Medieval Criticism: Poetics, Aesthetics and Hermeneutics

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1. Introduction

Literary criticism does not disappear during the Middle Ages. The classical tradition survives the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, and most of the great Latin authors will remain a part of the cultural tradition of Europe. The fate of the Greek authors is different: generally speaking, they will survive only through Latin versions and imitations of their works. Most of the Greek authors are unknown during the Middle Ages (this is the case of Homer) or will reach the West only through mangled versions and derivations (as happened with Aristotle's Poetics).

Some key concepts of classical poetics are preserved: the Platonic and Aristotelian conception of art as imitation and the classification into three basic genres, as well as the concept of decorum (from Horace). The Middle ages preserved the rhetorical tradition of classical times, adapting it to its own needs. There are artes poeticae, artes dictaminis (or treatises on letter-writing) and above all artes praedicandi which follow classical authorities such as Cicero, Horace or Quintilian. This would be the "prescriptive" side of medieval literary theory: manuals giving instructions for composition, focusing their attention on the prospective author.

On the other hand, there is a rich tradition of textual commentary, sometimes of the classics, but above all of the Bible and of theological writings. This aspect of medieval criticism directs its attention not to the way works should be, but to the way they are; not to works which must be written, but to works which are already written and are of religious or moral significance. The medieval commentators face problems which are peculiar to their own age, different from those of the classical writers. For instance, they must accommodate the tradition of Pagan learning and the authority of the Scripture, so as to assimilate the culture of the past without any danger to belief. Since the ultimate basis for medieval knowledge is faith in the authority of a book, of the Scripture, they must also ascertain the
degree of authority which must be given to each kind of text, and solve the critical problems posed by an interpretation of the Bible. Of course, most of the medieval critics are priests or monks; many are theologians, and in any case their concern is never far from religion and from the authority of the Church and the Bible. This hegemony of Christian authority over critical thought is what characterises the Middle Ages as a period in the history of literary theory and criticism.

The Middle Ages are not a uniform period, though. From the point of view of literary criticism, we may divide it into three periods:

1) The Dark Ages, from the sixth to the eighth century. Very few documents from this period have reached us. We find nevertheless a few isolated scholars of great influence. We may conveniently end the Dark Ages with the so-called Carolingian renaissance of the late eighth century, fostered by the Englishman Alcuin of York (c. 735-804).

2) The High Middle Ages, up to the 12th century. Although written texts from this period are more abundant, it is still characterized by cultural isolation and stagnation, little variety in debate and little knowledge of the classics. The dominant tradition in philosophical thought is Platonic, and as far as knowledge is concerned, there is a lack of faith in human agency and a reliance on authority and revelation.

3) From the 12th century on, the situation changes somewhat. There is in Western Europe, and above all in France, an increase in cultural dynamism which has been called "the twelfth-century Renaissance." New, highly organized monastic orders are founded, increasing communication among the different regions and countries. Universities appear for the first time, and the system of study is based on reading and commenting texts. The importance of the disciplines connected to textual study will therefore increase. Little by little, the philosophical texts of Aristotle will become known in the West, and Aristotle will become "the Philosopher" for the later Middle Ages. The scholastic philosophy of the universities faces the problem of adapting Aristotelian thought to Christian dogma. This is only one more sign of an increasing movement towards humanism, towards a greater reliance on the ability and goodness of individual human intention and agency. The humanist influence is already clearly strong in the later critics of the Middle Ages, such as Dante or Boccaccio, who are no longer churchmen. Indeed, divisions in history are always artificial to a point, and the Middle Ages shade into the Renaissance just as the High medieval period merges imperceptibly into the Lower Middle Ages.

Even in the first period there are important men of learning and small periods of renaissance, occasional or localized instances of cultural revival. We will mention here, to start with, on the one hand the figures of Augustine and Boethius, at the borderline between the late classical age and the Middle Ages; on the other, Bede and Isidore of Seville as great isolated figures in the so-called "Dark Ages" from the sixth to the eighth century.
The Roman Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 480-525) wrote *De consolatione philosophiae* (*The Consolation of Philosophy*), the most popular tract of the Middle ages. This treatise was written in prison while he awaited execution, and it explains how the contemplation of God can reconcile us to our miseries down on earth. preserved through his Latin translations some works of Aristotle; these translations, together with his comments, preserve these theories in an age in which classical knowledge was rapidly disappearing.

Augustine is the greatest of the Fathers of the Church, and his influence on Christian thought has been enormous: it was all-pervasive in the early Middle Ages, and his works served, together with the Bible, as a reference background for commentators scattered all over Europe. His works also provide models on issues of critical theory, such as problems of interpretation and authority, rhetoric, the use of classical literature, etc. We shall return to Augustine's theories later on.

Among influential medieval writers we can mention Isidore of Seville, the author of *Etymologiae*, an encyclopedic work which deals with just about everything on earth. It was the standard encyclopedia for the early Middle Ages, and we mention it here because it includes, among other things, a discussion of the nature of poetic fiction and a treatise of rhetoric. The etymological method followed by Isidore to explain the meaning of things was a standard practice in the Middle Ages, and a standard way of beginning any commentary would be to explain the real or supposed etymology of the title of the work or of the name of the author.

The Venerable Bede (673-735) taught at the monastery school of Jarrow (Durham, England) for more than fifty years. He wrote many important Latin works, among them the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, which is the first history of England, and *De natura rerum*, a compilation of all contemporary knowledge about natural science, natural history, astronomy, botany, etc. He also wrote many treatises on education, lesson books and commentaries of sacred texts.

One basic problem of early Christian thought was the integration of the Biblical and Christian tradition with the classical heritage. A way of assimilating both traditions was to draw comparisons between classical and Hebrew authors. This might be the primitive form of comparative literature studies, although Plutarch or Macrobius had already compared Greek and Latin authors: Terence and Menander, Virgil and Homer, etc. Saint Jerome, the translator of the Bible, was fond of such comparisons. "David" he remarked "is our Simonides, our Pindar, our Horace."1 Bede also compares the book of Job to a tragedy, the Pentateuch to a heroic poem, and the Ecclesiastes to an elegy. In his rhetorical work *De schematibus et tropis*. Bede takes the same approach, showing the richness of the Bible both in its variety of literary genres and its elaborate use of language. Traditionally, the figures of rhetoric were exemplified with instances taken

1 Qtd. in *Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations*. Ed. O. B. Hardison et al. (New York: Ungar, 1974): 9
from the classical authors: Bede takes examples from the Bible. Bede's choice of genres does not coincide everywhere with Jerome's: some of the psalms are elegies, Job is a heroic poem which uses the "mixed" mode of treatment (narrative + dialogue), the Song of Songs is a biblical drama and Ecclesiastes is a didactic poem. Matching Hebrew against Classical history, the Christian thinkers drew the conclusion that Hebrew history was older; therefore, Hebrew civilization, including literature and poetry, anticipated the classics. This view was held by Jerome, who thinks the Bible used classical verse forms before the Greeks. According to Isidore of Seville, "it is apparent that the study of poetry was much older among the Hebrews than among the Gentiles."¹ "Bede's De Arte Metrica incorporates these ideas into formal criticism. In addition to repeating the commonplaces concerning the use of classical prosody in scripture, he notes that Hebrew poets anticipated the three classical manners of imitation. The pure mimetic, or dramatic, manner is used in the Song of Songs; the pure narrative in Ecclesiastes, and the "mixed" — the manner used by Homer and Vergil — in the Book of Job. The De Arte Metrica also illustrates the new canon of the classics by adding Prudentius, Arator, Sedulius, and Ambrose to the list of classical poets."² The privilege given to the Bible over all other literature will remain a basic critical conception during the whole of the Middle Ages. "As the Book of Books, the Bible was supposed to have made superlative use of all the figures, colours, tropes, and stylistic registers with which the classical authors had adorned their works."³

Evaluating pagan literature was more problematic for medieval thinkers. The issue of the relationship between pagan and Christian culture was a central one, since Christian thought had to face the challenge of assimilating without danger the important body of pagan knowledge it inherited. The literary canon received from the classics had to be handled with care.

The classical authors were usually given a moralizing interpretation, but sometimes this was difficult to do, and then the commentators had to accommodate their categories, and in so doing these became more complex. Ovid, for instance, was a difficult author because of his immorality. For instance, a medieval commentator of Ovid's Heroïdes tries to interpret it as a work of "ethics":

(1) He uses the example of Penelope to discuss lawful love, the example of Canace to discuss unlawful love, and the example of Phyllis to discuss foolish love. He includes two of the forms, foolish and unlawful love, not for their own sake, but in order to commend the third. Thus, in commending lawful love he criticizes foolish and unlawful love.⁴

¹ Qtd. in Hardison et al. 26
² Hardison et al. 26.
⁴ Qtd. in Minnis et al. 21.
Here Ovid cannot be read literally: some of the letters must have an ironical sense. According to another commentary,

(2) Another interpretation is that the intention is to praise some of those who write the letters for their chastity, and to blame some for their unchaste love.\(^1\)

Another work by Ovid, the *Amores*, definitely cannot be given a moral reading. Therefore, a commentator must acknowledge that

(3) the end he has in view (*finalis causa*), that is, the usefulness of the book, is that we should recognize in it verbal embellishments (*ornatus verborum*) and an attractive word-order (*pulchras positiones*).\(^2\)

We see that occasional commentators accept poetic pleasure as a sufficient justification.\(^3\) But this purely aesthetic aim of this work is suspect from a purely Christian viewpoint, once we take into account the subject of the work, carnal and worldly love, and another commentator asks

(4) Why should the young recruit in Christ's army subject his impressionable mind to the writing of Ovid, in which even though gold can be found among the dung, yet the foulness that clings to the gold defiles the seeker, even though it is the gold he is after?\(^4\)

Therefore, pagan writers who are thought to be more "moral" (like Cicero) or more truthful (Lucan over Homer) are privileged in the Medieval canon.

