

OLLSCOIL Na hÉIREANN
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, GALWAY

M.A. IN LITERATURE AND PUBLISHING
SUMMER EXAMINATION 2000/2001

EN 522: Medieval Aesthetics

Professor E. Ní Chuilleanáin
Professor B. O'Donoghue
Professor K. Barry
Dr. C. La Farge
Ms C. Carney

TIME ALLOWED: TWO HOURS

ANSWER THREE QUESTIONS

Answer Section One and two question from Section Two.

Section One (40 points)

1. Write a brief report on the essay that you have submitted for this course, and on the research you conducted in relation to it.

Section Two (60 points)

2. Write an analysis of **two** of the following passages. In the course of your analysis you might wish to consider one or more of the following topics: allegory, the inspiration of the pagans, the authority of ancient authors, the veil of fiction, the relationship of spirit to letter, the status of the human author, the value of the literal meaning, *figura*. Your analysis, in each case, should be closely argued.

\Contd...

.../Contd.

a. Send me now the Mantuan Bard in person, so that I can lead his fugitive meanings into the light. And behold -he comes towards me well filled with a draught of the spring of Mount Helicon. He is a proper image of a Bard with his tablets raised in order to treat his topic, and with a fixed frown murmurs some mysterious truth that wells up from within him.

I said: "If you please, put aside your frowning expressions, O most famous of Italian poets. Sweeten the bitter sauce of your difficult ideas with the condiment of sweet honey. For I do not search your words for what Pythagoras says about harmonic numbers, or Heraclitus fire, or Plato ideas, or Hermes the stars, or Chrysippus numbers, or Aristotle entelechies. Nor am I interested in what Dardanus says about powers, or Battiades about daemons, or Campester about spirits of the underworld and ghosts. I seek only the easy things taught by grammarians to their childish pupils for monthly fees."

Then, wrinkling his brow, Vergil said: "I thought, little man, that you were too foolish for me to load my heavier burdens on your heart. You are more dense than a dirt clod and will sleep through anything weighty."

I said: "Save that sort of knowledge, I pray, for your Romans for whom it is honorable and harmless. It will be enough for me to touch the lowest hem of your robe."

He said: "As far as your coarse intelligence and the timidity of your age permit you to learn, I will dip out just a few drops from the fountain of my swelling genius and explain these matters to you. This small measure will prevent you from becoming so drunk that you get sick. Now make the seats of your ears vacant so that my words can enter."

(Fulgentius, *The Exposition of the Content of Vergil according to Moral Philosophy*, trans. O. B. Hardison, Jr.)

Contd.\...

.../Contd.

- b. Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
So sende myght to make in som comedye!
But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,
But subgit be to alle poesy;e;
And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace
Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.

And for ther is so gret diversite
In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,
So prey I God that non myswrite the,
Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge;
And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,
That thow be understonde, God I biseche!
But yet to purpos of my rather speche:

(Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, V, 1786-99)

Contd.\...

.../Contd.

c. 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 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. What, therefore, the sound of the mouth, which all in the same moment begins to subsist and fades away, is to the idea in the mind, that the whole extent of time is to eternity. The idea in the mind is the internal word, which is shown forth by the sound of the voice, that is, by the external word. And the divine Wisdom, which the Father has uttered out of His heart, invisible in Itself, is recognized through creatures and in them. From this is most surely gathered how profound is the understanding to be sought in the sacred writings, in which we come through the word to a concept, through the concept to a thing, through the thing to its idea, and through its idea arrive at truth. Because certain less well instructed persons do not take account of this, they suppose that there is nothing subtle in these matters on which to exercise their mental abilities, and they turn their attention to the writings of philosophers precisely because, not knowing the power of truth, they do not understand that in Scripture there is anything beyond the bare surface of the letter.

(Hugh of Saint-Victor, *Didascalicon*, V.iii)

Contd.\...

.../Contd.

d. Socrates' comments in the *Ion*, when he is discoursing with the rhapsodist about this species of poetry, confirm these views. Here Socrates states clearly that the poetry of Homer is divine, and that it is a source of enthusiastic energy to those conversant with it. For when the rhapsodist says that he can speak copiously on the poems of Homer, but not at all on the writings of other poets, Socrates explains this by saying: "It is not from technical skill that you speak well concerning Homer, but because you are moved by a divine power." And the truth of this is indeed perfectly evident. For those who do something by means of art are able to produce the same effect in all similar situations. But those who work by means of divine inspiration on something truly harmonious cannot regularly produce the same effect when working with other, similar things. The rhapsodist receives divine inspiration when reciting Homer, but not when reciting other poets. Socrates then instructs us by using the stone commonly called Herculean as a clear analogy to perfect possession by the Muses: "This stone, then, not only draws to itself iron rings, but imparts to them a power to attract similar things, so as to enable them to draw other rings, and form a chain of rings, or pieces of iron, each hanging from the other."

