than-earthly stems from the fact that the more-than-earthly had been revealed to him in an unparalleled way: through the highest moments of earthly love that he had known. And it is as Dante fully fathoms that the revelation comes through his beloved, who

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is now in heaven, and realises that if anyone can bring him to heaven's blessedness it is she, that he conquers his doubts and becomes sure that his mission is a true one, not one spurred by some manic delusion of grandeur of his own.

The literal subject of the *Commedia*, then, is the *itinerarium mentis* of Dante Alighieri, the poet guided by Vergil and inspired by a dead Florentine woman, Beatrice. To her he attributes exceptional intellectual powers: indeed she epitomises that conjunction of intellectual and visionary insight which he is trying to communicate in his verse. The *Commedia* tells the inner experience of this poet who saw himself called to the rôle of prophet, in order to fight for peace and justice in the temporal sphere like Aeneas, in the spiritual like Paul. It is a subject of such daring that, if Dante really wrote the exegesis for Cangrande, we should have to say that here for once his courage failed him. Here he drew back from what he had affirmed with passionate earnestness throughout the *Commedia*, and relied instead on a kind of timorous *captatio benevolentiae*, telling his patron reassuringly, 'this is a poem about souls in the otherworld', and thereby assigning it as it were to a familiar genre. Was Dante really beset by such faintheartedness that, having completed the *Commedia*,[11] he no longer dared to avow what mattered to him supremely about its composition?

According to the explanation in the *Epistle*, 'the condition of souls after death', which the poem shows literally, has as its hidden meaning that each of these souls justly receives its reward or punishment after death, in accordance with its free choice of worthy or unworthy deeds on earth.[12] This may be a salutary moral reflection, and one that many of the descriptions of souls in the *Commedia* might stimulate. Yet it is also a perfectly obvious reflection; it has nothing of hidden meaning about it. I cannot see that it belongs with what the author of the *Epistle* himself calls *isti sensus mistici* – the three hidden senses which, he goes on, can all be called, in general terms, allegorical. To say that the destinies of souls in the otherworld match their choices in this life – is that really to reveal the hidden meaning of the *Commedia*?

There are moments in the *Commedia*, to be sure, where the overt sense has a hidden or allegorical meaning. At times Dante explicitly signals the latent presence of such a meaning – as in *Inferno* IX, when he admonishes his readers:

> O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani,
> mirate la dottrina che s'asconde
> sotto 'l velame de li versi strani

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> Oh you that have sound understanding,
> note the doctrine that hides
> beneath the veil of the strange verses (61–3)

– the enigmatic verses, that is, about the Furies and the heavenly messenger. But the very fact that Dante sets certain moments in relief in this way should make us wary of following those early commentators who wished to find allegorical meaning hidden everywhere. It is not enough for them that Dante, at the opening of his journey, evokes swift, violent experiences – of being lost and terrified in a dark forest, his way barred, at the foot of a sunlit hill, by a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf; that Dante calls out for help to a human apparition he sees, who, to his joy, turns out to be the shade of Vergil. The real meaning, allegedly, is not this at all, but that Dante and, implicitly, all mankind stray in the forest of the sinful life; they cannot ascend the bright hill of virtue; their way is cut off by three bestial vices – lust, pride, and covetousness. In this harsh plight human reason – embodied in Vergil – guides the sinner on his cathartic journey, after explaining that the journey has been sanctioned by theology – which, needless to say, is embodied in Beatrice.[13]

I do not wish to suggest that this venerable tradition of seeking specific allegories at every point is wholly baseless. It represents one way of recognising what every alert reader must recognise: that the forest and beasts, the lostness and the dangers, the guide and the journey mean more than they say – that they are no simple elements of an adventure-story, but evoke complex states of mind and conscience, complex responses to the outer world. Yet, apart from the fact that there have always been disagreements about what particular elements signify, this time-honoured exegetical method cannot easily illuminate the imaginative purpose of the poem. It tries to make the poet's vision into something else. If Dante chose to stimulate his readers' imagination by mystery, what do we gain by reducing this to commonplaces, that take us no trouble to comprehend? It is something undefined and evocative that here challenges understanding, not a tract on sin and repentance. (Those are much easier to understand.)