Generally speaking, all pagan literature is suspect; it can lead the human soul astray, as we find in Augustine's *Confessions*, where he tells us of the vain emotions of his soul when he watched tragedies or read the epic poems of Homer and Virgil.\(^5\) Augustine and other Fathers of the Church set the pace for the medieval attitude towards pagan literature. The assimilation of the classics, when it occurred, was done through selection and distortion. Or, as it was put by Rabanus Maurus (early 9th century) in his *Clerical Institute*,

(5) If we wish to read the poems and books of the gentiles because of their flowers of eloquence, we must take as our type the captive woman in Deuteronomy . . . If an Israelite should want her as wife, he should shave her head, cut off her nails, and pluck her eyebrows. When she has been made clean, he can then embrace her as a

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1 Qtd. in Minnis et al. 22-23.
2 Qtd. in Minnis et al. 28.
3 Cf. also "Bernard Silvester's" introduction to his commentary of the *Aeneid*, in Minnis et al. 152.
4 Conrad of Hirsau, in Minnis et al. 56.
5 E.g. *Confessions* 1.16, 3.2.
husband. By the same token, we customarily do this when a book of secular learning comes into our hands. If we find anything useful in it we absorb it into our teaching. If there is anything superfluous concerning idols, love, or purely secular affairs, we reject it. We shave the head of some books, we cut the nails of others with razor-sharp scissors.¹

The establishment of a canon of classical authors is based therefore on their usefulness from the point of view of Christian education. According to Augustine, Cassiodorus and Rabanus Maurus, the chief justification for the study of the classics and other secular letters was as a preparation for the study of the Bible. In the words of Conrad of Hirsau,

(6) the nourishing milk you draw from the poets may provide you with an opportunity for taking solid food in the form of more serious reading.²

¹ Qtd. in Hardison 5.
² In Minnis et al. 54.
2. Medieval poetics

Medieval poetics will not follow the Aristotelian tradition according to which poetry is a distinct art in its own right. Poetics is a marginal discipline, and as such it has no specific place in the medieval educational system. The *trivium* was the first approach to higher learning. It included the study of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and it was followed by the *quadrivium*, consisting of arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy. And there was, of course, theology, the supreme discipline of knowledge. Whatever studies of poetry take place in the Middle Ages will tend to assimilate poetry to a particular discipline of the *trivium* or the *quadrivium*. Criticism is often associated with the disciplines of the *trivium*. The choice of a grammatical, logical or rhetorical approach gives rise to different forms of criticism. And we can also relate poetry to the disciplines of the *quadrivium*.

2.1. Literature and grammar

2.2. Literature and rhetoric: Geoffrey of Vinsauf.

2.3. Literature and logic

2.4. Literature and the *quadrivium*.

2.1. Literature and grammar

Grammar is the science of correct speaking. Classical authors are studied here as models of language use: for Christian writers like Bede, Cassiodorus or Rabanus Maurus, the study of poetry is only a preparation for the study of Scripture. Medieval grammar laid a strong emphasis on composition and imitation of a choice of authors. This emphasis and the idea of a selection of authors are already found in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (1st century). In his *De arte grammatica*, Gaius Marius Victorinus (4th century) defines grammar as

(7) the science of interpreting the poets and historians and the method of correct speaking and writing.

The grammatical approach is prominent in the Cathedral schools from the 12th century on, and it is defended by medieval humanists like John of Salisbury (c. 1115-1180). In his *Metalogicon*, John of Salisbury observes that "poetry belongs to grammar, which is the mother and source of its study."\(^1\) According to John of Salisbury, poetry is

\(^1\) Qtd. in Hardison et al. 7.
(8) the cradle of philosophy\footnote{1};

however, this may mean only that poetry is the easiest study to undertake before the pupil can approach more difficult texts. This view of poetry as a linguistic instrument can be found as late as the first phase of the Renaissance, in humanists like Erasmus, whose approach to poetry is still to a large extent the medieval one.

The grammatical approach gives rise to three types of treatise:

1. The 	extit{gloss} or grammatical commentary, which follows a text in a detailed way concentrating on difficult terms or complex expressions, and explaining topical references.

2. The 	extit{Ars metrica} or 	extit{Ars rhythmica}, the treatise on prosody, which classifies questions relative to verse, such as the different kinds of feet, lines and stanza forms. In England we find an important early instance: Saint Bede's 	extit{De Arte metrica}. Beside the study of classical verse, Bede mentions the changes from a quantitative to an accentual prosody. The metrics of Latin poetry was based on the quantity of syllables. In the late classical age quantity disappeared from Latin, and poetic rhythm changed to the accentual prosody we know today. Bede provides one of the earliest technical discussions of a prosody which would be used by all later poetry. He defines accentual prosody as

(9) [a] composition determined not by metrical practice, but by the number of syllables as determined by their sound as in the songs of the popular poets.\footnote{2}

3. 	extit{Accessus ad auctores}, or introductions to recommended authors, as an introduction to their works or in an independent treatise, sometimes comparing their relative merits in a brief way. Saint Jerome, like Bede, also compares the relative merits of the Bible and the classical writers and defends the value of the Bible as literature.

The 	extit{accessus} usually follows a pre-established development. There are several types used at different times during the Middle Ages, which indicates the gradual evolution of critical conceptions:

1) In the early part of the Middle Ages, we can find basically two types of prologue:

- Type A is based on the rhetorical 	extit{circumstantiae} which try to systematize knowledge about any topic: it is based on the questions who? what? why? how? when? where? when? by what means? (The same as today's

\footnote{1} Metalogicon 1.22, qtd. in Minnis et al. 122.
\footnote{2} Qtd. in Hardison et al. 8.
journalists's rule of thumb for a news item). Apparently this type originated in the classical age with Hermagoras, and it is used extensively by Remigius of Auxerre (c. 841-908).

• Type B is associated with the commentary of the Aeneid written by Servius (4th century). It includes discussion of "the life of the poet (vita poetae), the title of the work (titulus operis), the nature of the verse (qualitas carminis), the intention of the writer (intentio scribentis), the number of the books (numerus librorum), the order of the books (ordo librorum) and the textual exposition (explanatio). "

2) With the development of scholasticism, another type of introduction, the "type C" prologue, became more common: "In the twelfth century a critical idiom became widely used in commentaries on all kinds of "set text," whether sacred or secular, whether in schools of grammar or theology, which entailed analysis of authorial intention (intentio auctoris), book-title (titulus), stylistic and didactic mode of procedure (modus agendi or modus tractandi), the order in which the contents are arranged (ordo), the pedagogic and/or moral usefulness of the work (utilitas), its subject-matter (materia), and the branch of knowledge to which it belongs (cui parti philosophia supponitur). " Classical precedents can be found for each of these sections, but the increased popularity of this approach is significative. The "type C" prologue was imported from philosophical works, and therefore it tended to stress the seriousness of poetry and its moral utility. Usually, literary works are said to belong to ethics, a branch of practical philosophy according to the Aristotelian classification of sciences. There are of course mixed forms, later developments and mutual influences between these models for prologues.

The most complete of the remaining accessus is the Dialogus super auctores, sive Didascalon by Conrad of Hirsau (c. 1070-1150), a compilation of introductions to Aesop, Horace, Homer, etc. and also to Christian poets like Sedulius and Juvenecus. He organizes them from the easiest to the most difficult, according to the Pauline maxim stating that "milk must come before solid food." In his methodological introduction, Conrad explains that a good explanation of a text should include the following:

(10) who the author is, what he has written, the scale of his work, when he has written it, and how, that is whether it is in prose or verse, with what subject-matter or intention each has begun his work, what end the composition has in view. 3

Elsewhere he notes that

(11) in interpreting books the ancients asked seven questions: who the author was, the title of the work, the nature (qualitas) of the

1 Minnis et al. 12.
2 Minnis et al. 2.
3 Conrad of Hirsau, Dialogus super auctores, in Minnis et al. 40-41.
verse, the intention of the writer, the order and number of books, and
the actual exposition [of the text]. But modern writers have laid
down four questions that have to be asked: the subject-matter, the
intention of the writer, the final cause of the writing, and to what
part of philosophy that which is written pertains.¹

Similar prologues were used well into the Renaissance period, for both
sacred and profane books.

Conrad's treatise is interesting because it is the closest medieval
equivalent of a general introduction to literature, including a discussion of
its ultimate aims and its technique and definitions of all the basic critical
terms he uses. His explanations usually begin following the example of
Isidore, with the etymology of the terms (usually the wrong one). Thus with
the definition of books:

(12) "Book" (liber) is so called from the verb "to free" (liberare),
because the man who spends his time reading often releases his
mind from the anxieties and chains of the world.²

The same principle is used to explain the different kinds of writers:

(13) The author (auctor) is so called from the verb "increasing"
augendo) because by his pen he amplifies the deeds or sayings or
thoughts of men of former times. History is something seen, an
event, for Greek historin is visio ("sight") in Latin. Hence the
writer of history is said to write of the event he has witnessed.
Moreover, the poet (poeta) is called a maker, or one who gives
shape to things, because he says what is false instead of the truth, or
else sometimes intermingles truth with falsehood. The bard (vates)
gets his name from his mental power. For it argues great mental
powers to bypass the present and show future events as if they were
right before one's eyes. Commentators are those who can work out
many ideas, beginning with just a few facts and illuminate the
obscure sayings of others. Expositors are those who unravel the
mystical sayings of Holy Scripture. Writers of discourses are those
who compose discourses on various subjects containing exhortation
for the edification of their audience. A poem (poema) is the work
of the poet and that alone, while poesy (poesis) is a work consisting
of many books. Poetria or poetrida is a woman who studies verse.
A fable (fabula) is something that neither happened nor could
happen.³

There follow discussions of metre, of rhetorical arguments. The order of
presentation is natural ("when the beginning of the book follows the natural
sequence of the matter narrated") or artificial, such as the one followed by

¹ Conrad of Hirsau, in Minnis et al. 46.
² Conrad of Hirsau, In Minnis et al. 42.
³ Conrad of Hirsau, in Minnis et al. 43-44.
Virgil in the *Aeneid*. Conrad also mentions the different levels of explanation (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogic) and repeats several classical doctrines, such as the Horatian idea of the unity of the work or the rhetorical doctrine of the levels of style:

(14) There are three styles of writing, the lowly, the middle, and the lofty, and the author adapts the tone of his style to the nature of his subject matter.\(^1\)

These styles are best exemplified by Virgil:

(15) He produced three works, employing the threefold range of styles, that is the lowly, middle and grandiloquent, in the *Bucolics*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid* respectively.\(^2\)

These conceptions are representative of medieval criticism, but they will remain critical commonplaces for hundreds of years.

2.2. Literature and rhetoric

Most often, the theory of poetry is assimilated to rhetoric: poetry is just another kind of discourse with a practical aim in view, the persuasion of the hearer. Thus, we can speak of a rhetorical poetics, since the way these clerics approach literature derives mainly from classical rhetoric. As a matter of fact, classical poetics, if we except Aristotle, was heavily rhetorical. Late classical critics, such as Donatus and Macrobius, interpret the highest poetry (Virgil) as a work of oratory and moral teaching. This approach will be emphasized during the Middle Ages, when in fact there is no clear separation between the disciplines of rhetoric and poetics. The most influential authorities on matters of poetry are Horace and Cicero.

During the Middle Ages, rhetoric was a part of the standard education of a man of letters. It was included in the *trivium* of medieval universities and schools, together with grammar and logic. Medieval rhetoric was an impoverished version of the classical approach. It loses its relative comprehensiveness, and often ends up in a theory of "embellishment" of speech through a list of conventional techniques. Medieval treatises concentrate on disposition to some extent and above all on elocution; they often leave aside the other phases of composition. The separation between genres and styles degenerates into the theory of the *sermones*, with a fixed *sermo* dealing with a specific social level and subject matter: early English critics like John of Salisbury (*Metalogicon*) or John of Garland (c. 1195-1272; *Poetria*) follow the classical doctrine of the

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\(^1\) Conrad of Hirsau, in Minnis et al. 46.

\(^2\) Conrad of Hirsau, in Minnis et al. 62.
three styles, high, medium and low. The key classical texts are the works of Cicero, Quintilian's *Institutio* and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, which at the time was believed to be by Cicero. There is an almost complete ignorance of the Greek texts.

Works on rhetoric can be found at any point in the Middle Ages. We have already mentioned the work of Isidore of Seville (560-636) in his *Etymologiae*, the standard encyclopaedic work of the early Middle Ages. In England, we have Bede once more, with his treatise *De schematibus et tropis*, which illustrates the commonplaces of classical rhetoric with examples from the Bible, aiming, as we have noted, at the integration of the two traditions. But there are two high points of rhetorical activity during the Middle Ages. The first was the Carolingian revival of learning (8th-9th centuries) directed by the Englishman theologian Alcuin, the teacher and counselor of Charlemagne; the second is the "renaissance" of the twelfth century.

Alcuin himself wrote an influential *Rhetoric* as well as several works on grammar and educational dialogues, and, interestingly enough, seems to have promoted coeducation, or educating boys and girls together, an idea remarkable at one time when girls were seldom taught to read. Several treatises on poetry, rhetoric and criticism seem to have been written in this period, though most of them are lost. In England there is a minor revival of learning in around the figure of King Alfred the Great (849-99), who stimulated translation from Latin works into Old English, in an attempt to make learning more available.

A great number of treatises of rhetoric are composed from the 12th century on. The treatises on the art of poetry are usually called *Poetria* ("that is, 'the poet's rule-book'"\(^1\)) and are not so different from the rhetorical treatises. As a typical instance, we can concentrate on the work of the Englishman Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* (early 13th century). It is not an original or important work, but rather a representative one, and a popular textbook in its age.

The treatise is written in Latin verse (the age of vernacular treatises is still far away) and it aims to give advice to prospective poets. It follows the classical rhetorical outline, concentrating on disposition and elocution, and deals with grammatical issues as well as with problems of composition. The model is that of epideictic rhetoric; the aim of poetry is supposed to be to praise or censure. As in all rhetorical treatises, emphasis falls on craftsmanship rather than on inspiration. But Geoffrey insists on the power of the mind to give shape to the subject matter, and the main theoretical principle of his treatise is "the primacy of the intellectual conception of the work over its materials."\(^2\) The initial idea of the poet must guide the process of composition. The hand of the mind, Geoffrey says, must shape the material before the actual hand: the plan and intention of the writer must

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1. Anonymous commentator of Horace; in Minnis et al. 34.
2. Hardison et al. 126.
guide everything and submit the materials to the preestablished idea. This insistence on the primacy of the idea over matter is a textbook version of the Neoplatonic thought which pervades the language of theology in the High Middle Ages. The idea, then is the inner nature of the work, which must be clothed with words and ornaments, the outer garments. Apart from this characteristic sartorial imagery, Geoffrey employs the image of social degree to describe the relations between the elements of the text: the idea is the mistress, and words are the servants. The introduction of the work is a herald who announces the subject, while the main body is the lord of the house. Geoffrey deals with composition in three stages: the order of the material, its amplification or abbreviation, and the ornamentation or elocution.

**Ordering the material.** This section corresponds to the classical *dispositio*, but now it is conceived as an ordering of narrative material. Geoffrey is traditional in his opposition between two kinds of order (*ordo naturalis* vs. *ordo artificialis*), but the definitions are interesting; at the same time they allow us to enjoy Geoffrey's pedantic style:

1. The material's order may follow two possible courses: at one time it advances along the pathway of art, at another it travels the smooth road of nature. Nature's smooth road points the way when "things" and "words" follow the same sequence, and the order of discourse does not depart from the order of occurrence. The poem travels the pathway of art if a more effective order presents first what was later in time, and defers the appearance of what was actually earlier. Now, when the natural order is thus transposed, later events incur no censure by their early appearance, nor do early events by their late introduction. Without contention, indeed, they willingly assume each other's place, and gracefully yield to each other with ready consent. Deft artistry inverts things in such a way that it does not pervert them; in transposing, it disposes the material to better effect. The order of art is more elegant than natural order, and in excellence far ahead, though it puts last things first.  

Geoffrey goes on to distinguish several kinds of artificial order. We can begin with the end:

2. Nature has placed the end last in order, but art respectfully defers to it, leads it from its humble position and accords it the place of honor. (130)

We can also begin with the middle. We can also, to begin with,

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(18) make use of a proverb, ensuring that it may not sink to a purely specific relevance, but raise its head high to some general truth (130),

or with an exemplum. Any of these techniques will ensure a brilliant, artistic beginning.

**Development** (amplification and abbreviation). These are further techniques to control the material and make it fit our intention. The techniques of amplification are enumerated: repetition, periphrasis, comparison... the aim should be to present the same thing in a number of different ways, in a "hidden" way, under another aspect. Apostrophes or digressions can also be used to add more material if necessary. Descriptions are also a good device which can be introduced anywhere; Geoffrey gives a delightful stock recipe for the classical description of a feminine figure:

(19) So let the radiant description descend from the top of her head to her toe, and the whole be polished to perfection. (134)

Abbreviation is done through the suppression of all these devices, pruning and paring, fusing many concepts in one, having resource to implication, even clipping the syntax through the use of clipped sentences and ablative absolute.

**The ornaments of style.** Geoffrey's conception of style is guided by the classical notion of decorum, of the necessary congruence between content and expression:

(20) If the meaning has dignity, let that dignity be preserved; see that no vulgar word may debase it (136).

Here the distance between the political and the critical imagination is minimal. Another observation on style is interesting in another sense. An advantage of ornament, Geoffrey argues, is that it is a strange use of language: by moving words around and using them in unexpected ways, poetry renews the word. Medieval literary theory usually defines figures as deviations from the common usage, even as faults:

(21) Solecism is every fault which occurs in the putting together of words... If solecinisms occur with reason [i.e. deliberately] they are called sc/hemata by the Greeks and "figures" by the Latins. Thus, Isidore says, "A figure is a fault which occurs with reason."¹

Geoffrey classifies the kinds of ornament into easy and difficult (ornatus facilis / difficilis). Difficult ornament consists mainly in the use of tropes and some "difficult" figures like hyperbaton. Here Geoffrey follows ad Herennium. Tropes are "difficult" because in them

¹ William of Conches, prologue to the Commentary on Priscian's Institutions, in Minnis et al. 133.
a word is taken only in its figurative and not in its literal sense. All the tropes are of one general class, distinguished by the figurative status of the words and the uncommon meaning assigned them (137).