It looks as if we must rescue Dante the poet from the conceptions of poetic meaning that were current in his time, and perhaps even – if he is the author of the explanatory part of the Cangrande letter – rescue Dante from himself. Yet the picture, if we look more attentively, is not quite so bleak. The range of ways of think-

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ing about poetic meaning in the period up to Dante is greater than most modern scholars have realised.

A notable contribution to showing this was made by Erich Auerbach, in his essay '*Figura*' and a group of related studies.[14] Auerbach suggested that, while allegory undeniably plays an intermittent part in the structure of the *Commedia*, it is far from being the dominant principle of structure. It is much less important for the imaginative workings of the *Commedia* than *figura*, the concept which Auerbach documented systematically, and rightly distinguished from the more familiar modes of allegory, though recognising that often it interacts with these and cannot be wholly separated from them. Historically and critically, however, the distinction remains vital:

> Figural interpretation establishes a relationship between two persons or events . . . that are both real and within time . . . it is not concerned with concepts or abstractions: these are entirely secondary . . . *Figura* is clearly distinguished from most of the allegorical forms known to us from other contexts, by the historical reality of both what signifies and what is signified.[15]

This is evident when the persons and events that are figurally related belong to the Old and New Testaments – when Adam, for instance, is a *figura* of Christ, or Isaac's sacrifice a *figura* of the crucifixion. But it is Auerbach's merit to have seen that this same concept of *figura* can likewise illuminate certain key characters and situations in the *Commedia*. Thus Cato, Vergil, and Beatrice can 'mean more' than themselves precisely because Dante conceives them as fully alive and real, and *not* as allegories. The Cato who guards the shore of *Purgatorio* fulfils the *figura* of the historical Cato; he is 'not an allegory for freedom; rather, he remains Cato of Utica, the unique individual, just as Dante saw him'.[16]

But even if the concept *figura* is fertile for the understanding of Dante's poetic art, it seems to me that a number of other medieval concepts should likewise be considered for what they may be able to contribute to this understanding. In particular, the concepts of image (*imago*) and metaphor (*metaphora* and its synonyms), hidden comparison (*collatio occulta*), symbol (*symbolum*), and mythopoeic fiction (*integumentum*) had all been elaborated in diverse subtle ways by the time that Dante wrote. Given the sheer breadth of his imaginative range, would it not be surprising if some medieval uses of these concepts were not also pertinent to

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Dante's artistry and intentions? Figural interpretation can admittedly shed much light, correcting what is simplistic in allegorical interpretation, yet it too can cope with only one aspect of Dante's multifarious ways of generating poetic meaning.

It is true that in the high Middle Ages there was no comprehensive critical vocabulary comparable to that of the present day; yet there are many intimations in medieval Latin texts that critical insight could be acute. In particular, while theologians were still often concerned, as the Church Fathers had been, with fixed allegorical meanings in Scripture, in non-theological writing we can find evidence of an awareness of unfixed, open meanings – meanings such as could be incorporated in a text but could hardly be spelt out. It was possible to think profoundly about the creative aspect of poetic imagination. It was possible, too, to see a poet's imagery not just as a pretext for allegorical meaning, nor again as mere ornament (*ornatus*) – though these were familiar scholastic notions – but as a direct means of cognition: neither hiding meaning nor adorning it, but creating it. This conception clearly has a greater bearing on Dante's art than the more conventional ones. Again, it was possible to think about the art of conveying *hidden* meaning in terms that went beyond allegory, and indeed beyond *figura*, to creative uses of symbol and of myth. I should like to adumbrate one or two of these less familiar ways of thinking about poetic meaning up to Dante's time, indicating how they are germane to Dante's art.

(ii) Alan of Lille: Poetry and Creativity

Let me begin with a major twelfth-century Latin poet who notably influenced Dante,[17] and whose thoughts about poets and poetry present some of the same anomalies as I have already mentioned, but also hint at some different solutions. Alan of Lille, in the prose prologue to his verse epic, *Anticlaudianus*, composed 1182/3, makes large claims for his poem, ones that may well remind us of the letter to Cangrande. The work, Alan affirms, has not merely a literal sense, that will 'caress the hearing' – that is, a sense enjoyable purely as a story – nor only a moral sense, that, like a mirror for princes, will 'instruct a mind growing in insight'. It has a third sense, 'a more acute subtlety of allegory', that will sharpen the intellect as it sets out on its heavenward journey. For in this