The main tropes are:

• Metaphor (*translatio*), defined as a new garment given to a thing:

(23) Here the linking of aspects that are similar sheds a pleasing light (136).

Metaphor is the most valuable garment in Geoffrey's wardrobe; he recommends a series of metaphors which must have been trite already by 1200.

• Metonymy (*denominatio*). It is defined as the use of an abstract for a concrete term, for an effect attributed to a cause ("fear goes pale"), or an action to an instrument, or the material instead of the form of the object, the container instead of the thing contained, etc.

• Synecdoche (*intellectio*) : "suppressing the whole, I imply that whole from the parts" (138).

• Catachresis (*abusio*) is an analogical use of language, using a word instead of a related word ("long" for "great").

Other tropes mentioned by Geoffrey are hyperbole, onomatopoeia, antonomasia, and allegory.

Easy ornament allows the poet to compose a work that is at once adorned and simple. Geoffrey defines the main figures of speech and thought. The former adorn the form of the words, while the latter adorn their meaning. Among the figures of thought he mentions distributio (distribution of roles [or characteristics] among several things or persons) *licentia* (use of familiar language), *diminutio* (litotes or understatement), *descriptio*, *expolitio* (that is, varying treatment), *hyperbole*, *ambiguity* (irony), *brevitas* (compression), *demonstratio* (vivid presentation of action or objects through the use of circumstance), *sermocinatio* (adapting a speech to the speaking character), and many others.

On memory, Geoffrey is brief but to the point:

(24) the little cell that remembers is a cell of delight, and it craves what is delightful, not what is boring. (142)

He advises against trying to stock too much in one's mind, and to learn things little by little, enjoying oneself while one learns and without any burdensome efforts. To learn things by heart, he also advises each person to devise his own system of mnemotechnic signs, one which gives pleasure.
Geoffrey of Vinsauf concludes his treatise with a section on delivery:

(25) In reciting aloud, let three tongues speak: let the first be that of the mouth, the second that of the speaker's countenance, and the third that of gesture. (143)

The voice of the poet must be modulated in accordance with the contents of the poem; it must be "a reflection of the subject" (143). The poet must act out the poem without being really deeply affected by it.

(26) So, then, let them all be in harmony: suitable invention, flowing expression, polished development, firm retention in memory. If discourses are delivered ineptly, they are no more to be praised than is a recitation charmingly delivered but without the other requirements mentioned. (144)

2.3. Literature and logic

A possible link between literature and logic was already pointed out by Alexander of Aphrodisias, a 3rd century commentator of Aristotle's works. But the issue was forgotten until it reappears with the scholastic Aristotelianism of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Averroes' reading of the *Poetics* was influential in this respect. He conceived poetry (or rather fiction) as a "faculty", as a logical possibility of modulating a statement, and not a "science" with contents of its own. He believed the *Poetics* to be the last section of Aristotle's *Organon* or logical works, dealing with the logical possibility of fiction. Some scholastics, like Gundissalinus, will go further and will define poetry as the technique of creating illusions. Some scholastics, such as Aquinas, consider poetry to be the lowest part of logic, dealing with fictions, and not with reality —extremists like Savonarola¹ push further these views and defend again the Platonic rejection of all kinds of fiction. Although these definitions was not always meant as a condemnation of poetry, they were challenged by defenders of poetry such as Boccaccio, who want to see in it a source of knowledge, and not merely a play of logical possibilities. St. Thomas Aquinas and Roger Bacon (13th century) will accept a double definition of poetry: "as a faculty or technique it is a part of logic; as an activity it is a kind of ethical teaching or a method of creating moral examples."² The issue of the place of poetry among the sciences becomes a standard topic in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as can be seen in the defenses of poetry written by Boccaccio or Sidney. Many scholastic thinkers (St. Bonaventure, Giles of Rome, Henry of Ghent, William of Conches) consider poetry to be essentially didactic and therefore place it within the sphere of ethics, a much higher

¹ Gerolamo Savonarola (1452-98), *De scientiis.*
² Hardison et al. 15.
position among the sciences. Others, like Bernard of Chartres, denied that poetry had anything to do with philosophy.

The relation between literature and logic was bound to be a problematic one due to the literary nature of the Bible. Scholastics had to distinguish two possible modes of science: "the modes of human science (involving such logical methods as definition, division, argument-formation, and the application of examples designed to aid the teaching of these methods) and the modes of sacred science (involving such poetic and rhetorical methods as narrative, fiction and parable, affective exhortation and warning, allegory, figure and metaphor, exemplification, etc.)." Once these methods were recognised to have a cognitive value, there was only one step to the application of these ideas to secular literature — unless the literature of the Bible and secular literature are different in substance. As we see, the relationship of poetry to logic leads us naturally to the problem of its relationship with theology.

2.4. Literature and the quadrivium

Attempts to relate secular poetry to the disciplines of the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, astronomy, and theology) are more rare. Arithmetic, music and astronomy are related for the medieval mind in a way they no longer are for us, through the Neoplatonic (and ultimately Pythagorean) conception of cosmic harmony, which governs the harmony of musical rhythm as well as the movements of the planets, and can be understood through mathematics. In his treatise On Music, Boethius (27) shows that after some fashion a musical proportion exists between all things, inasmuch as all things have been constructed in a certain proportion to each other, in a harmonious pattern.2

This idea of cosmic harmony is reinforced through the Christian conception of divine order: the universe is created and ordered by God, and the harmony of the universe hides a secret order of significations which all point to the mysteries of salvation: anything can be read, everything is a symbol of the divine order of things. This conception is pervasive in medieval texts.

The belief in a secret order and harmony of things stimulated some forms of critical activity which have remained with us ever since. We have on one hand allegory, which we shall study in a minute. But we also have such things as numerology and symbolic interpretation.

Numerology is the study of numerical symbolism in texts: it assigns a moral or a mystical meaning to selected numbers. Three, seven or twelve...
are favourite magic numbers, though any number will do in the end. The occurrence of these numbers, or the numerical repetition of motifs, actions, etc., becomes significant for the numerological critic. Among works of this kind we can mention the work of Aldhelm, (640?-709), the abbot of Malmesbury and Bishop of Sherborne, whom we might consider to be the first English critic. He wrote De Septenario, de Metris, Enigmatibus, ac Pedum Regulis (Concerning the Number Seven, Meter, Enigmas, and the Rules of Feet). Apart from a discussion of Latin verse, Aldhelm discussed the meaning of the number seven as it was used in the Bible. Needless to say, these ideas were not exclusive of the critics: the numerological keys were used by the authors themselves during the Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance: Spenser used them in England, and Dante built his Comedy on the basis of the sacred number three, allusive to the Trinity (three books, 33 cantos in each, written in terza rima).
3. Medieval Aesthetics and Hermeneutics

3.1. Reading the Bible: Literature and Theology

The really problematic issue for medieval criticism is the relationship between poetry and the queen of all disciplines, theology. The study and commentary of the Bible is the real concern of the medieval critics, and their most interesting critical conceptions have to do with Biblical interpretation and appreciation, in the light of Christian dogma. The basic problem of medieval criticism is that whereas theological treatises have a logical and philosophical arrangement, the Bible is not an abstract discussion of religious issues: it is a literary work, which includes history, narrative, parable and allegory. There is, accordingly, an uneasy relation between the Bible, secular poetry, and theology: whereas theology is argumentative, the Bible is, like secular poems, "affective." The medieval critics will have to discuss the different literary strategies (genres, figures, techniques) used by the Bible to address different kinds of public, and recognise the way in which these literary strategies are legitimate instruments of religious instruction. According to Saint Bonaventure,

(28) because the recipients of this teaching do not belong to any one class (genus) of people, but come from all classes —for all who are to be saved must know something of this teaching— Scripture has a manifold meaning so that it may win over every mind, reach the level of every mind, rise above every mind, and illuminate and fire with its many rays of light every mind which diligently searches for it.¹

Throughout the Middle Ages, the idea that the Sacred Scriptures have a symbolic value hidden beneath its apparent meaning is dominant. Indeed, this idea is usually applied to sacred books of any kind: Homeric poems among the Greeks, canonic literature in our own days, and, of course, the

¹ St. Bonaventure (1217-74), *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, in Minnis et al. 234.
Bible in the Middle Ages. A book which was divinely inspired gave its commentators special grounds for this claim, as noted by Jorge Luis Borges:

(29) They thought that a work dictated by the Holy Spirit was an absolute text: in other words, a text in which the collaboration of chance was calculable as zero. This portentous premise of a book impenetrable to contingency, of a book which is a mechanism of infinite purposes, moved them to permute the scriptural words, add up the numerical value of the letters, consider their form, observe the small letters and capitals, seek acrostics and anagrams and perform other exegetical rigours which it is not difficult to ridicule. Their excuse is that nothing can be contingent in the work of an infinite mind.\(^1\)

The idea of mystical interpretation derives from the Greek tradition of allegorizing Homer and Hesiod as well as from the rabinic allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament. A synthesis of both traditions had been made by the Jewish Neoplatonist Philo of Alexandria (early 1st century), and introduced in the Christian tradition by Origen (early 3rd century), who speaks of three levels of sense in the Bible: literal, moral and mystical. A contemporary of Augustine, St. John Cassian (c. 360-435), speaks of four levels of interpretation. For instance, Jerusalem in the Old Testament is, literally or historically, the city of the Jews. Allegorically, it is the Christian Church. Tropologically or morally, it is the individual soul, and anagogically (or mystically) it is the City of God. These three last levels we may call "allegorical" or "spiritual." In some medieval doctrines (John Scotus, St. Bonaventura) the whole of Nature is an allegory which can be interpreted as the work of God. In the twelfth century, Alan of Lille's hymn to the allegorical links between Nature and God suggests that signification pervades the universe, that the world and the book are different manifestations of the same:

(30) Omnis mundi creatura
Quasi liber et pictura
Nobis est, et speculum,
Nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis,
Nostri status, nostrae sortis,
Fidele signaculum.
Nostrum statum pingit rosa,
Nostri status decens glosa
Nostrae vitae lectio.

This theory of universal symbolism is a theological and not an aesthetic doctrine, but it will have numerous implications on aesthetics and literary theory.

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\(^1\) \textit{Laberintos}, qtd. in Minnis et al. 65.
3.2. Augustine (354-430)

3.2.1. Aesthetics
3.2.2. Hermeneutics

3.2.1. Aesthetics

Augustine was the greatest theorist of early Christendom. He had some knowledge of classical philosophy; he had read Plotinus, and he grafted many neo-Platonic concepts to Christian doctrine, thereby giving it a philosophical basis. As it is to be expected, his aesthetic ideas also have strong Plotinian overtones.

The perception of beauty presupposes for Augustine an idea or norm according to which this beauty is judged to be such. But this norm is not learnt from experience and sensory knowledge. The concepts of order and perfection are known to man by direct divine inspiration. Beauty, then, is not relative, but absolute. The perception of beauty is passive: it is a delighted contemplation (*beate contemplari*); the object of this contemplation are things which are harmonious to the nature of man, especially to his mind.

Augustine stresses the concept of unity as basic in both nature and art. Unity is the main source of beauty. Aesthetic concepts, such as proportion, number or measure, all important for the existence of beauty, are derived from comparison between different unities. We also find in Augustine the idea of the whole, a second-level unity made of other unities, which are integrated with an end in view. This unity arises not from the diversity of parts, but rather in spite of the diversity of parts. Augustine seems to regard the whole of a literary work as a kind of system with a complex unity. The unity of the work must allow for the existence of elements which seem to go against it; it must allow variety. This does not destroy unity, because things which are opposed often work together: so, the villain in drama makes the virtue in the hero stand out; barbarism and solecism season poetry. We can compare this Christian acceptance of defects with the doctrine of *felix culpa*: sin and imperfection are necessary so that God's plan of salvation may be fulfilled.

3.2.2. Hermeneutics

Augustine also dealt with the problem of figurative language and interpretation of the Scriptures. Augustine recognizes the poetic language of the Bible, and speaks of the "pleasant use of symbols" which is to be found there. He ventures forth the theory that the interpretation of symbols is pleasant because finding hidden things is a pleasure for man. A symbol is a part of the work which has a multiplicity of meanings. But the Scriptures
as a whole have a multiplicity of meanings, according to the interpretation we make. The possible interpretations of the Old Testament, Augustine says, are four: it can be interpreted according to history, etiology,\(^1\) analogy\(^2\) and allegory. We see that they do not coincide with those distinguished by Cassian. There are several accounts among the Church Fathers and later theologians; some distinguish three, some four, some five levels of meaning. But in the scholastic period Cassian's distinction will be the most popular, and will be adopted by Aquinas. Augustine's version is not contradictory with these. The first three levels (history, etiology, analogy) are part of the literal meaning; allegory is a common term for all the hidden or mystical meanings.\(^3\) The crucial issue is the difference between the literal level and the mystical level. This distinction will be most important to the history of literary criticism, since it opens the possibility of discovering multiple meanings in a literary work and makes interpretation more problematic.

Augustine's ideas on interpretation were enormously influential. He sought to find mystical meanings in Scripture through the use of allegory, but he also referred all interpretations to historical plausibility and to the doctrine established by the authorities. In this way, allegorical interpretation could be used to control the meaning of those passages of the Bible which seem contrary to Christian doctrine:

(31) When, therefore, we read the divine books, in such a great multitude of true concepts elicited from a few words and fortified by the sound rule of the Catholic faith, let us prefer above all what it seems certain the man we are reading thought. But if this is not evident, let us certainly prefer what the circumstances of the writing do not disallow and what is consonant with sound faith. But if even the circumstances of the writing cannot be explored and examined, let us at least prefer only what sound faith prescribes. For it is one thing not to see what the writer himself thought, another to stray from the rule of piety. If both these things are avoided, the harvest of the reader is a perfect one. But if both cannot be avoided, then, even though the will of the writer may be doubtful, it is not useless to have elicited a deeper meaning consonant with sound faith.\(^4\)

There is an important critical principle here: the objectivity of historical meaning and the use of intention as a controlling principle. But it is subordinated to a peculiarly Christian reliance on authority and morality, so that historical criteria are subservient to doctrinal ones. In fact, there is only one controlling principle in Augustine's conception: truth as defined by revelation and authority. Augustine does not believe that a text has one single, fixed, historical meaning: rather, he thinks that a text may contain as

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1 I.e. with reference to causes.
2 "When the points of agreement between Old and New Testaments are taught" (Alexander of Hales, *Sum or Theology*, introd. 1.4.4.1, in Minnis et al. 221.
3 Cf. Alexander of Hales' *Sum of Theology*, introd. 1.4.4.1., in Minnis et al. 222.
4 Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 1.21, qtd. by Hugh of St. Victor in Minnis et al. 86.
many truthful and beneficial meanings as are found by its interpreters. Addressing God, Augustine prays,

(32) If I had been Moses . . . writing the book of Genesis, I should have wished to be granted such a skill in writing, and such a style of putting together my discourse, that [those who are able to understand] would find that whatever truths they had arrived at in the course of their own thinking were not omitted in the few words of thy servant. And if someone else saw another meaning in the light of truth, that meaning too would not be absent in these same words of mine.¹

Augustine also made some influential comments on secular literature. In his Confessions, Augustine belittles the value of literary works (such as the Aeneid) when compared to the word of God, and dismisses them as idle fictions. However, Augustine does not condemn fiction as lies; he recognises that a work of fiction is not a lie because it does not purport to be true. If we call a work of fiction a lie, then we must admit that it is a special kind of lie or falsehood, because it also contains a particular kind of truth. Commenting on the use of fables and fiction, Augustine observes:

(33) In feigning of this kind, men have attributed even human deeds or sayings to irrational animals and things without sense, in order that, by narratives of this sort which are fictitious but have true significations, they could communicate in a more agreeable manner what they wished to say. Nor is it in authors of secular literature alone, as in Horace, that mouse speaks to mouse and weasel to fox, so that by a fictitious narrative a true signification may be assigned concerning that which is being treated of; whence, the similar fables of Aesop having the same end in view, there is no man so untaught as to think they ought to be called lies, but in sacred literature also, as in the book of Judges, the trees seek a king for themselves, and speak to the olive, to the fig, to the vine, and to the bramble. Which, certainly, is all feigned in order that one may reach what is intended by a narrative which is indeed fictitious but not mendacious since it has a truthful signification.²

Though the difference between fiction and lying was not clear to many medieval critics, this statement is close to Sidney's definition of fiction in the sixteenth century, and is all the more important because Augustine recognizes that the Bible uses the same literary resources as secular literature. In order to defend the truthfulness of the sacred text, he has to admit its literary nature.

² Augustine, Contra mendacium, qtd. in Minnis et al. 209.
3.3. Dionysian symbolism

Symbolism and allegory are an important element in medieval criticism. The admission of this kind of analysis in the study of the Bible was to some degree inherited from the Hebrew and neo-Platonic traditions, but an important development from the twelfth-century Renaissance was the acceptance of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500) as a major authority. Pseudo-Dionysius wrote a book on The Celestial Hierarchies in which he interpreted the figurative language of the Bible as a legitimate way of giving a sensible form to mysteries which are above our understanding. This work became one of the major sources for medieval ideas of imagery and symbolism. Pseudo-Dionysius believed in negative theology: the idea that we cannot really represent God in language or in sensible forms. This doctrine entails that the more obviously false representations (those which use fiction, metaphors, symbols taken from ordinary things) are the most useful precisely because there is no danger of their being taken for the truth — no danger of idolatry. "The arts of language are indispensable because human language is the only medium by which men can convey to one another something, however inadequately, of what is essentially inexpressible. Moreover, figures, fictions and other poetic devices . . . are particularly valuable by reason of their very non-referentiality in empirical terms. Indeed, the more fictional and inappropriate they are the better, for then no one can fall into error like that of those anthropomorphic worshippers who . . . 'believed that God was distinguished with all the features of a human body, and was surrounded by angels as by a kind of army.' The truest poetry is the more obviously feigning." Scriptural symbolism is therefore not only acceptable, but "a mark of God's infinite condescension and goodness to His creatures," enveloping divine truth, in itself ineffable and spiritual, in comprehensible figures and material forms which point to it in an analogical way, or better, in a contradictory way. This conception finds support in St. Paul's statement that in the future life we shall perceive God directly and not through signs and symbols:

(34) For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass [Or: figuratively], darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part: but then I shall know even as also I am known. (1 Corinthians 13.10-13)

That is, the indirection of the sign is necessary to meaning just as in Christian theology the body is the necessary vehicle of the soul in earthly life (Dante will make this connection between sign and body explicit). According to the English commentator Robert Grosseteste (Bishop of Lincoln 1235-53), the negative imagery can be rejected in the final stages of

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1 Minnis et al. 126, on Ralph of Longchamps, who apparently follows Boethius. Cf. this debate as scenified by Umberto Eco in chapter 5 of The Name of the Rose.
2 Minnis et al. 168.
mystical contemplation, but is necessary as a stair to reach that level of spirituality:

(35) Without material forms and figures, and without phantasms, we shall [eventually] contemplate the divine and intellectual beings, yet we shall not be able to attain to this contemplation unless we first use both the uplifting forms and material figures.\(^1\)

Therefore, imagination and poetic forms are respectable even when dealing with sacred subjects. They may be of two kinds: positive, similar images, or negative, dissimilar images. A "similar" image occurs in the Bible when Saint John says that "God is light" (I John 1:5). A dissimilar image occurs when God warns us "I will come on thee as a thief" (Rev. 3.3). Many theologians, most of them, in fact, prefer the use of analogical and similar imagery. However, the followers of Dionysius, like Grosseteste or Thomas Gallus, show a preference for dissimilar or negative imagery: the more dissimilar the images are from our idea of God, so much the better for them.