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poem, Alan continues, one can find not only something of all the seven liberal arts but 'an abundance of celestial theophany (*theophanie celestis emblema*)': the poem, that is, can figure and be a manifestation of the divine.[18]

Theophany, the concept at the heart of the thought of the Carolingian Platonist Scotus Eriugena, is here taken over by Alan and combined with another of Eriugena's pivotal words: Alan invites the reader not to rest content with the poem's 'base images', but to rise beyond them 'to the contemplation of *supercelestial* forms (*ad intuitum supercelestium formarum*)'. A theophany, that is, can allow the perception even of forms as they exist in the divine realm. Alan, as we see, believes that his epic can lead to a kind of insight such as poetry seldom attains. Indeed in the poem itself he makes some scathing allusions to the epics of his contemporaries – Joseph of Exeter's on Troy and Walter of Châtillon's on Alexander – for these, he thinks, are mere narratives, they have no hidden meanings, they are not theophanies.

At the midpoint of his poem Alan sets an invocation that I am convinced meant much to Dante, where he makes an even more audacious claim than at the outset:

> Till now my muse has sounded with thin murmur,
> till now my page has played in fragile verse
> to the sound of Phoebus' lyre; but now, leaving such
>   paltriness aside,
> I tune a greater lyre and, casting off the poet's part,
> I lay claim to the new words of the prophet.
> Earthly Apollo shall yield to the heavenly muse,
> the muse to Jove, the words of earth shall yield,
> obedient, to those of heaven – earth shall give place to
>   Olympus.
> I'll be the reed-pen of this song, not its scribe or author . . .
> the night irradiated from without, the muddy cup
>   streaming with nectar.
>
> Supreme begetter, God eternal, living power . . .
> shine before me with your radiance, bedewing
> my mind more copiously with divine nectar –
> rain upon my spirit, wash its stains away and, tearing the
>   dark open,
> dispel it, make me serene with the splendour of your light.
> Repair my reed-pen, purge my tongue of rust,
> let me, the stammerer, speak your words, give speech to
>   me

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who am dumb, give me a fountain in my thirst, a path in
my lostness,
be my ship's helmsman, in my fear grant me a haven,
billowing my sails with a celestial wind.[19]

I believe Alan's prayer for inspiration as prophet to be passionately serious, as the exalted language suggests – but what is it that Alan prophesies? Till now he had depicted how Natura plans to create a new, perfect human being (the *novus homo*), and how, to achieve this, Fronesis – the personified human mind, at its highest or divinest capacity[20] – makes an ascent into the heavens. After the poet's invocation, Fronesis reaches the presence of God, implores him to give her the form of the *novus homo*, and, receiving it, brings it back to earth. Natura and the Virtues welcome the form and make it into a physical reality. A number of threats and dangers – from Fortuna and from the Vices – are overcome, the perfect one survives, uncorrupted, and the poem ends with an evocation of paradise re-established on earth. Through the *novus homo*, the world is renewed.

This renewal must be the prophetic vision that meant so much to Alan. Its details remain mysterious, just as those of Dante's palpably prophetic passages do. Alan's thoughts and hopes may here be quite close to those of the prophet who was his exact contemporary, Joachim of Fiore.[21] Alan's 'earth made heavenly' could well be that age of complete justice, brotherly love and free sharing of all property which Joachim, in the 1180s, believed was already on the horizon. And yet for Joachim this age also implied the discarding of all outward authority, both of Church and State, whereas for Alan, it would seem, even the renewed world will still need a ruler – blessed and idealistic, but a ruler nonetheless. If for Joachim the *novus homo* realises the finest potential of monasticism, for Alan he is rather a philosopher–king, graced with intellectual and chivalric virtues, not only with spiritual ones.[22]

It is likely that Dante shared something of Joachim's vision as well as of Alan's; but the identity and the precise temporal and spiritual rôle of Dante's saviour of the world – that Veltro whom Vergil predicts, who is nourished on wisdom, love, and valour, and who will cause the death of the wolf,[23] that deliverer whom Beatrice promises, who will slay the harlot and the giant[24] – remain (perhaps intentionally, perhaps inevitably) enigmatic.

To return to Alan's invocation: it is also one of a series of moments in his poem in which Alan reflects upon the nature of

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