(36) Since all attributes of God may truly and properly be denied and removed, and nothing can properly be affirmed about Him, it is much more appropriate that the hidden secrets of divinity should be revealed through more lowly and dissimilar [i.e. from God] forms that are accessible to the senses than through more precious ones. So, when Holy Scripture designates things heavenly and divine by more lowly forms, it honours rather than dishonours them and shows thereby that they surpass all material things in a way that is on a higher plane than this world.\(^2\)

A work of Dyonisian inspiration like *The Cloud of Unknowing* can therefore, without contradiction, attack imagination as a chain which ties us to the world while using a rich imaginative language. But in the last analysis the two positions are not so different. Even dissimilar imagery is revealing to the one who knows how to read through it. The problem is the same in all allegorical interpretation: namely, not to be satisfied with the superficial meaning, but to seek further. Therefore, Grosseteste argues, the allegorical representations are a concealment for the ignorant and a manifestation for the initiated.

This symbolic readings were to be applied exclusively to the Bible, because it is different in nature from secular writings: they are not the work of their human authors, but the work of God. According to St. Gregory, the inspired writers of the Bible were only a mere pen in the hands of God. The essentials of the distinction between sacred and secular symbolism are found in the *Didascalicon* of the Parisian Hugh of Saint Victor (c. 1096-1141):

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2. Thomas Gallus (abbot at Vercelli, 1219-46), commentary of *The Celestial Hierarchy* ch. 2; in Minnis et al. 178.
It ought also to be known that in the divine utterance not only words but even things have a meaning—a way of communicating not usually found to such an extent in other writings. The philosopher knows only the significance of the words, but the significance of things is far more excellent than that of words, because the latter was established by usage, but Nature dictated the former. The latter is the voice of men, the former the voice of God speaking to men. The latter, once uttered, perishes; the former, once created, subsists. The unsubstantial word is the sign of man's perceptions; the thing is a resemblance of the divine idea.¹

The universe, therefore, is the Book of God, and its significance is encapsulated in the pages of the universal book, the Bible.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of the Bible ought to have some limits: if meaning can never be fixed, doctrine may be threatened: every statement of the Bible might be said to be figurative, and we would have no doctrine to hold on to. Even some of the Christian Fathers, like Origen, had fallen into this danger: Origen held that the whole story of the creation in Genesis was a beautiful poetic fiction—an interpretation which was subsequently condemned by the Church. Interpretive criteria were therefore necessary. Hugh of Saint Victor argues that

(38) The foundation and principle of sacred learning... is history, from which, like honey from the honeycomb, the truth of allegory is extracted.²

Moreover, he observes that

(39) All things in the divine utterance must not be wrenched up to an interpretation such that each of them is held to contain history, allegory and tropology all at once.³

The ultimate criterion is the guidance of authorities and the literal sense of the Bible:

(40) In order, therefore, that you may be able to interpret the letter safely, it is necessary that you not presume upon your own opinion, but that first you be educated and informed, and that you lay, so to speak, a certain foundation of unshaken truth upon which the entire superstructure may rest; and you should not presume to teach yourself, lest perhaps when you think you are introducing you are rather seducing yourself. This introduction must be sought from learned teachers and men who have wisdom, who are able to

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¹ Hugh of Saint Victor, *Didascalicon*, in Minnis et al. 73.
² *Didascalicon*, in Minnis et al. 76.
³ *Didascalicon* v.ii, qtd. in Minnis et al. 66.
produce and unfold the matter to you both through the authorities of the Holy Fathers and the evidences of the Scriptures, as is needful.\(^1\)

Hugh reacts against the interpretive tradition following Saint Gregory, which often indulged in fanciful allegorical interpretations disregarding the congruence between the allegorical meaning and the literal sense. According to Hugh, those allegorical meanings which have not been intended by the author are doubtful: authorial intention is a criterion of validity, and the more improbable readings should be rejected unless there are moral reasons for not doing so, the whole under the Augustinian principle of dogmatic guidance.

3.4. Secular Allegory

The study of symbolism and allegory was not exclusive of Scriptural commentary. Some secular and even Pagan writings were more than mere *fabulae*, more than fictions. It was believed that some authors transmitted hidden learning in an allegorical way, conveying thoughts about morality, physics and even metaphysics, under a covering (*integumentum*, *involucrum*) of fiction. Some pagan poems were explicitly didactic at the literal level: satire, for instance, conveys its teaching at the literal level. But the claim of hidden learning was put forward by the commentators of Virgil, Ovid or Boethius, such as the William of Conches (Chartres, 1080-1154) and "Bernard Silvester" (England? Tours? fl. 1156), who used the same method in dealing with poetry or with philosophical texts. "Bernard Silvester" explains this allegorical form as follows:

\[(41)\] The integument is a kind of teaching which wraps up the true meaning inside a fictitious narrative (*fabulosa narratio*), and so it is also called "a veil" (*involucrum*). Man derives benefit (*utilitas*) from this work, the benefit being self-knowledge.\(^2\)

"Bernard Silvester" has some interpretive tricks so that the texts may yield a suitable allegorical meaning:

\[(42)\] Saturn you understand sometimes as a star, and again, immediately after, as representing time. Likewise, Mercury you understand sometimes as representing eloquence, and sometimes as a star. The possibility of the integuments relating to different things, and of multiple signification in all mystical material, must be taken into account if the truth cannot stand supported on one interpretation. So, in this work we find the same principle, that one

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1. *Didascalicon*, in Minnis et al. 81.
and the same name designates different things, and conversely
different names designate the same thing.¹

This is a rule intended to make meaning proliferate. Conversely, we shall
see that some theological interpreters formulate hermeneutic norms devised
to keep meaning under control. We might say that the secular and the
sacred interpreters are playing different hermeneutic games and setting
different rules accordingly.

We see that in spite of some theologians' strictures against poetry,
there is a persistent tradition of allegorical interpretation of poetry (above all
classical poetry) which lays stronger claims: poetry is knowledge, even
revealed knowledge. Poetry in this tradition, which goes from Theagenes
through the Stoics and neoplatonics to Macrobius and Fulgentius, is
allegorized philosophy. And hidden meaning always has an aura of higher
meaning, meaning derived from some superhuman source. The conflicts
these ideas could provoke in the Middle Ages can be easily imagined. How
in the world could pagan authors have received divine inspiration, akin to
the Christian grace? The defenders of poetry had to sort out complex
theological problems. "By and large, they accepted the idea that the Holy
Spirit had, indeed, inspired the pagans; and by and large they incurred the
hostility of more conservative clerics for suspiciously deistic teaching."²
Most often, the kind of teaching claimed for poetry would not seem to
challenge the authority of the Bible, consisting mainly of moral or
cosmological readings which do not impinge on revealed truth. Conrad of
Hirsau believes in the ethical value of literature, ascribing most of the
authors he mentions to the field of "ethics." He also notes the use of fiction,
fables and metaphors in the Bible, and observes that Saint Paul and the
Fathers of the Church often borrowed ideas and expressions from pagan
literature. Of course, Conrad also thinks that secular literature and sacred
Scripture are substantially different, and that the methods of interpretation
for each should be different: the signification of Holy Writ is much more
powerful, and it admits mystical interpretations which cannot be found in
the poets.³ Nevertheless, the claim of poetry to be an independent source
knowledge and wisdom must have seemed alarming to the more orthodox
churchmen. In any case, this kind of defense of poetry was a stronghold for
secular criticism and an inspiring force for the medieval humanists. The
gradual convergence of sacred and secular criticism continued in the
thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, leading to Dante and Boccaccio. Later
on, it will be further developed by the Italian humanists of the fifteenth
century.

Already in the twelfth century, some theologians start to read the
Bible as literature: "In the twelfth century certain scholars —notably Peter
Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers— had in their Bible-commentaries applied
to sacred literature the conventions and categories of secular literary theory

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¹ Minnis et al. 154.
² Hardison et al. 18.
³ Conrad of Hirsau, in Minnis et al. 48, 50-51.
and criticism.\textsuperscript{1} Peter Abelard (1079-1142), a bold and original thinker who was later condemned as an heretic, discussed the possibility of error on the part of the authors of religious authorities, and defended the right to question and criticize the writings of the Fathers of the Church. He argues that

\begin{quote}
(43) In reading works of this sort, there must be freedom to form one's own judgment, not compulsion to believe.\textsuperscript{2}
\end{quote}

He applied the same principle tentatively to some Biblical writers, although as a rule he adheres to the Augustinian doctrine that there are no errors in Scripture and that problematic passages in the Bible should be interpreted allegorically. Abelard's views are significant of a humanist trend within scholastic thought. "Scriptural authors were being read literally, with close attention being paid to those poetic methods believed to be a part of the literal sense; pagan poets, long acknowledged as masters of those same methods, were being read allegorically or 'moralized"\textsuperscript{3} —it is therefore normal that sacred and secular hermeneutics would eventually merge. In view of this development, care must be taken not to oppose scholastic theologians to the humanist defenders of poetry. Much of the critical awareness of the Middle Ages was developed by the scholastics: "Even the most 'original' literary theory produced in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy takes its points of departure and many of its categories and basic ideas from scholastic literary theory."\textsuperscript{4} Scholasticism and humanism developed together, and it would be simplistic to say that scholasticism was the enemy of literature. After all, scholasticism was an activity centered around textual commentary: at least in this respect, "Scholastic literary theory was, therefore, at the very centre, and not on the fringes, of academic endeavour and achievement."\textsuperscript{5}

3.5. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

3.5.1. Aesthetics
3.5.2. Hermeneutics

3.5.1. Aesthetics

Saint Thomas Aquinas is the most influential of the Scholastic thinkers and his doctrines have long been the unofficial philosophy of the Catholic Church. The basic tenet of his doctrine is that there is no contradiction between faith and reason, and that therefore philosophy and theology are not contrary but complementary disciplines. Aquinas fully introduced the work

\begin{enumerate}
\item Minnis et al. 6-7.
\item Abelard, prologue to \textit{Sic et non}, in Minnis et al. 97.
\item Minnis et al. 4.
\item Minnis et al. 9.
\item Minnis et al. 8.
\end{enumerate}
of Aristotle in the scholastic philosophy of the Middle Ages, and used it to
draw a sharp distinction between God and his works. This distinction had
been threatened by the neo-Platonic doctrine of emanation, which presented
the Universe as the inevitable product of the divinity. He wrote several
important works: apart from his Biblical commentaries, he attacked the
naturalistic philosophy of Averroes in his *Summa contra Gentiles,* and
composed the main monument of scholasticism, his *Summa theologiae.*
This was left unfinished: one year before his death, Aquinas stopped work
on it, and came to believe that all he had written was "like so much straw
compared with what I have seen and what has been revealed to me."

Aquinas does not deal explicitly with literature as such, but he has
some interesting observations on general aesthetics, and he further develops
the theory of interpretive levels for the Bible which will later be applied to
literature. His Aristotelian outlook will favour a new approach to criticism
and interpretation.

Like any theologian, Aquinas is concerned with goodness, rather
than with beauty or the agreeable, which are the object of aesthetics.
Goodness is being considered in relation to desire. That is, good things are
desired. The agreeable is one of the divisions of goodness. The perception
of beauty, however, is characterized as a somewhat passive experience of
the object (cf. Kant's "disinterest"). Beauty is that which is agreeable to the
sight: "pulchra sunt quae visa placent" (cf. Plato's definition). In order to
please, a thing must be harmonious with him who knows it. Beauty is an
"analogical term": that is, there is not a single standard of beauty for all
things; every beautiful thing is beautiful in a special way. But beauty does
require three qualities in the object:

- Wholeness (*integritas sive perfectio* ),
- Proportion (*debita proportio sive consonantia* ), not only in the object
  itself, but above all, a proportion between the object and the observer.
- Brightness (*claritas* ); this last requirement is to be traced back to the neo-
  Platonic view of light as a symbol of the divine beauty and truth.
  Grosseteste had spoken of light as being the essence of beauty and
  perfection in matter. Later, when this metaphysics of light makes no longer
  any sense, "brightness" will be held to be the equivalent of structural
  perfection. James Joyce uses Aquinas' terms to expound his theory of the
  epiphany, or the sudden revelation of the essence of a thing through art. He
  modifies the concepts, though: he sees them not as requirements but as
  phases in a process of perception. First we perceive an object as a whole,
  then we perceive the proportion in it which is the cause of beauty, and then
  we are ready to get an aesthetic insight into the heart of the object, its
  "whatness" or *quidditas.* "Brightness" is the revelation of the essence of the
  object perceived : "*claritas is quidditas* " (*Stephen Hero* ).

This third quality, *claritas,* poses some problems when we try to
apply this aesthetic theory to literature. As conceived by Aquinas, it just
does not fit. All these aesthetic concepts are meant by Aquinas to apply to
both artistic and natural beauty. In fact, he does not seem to care much about artistic beauty, let alone literature.

3.5.2. Hermeneutics

Sometimes the Bible sometimes uses surprising figures and metaphors which might seem irreverent, for instance, comparing God to a worm or to a thief. Some authors debated whether it was right to use them, because they would sometimes obscure truth, and might debase the dignity of the divine image by comparing it with earthly, unworthy things. Aquinas observes that metaphors are "proper to poetic, the least of all the sciences." But nevertheless he thinks their use in theology is justified. It is explicitly authorized by the Holy Writ, and besides

\(44\) it is natural to attain to intellectual truth through sensible things, because all our knowledge originates from sense....

It is natural to man to be pleased with representations. (118)

(44) two phrases which are a clear sign of the Aristotelian influence on Aquinas. As to the charges of obscurity and irreverence, Aquinas argues that

\(45\) the very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds, and as a defense against the ridicule of the unbelievers. (118).

Also, God is best revealed through things furthest away from him. We see there are Dionysian arguments in this otherwise Aristotelian treatise.

Aquinas also continues the traditional Christian doctrine on allegory, with references to Augustine's distinction between historical, etiological, analogical and allegorical meanings, and also to St. Gregory: "Holy Scripture by the manner of its speech transcends every science, because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery." Aquinas distinguishes the same levels of interpretation as John Cassian, explaining them thus:

\(46\) the author of the Holy Scripture is God, in whose power it is to signify his meaning, not by words only (as man also can do) but by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore the first signification whereby words signify things

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belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it. Now this spiritual sense has a threefold division. . . . [S]o far as the things in the Old Law signify the things in the New Law, there is the allegorical sense; so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are signs of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense. But so far as they signify what relates to eternal glory, there is the anagogical sense. (119)

There is an implication in Aquinas that the symbolism of objects is proper and natural, while that of words is artificial and manipulable.

Aquinas explicitly restricts the fourfold method of interpretation to the Holy Scripture: it is not valid for literature at large, because only Scripture signifies in this peculiar way. Besides, the flights of interpretation are curtailed by the submission of all other senses to the literal: "all the senses are founded on one/the literal/ from which alone can any argument be drawn" (119). It is the literal sense which decides what is Christian doctrine and what is not. Doctrine must appear explicitly elsewhere in the literal level to justify an allegorical reading of a passage, and, of course, we must understand the literal level before we try to find any mystical meanings.\(^1\) The emphasis laid by Aquinas on the literal sense is an important qualification on previous doctrines: "Nothing necessary to faith is conveyed through the spiritual sense which is not conveyed elsewhere in Scripture, clearly and openly, through the literal sense. If we push this principle, stated so clearly by Aquinas, to its logical conclusion, allegory becomes at worst redundant and at best a pleasing (and persuasive) optional extra. Theory of interpretation like this, and the exegetical practice of so many of the schoolmen, dealt a powerful blow to the status of allegorical reading of the Bible as an academic procedure."\(^2\) The interpretive limitations imposed by the scholastics are clear. However, they might be taken to refer just to theological hermeneutics, leaving the door open for the application of this system to profane literature, such as will be undertaken by Dante.

The emphasis laid by Aquinas on the literal sense may be related to the Aristotelian perspective he favours. For the scholastic philosophy of the late Middle Ages, meaning is no longer something hidden: there may be allegories and symbols, but they are subordinated to the literal meaning of a text. There is an emphasis on authorship, on the different authors, genres, and conventions of the Bible, and on the different intention and aims of the different books. Each author, sacred or secular, has his own style and concerns. In the thirteenth century, as scholastic Aristotelianism became more systematized, the "type C" prologue is reorganized according to an Aristotelian framework. The last major kind of accessus ad auctores

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2. Minnis et al. 204.
is therefore the "Aristotelian prologue" used by Scholastic critics, which will lay emphasis on human agency, and also on the multiplicity of causes which may converge to produce a book: "The 'Aristotelian prologue' which introduced commentaries on authors both sacred and profane was based on the four major causes which, according to 'the Philosopher', governed all activity and change in the universe. Hence, the author would be discussed as the 'efficient cause' or motivating agent of the text; his materials, as its 'material cause'; his literary style and structure, as twin aspects of the 'formal cause,' the *forma tractandi* and the *forma tractatus* respectively; while his ultimate end or objective in writing would be considered as the 'final cause.' It was, therefore, the terms of reference of Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, rather than those of his *Poetics*, which defined the parameters of much scholastic literary theory."¹

Simultaneously, a greater importance is given to the individual authors of the different books of the Bible; they are no longer mere instruments for the voice of God, there is a more detailed attempt to perceive the different circumstances of their writing. "The literal sense, the understanding arising from significative words, was identified as the expression of the intention of the human author."² In Aquinas' own commentaries of the Bible, the value of different possible interpretations is judged taking into account the plausible intention of the Biblical authors. Even the prophets were considered to be fully aware of the meaning of their prophecies, instead of being passive mouthpieces or pens in the hands of God. According to William of Auvergne,

>(47) prophetic signs, expressed by means of deeds or speech, were intended by the prophets themselves to be understood figuratively; they are the human authors' metaphors.³

Moreover, Aquinas and other scholastic commentators restrict the scope of mystical meanings. Double meanings in particular words, such as metaphor, are to be understood as belonging to the literal level, because they were consciously intended by the authors:

>(48) the parabolical sense is contained within the category of the literal sense. For something can be given both its own proper meaning and also a figurative meaning by words. And the literal sense is not itself a figure, but rather that which is designated by a figure. For when Scripture names the arm of God, the literal sense is not that God has a physical limb of this kind but rather that he has that which is signified by this limb, namely, effective power.⁴

According to William of Nottingham (fl. c. 1312), the literal sense is double: "There is a 'proper' literal sense, which arises from the initial

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¹ Minnis et al. 3.
² Minnis et al. 205.
³ *De Legibus*, in *Magisterium divinale* (1223-40), qtd. in Minnis et al. 205.
⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.1.1.10., in Minnis et al. 242-243.
signification of the language; there is also a 'figurative' literal sense, which comes from the secondary or metaphorical signification of the language, and this too is a meaning which the author intended or which can be elicited from his intention." So the literal sense seems to absorb many of the meanings which had been previously ascribed to more cryptic interpretive procedures.

The religious reformers of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance will promote literal reading yet further. Two early translators of the Bible into English, Wyclif and Tyndale, argue against too subtle interpreters. Wyclif, a rebel against the authority of Rome, defends the literal truth of the basic propositions of the Bible against those who went too far in reducing Biblical assertions to metaphors and finding fictions and falsehood in Scripture. According to William Tyndale, who was burnt by the Catholics (1536),

(49) The literal sense is the root and ground of all . . . that which the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense.

Martin Luther rejected allegorical interpretation altogether. The Protestant approach to the Bible needed an interpretive doctrine which favoured individual understanding, instead of relying on secret knowledge controlled by authority. We can easily see, however, that these new conventions of reading also rest on dogma, albeit a different one. But meanwhile allegory flourished in religious and secular literature alike.

3.6. Dante Alighieri  (1265-1321)

The critical methods developed in Biblical commentary were gradually secularized and used outside the domain of theology, as humanist thought developed in the wake of the twelfth-century Renaissance. This is the last phase of medieval criticism, and in this displacement from the sacred to the secular "may be detected the origins of modern literary criticism as we know it." Dante Alighieri is a key figure in this development.

In his letter to Can Grande Della Scala, which serves as an introduction to the "Paradiso," Dante establishes a classification of the elements which have to be taken into account in a literary work. It is not directly based models in classical criticism, for this was unknown to Dante. But it has an Aristotelian flavour, because it is drawn from the Scholastic

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1 Minnis et al. 206.
2 De veritate sacrae scripturae (1378).
3 William Tyndale, The Obedience of a Christian Man (late 1520s), qtd. in Minnis et al. 206.
4 Minnis et al. 2.
models of literary prologue — apparently, Dante had been a student of theology at Paris:

(50) There are six things then which must be inquired into at the beginning of any work of instruction; to wit, the subject, agent, form, and end, the title of the work, and the branch of philosophy it concerns.¹

In his discussion of the subject, Dante applies to his work the concepts of medieval hermeneutics:

(51) The sense of this work is not simple, but on the contrary it may be called polysemous, that is to say, 'of more senses than one', for it is one sense which we get through the letter, and another which we get through the thing the letter signifies, and the first is called literal, but the second allegorical or mystic. (Letter 122)

This mystic sense can be subdivided into the traditional three senses of hermeneutics. As Dante explains in Il convivio,

(52) writings can be understood and ought to be expounded chiefly in four senses. The first is called literal, and this is that sense which does not go beyond the strict limits of the letter; the second is called allegorical, and this is disguised under the cloak of such stories, and is a truth hidden under a beautiful fiction [f. i. Orpheus] . . . . The third sense is called moral; and this sense is that for which teachers ought as they go through writings intently to watch for their own profit and that of their hearers . . . . The fourth sense is called anagogic, that is, above the senses: and this occurs when a writing is spiritually expanded which even in the literal sense by the things signified likewise gives intimation of higher matters belonging to eternal glory.²

In Il Convivio, Dante opposes this "allegory of theologians" to the "allegory of poets": in poetry, the surface level is a fiction, while the allegorical level of meaning is true; in theology, both levels are truthful.

Dante's comments on the title of his poem are also interesting, because they reveal the medieval conception of the opposition between tragedy and comedy:

(53) tragedy begins admirably and tranquilly, whereas the end or exit is foul and terrible (...) whereas comedy introduces some harsh complication, but brings its matter to a prosperous end. (Letter 122)

Tragedy and comedy are here simplified to a difference in the outcome of the story; they are also seen as kinds of fiction, and not as dramatic genres:

² Dante, The Banquet, in Adams 121.
Dante's work is a poem, and it is called a comedy. It is to be noted that the decorum of genres which divides tragedy from comedy is already undermined by the possibility of reading meanings different from the explicit ones: a serious message may be found under an apparently unworthy cover.

As refers to the end of poetry, Dante mentions a possible difference between the proximate and the ultimate ends, but concludes that

(54) the end of the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity (Letter 123).

Poetry delights and instructs. Delight comes not only from ornament, but also from the goodness in the work, which is delightful in itself.

In his treatise De vulgari eloquentia, Dante defends his choice of writing in Italian; he argues that serious literature can be written in the vernacular as well as in Latin. He examines the various Italian dialects and chooses as the ideal vernacular the Sicilian dialect spoken by people of quality. He is also concerned with the enrichment of Italian through the borrowing of words; this will become a universal concern in Europe two centuries later.

He speaks of three possible themes available to vernacular poetry: the state, love, and virtue. Love as a serious theme is a novelty in medieval criticism. Dante goes further than that: he claims that the lyrical song (canzone) is the best poetical form. This is the first time such a claim is made; it will be more typical of the Romantic age.

3.7. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375)

In his Genealogy of the Gentile Gods Boccaccio writes a practical manual of classical mythology for the use of poets which includes allegorical interpretations of the pagan myths, but he also feels compelled to defend the use of these myths. He is asking for liberty in thematic choice. He distinguishes fiction from lies, and defends poetry from the attack of those who only pay attention to the superficial meaning:

(55) Poetic fiction has nothing in common with any kind of falsehood, for it is not a poet's purpose to deceive anybody with his inventions. (Genealogy 131)

Besides, the making of fictions is the acknowledged social role of poets. In this way he justifies the use of Classical mythology, which is not intended to

be considered true. Likewise, the poets may alter historical facts or change the order of events (and in this they are opposed to the historians). The poet is nearer to the philosopher than to the historian, although he does not work by syllogism but only by contemplation.

Boccaccio holds that we can find in poets the same use of allegory as in the Scriptures. Both sacred and profane texts can be praised for disclosing at once both the text and a mystery, although the two forms of writing only coincide in the method of treatment, and not in the end they have in view. Boccaccio praises the use of allegorical meanings, which allows everybody, the wise, the fools and children, to find whatever meanings they can digest (*Genealogy* 128, 130). Allegory, then, does not seem to be pedagogical for Boccaccio, but rather an enticing and mnemonic way of presenting truth to those who already know in some way: "Holding that poetry is allegorical and truthful at hidden levels, though untruthful on the surface, he defends the use of allegory in the same way as Aquinas: meaning acquired by toil should ultimately be of more pleasure and better retained." (Adams 124) The unlearned are pleased with the external fable and the learned are exercised with the hidden truth. It may be noted that Boccaccio speaks of the "content" or "hidden truth" of poetry as if it were a disembodied truth which precedes in composition the shaping of the work. The "fiction" or external form is not a means of reaching the content, it is not its expression: it is an obstacle, a veil, something which must be taken away before we recognize the truth in the work.

Boccaccio pushes farther his analogy between poetry and theology whenever they coincide in end as well as in method:

(56) I say that theology and poetry can be considered as almost one and the same thing when their subject is the same. Indeed I go farther and assert that theology is the poetry of God.1

And he goes on to quote Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, III.4) who considered that the first theologians had been the poets: thus, the "highest" science derives from the "lowest." The Scripture often uses poetry and fables to adorn its meaning; a further proof that poetry and theology are not so far away from one another. This is a humanistic concern, and will become a general attitude during the Renaissance. Poetry can teach wisdom and virtue just as theology does.

(57) It veils truth in a fair and fitting garment of fiction" (*Genealogy* 127).

This "veiling" is what distinguishes poetry from the other art of language, rhetoric; according to Boccaccio:

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1 Boccaccio, "On the difference between poetry and theology" (*Life of Dante*, chapter 10); rpt. in Adams 126.
among the disguises of fiction, rhetoric has no part, for whatever is composed under a veil, and thus exquisitely wrought, is poetry and poetry alone. (*Genealogy* 128)

Other Italian humanists were developing similar ideas: Albertino Mussato discussed poetry as theology; Pico della Mirandola evolved a poetic theology.

Boccaccio's enthusiasm grows as he talks about the special gift of poets:

> (59) [poetry] proceeds from the bosom of God, and few, I find, are the souls in which this gift is born (*Genealogy* 127).

The poet feels a drive to compose, to invent, to arrange words. He needs a knowledge of all the other arts, as well as peace of mind, retirement and a desire for worldly glory. Young age helps, too. Poetry is for him a spontaneous gift, not a social accomplishment, and the whole desire of the poet is "to sing in solitude" (*Genealogy* 134)—a statement which sounds almost Romantic.

The *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods* is the first of the many defenses of poetry which will be written in the spirit of humanism, against the claims of the more strict religious views which consider poetry a potentially immoral vehicle, and also against other enemies of poetry, such as the sensual, the ignorant and "lawyers." Its flavour is distinctly Renaissance, and no longer medieval. But we must not forget that much of the conceptions of this early humanism derive from scholastic discussions and Biblical commentaries.

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