Let us now consider Socrates' continued remarks on divine poetry. "Thus then," he says, "the Muse makes men divine; and, from these men thus inspired, others catch the sacred power to form a chain of divine enthusiasts." Here, in the first place, he speaks of the divine cause in the singular number, calling it the Muse and not, as in the *Phaedrus*, a possession from the Muses. Socrates refers to the divine cause as a single mania affecting a whole multitude, in order to attribute all enthusiastic power to one spiritual substance, the primary principle of poetry. For poetry subsists uniformly and mysteriously in the first mover, but secondarily and indirectly in poets moved by that spiritual power, and still more indirectly in the rhapsodists, who are led back to the first cause through the agency of the poets. By thus extending the principle of divine inspiration as far as the rhapsodists, Socrates celebrates the fecundity of the first moving power. At the same time he clearly states that poets themselves participate in inspiration: the poets' ability through their poems to excite others to a divinely inspired state indicates that a divine nature is conspicuously present in their souls. Consequently, Socrates adds this comment: "The best epic poets, and all who similarly excel in composing any kind of verse to be recited, do not frame their admirable poems from the rules of art; but, possessed by the Muse, they write from divine inspiration. Nor is it otherwise with the best lyric poets, and all other fine writers of verse to be sung." And again, afterwards, he says: "For a poet is a thing light and volatile, and sacred, nor is he able to write poetry till he becomes divine, and has no longer the command of his intellect." And lastly, Socrates adds: "Hence it is that the poets indeed say many fine things, whatever their subject, just as you do concerning Homer; but not doing it through any rules of art, each of them succeeds through a divine calling in that species of poetry to which he is uniquely impelled by the Muse."

(Proclus, *On the More Difficult Questions in the Republic: the Nature of Poetic Art*)

Contd.\...

.../Contd.

e. But if the matter is to be resumed, I suppose that, whatever those fellows think, poets are not liars. I had supposed that a lie was a certain very close counterfeit of the truth which served to destroy the true and substitute the false. Augustine mentions eight kinds of lies, of which some are, to be sure, graver than others, yet none, if we employ them consciously, free from sin and the mark of infamy that denotes a liar. If the enemies of poetry will consider fairly the meaning of this definition, they will become aware that their charge of falsehood is without force, since poetic fiction has nothing in common with any variety of falsehood, for it is not a poet's purpose to deceive anybody with his inventions; furthermore poetic fiction differs from a lie in that in most instances it bears not only no close resemblance to the literal truth, but no resemblance at all; on the contrary, it is quite out of harmony and agreement with the literal truth.

Yet there is one kind of fiction very like the truth, which, as I said, is more like history than fiction, and which by most ancient agreement of all peoples has been free from taint of falsehood. This is so in virtue of their consent from of old that anyone who could might use it as an illustration in which the literal truth is not required, nor its opposite forbidden. And if one considers the function of the poet already described, clearly poets are not constrained by this bond to employ literal truth on the surface of their inventions; besides, if the privilege of ranging through every sort of fiction be denied them, their office will altogether resolve itself into naught.

Again: if all my preceding argument should deserve reprobation – and I hardly think it possible – yet this fact remains irrefutable, that no one can in the proper discharge of his duty incur by that act the taint of infamy. If the judge, for example, lawfully visits capital punishment upon malefactors, it is not called homicide. Neither is a soldier who wastes the enemy's fields called a robber. Though a lawyer gives his client advice not wholly just, yet if he breaks not the bounds of the law he does not deserve to be called a falsifier. So also a poet, however he may sacrifice the literal truth in invention, does not incur the ignominy of a liar, since he discharges his very proper function not to deceive, but only by way of invention.

(Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*)

Contd.\...

.../Contd.

f. In those places where things are used openly we may learn how to interpret them when they appear in obscure places. In no better way may we understand what is said to God in "Take hold of arms and shield: and rise up to help me" than by consulting that passage which reads, "O Lord, thou hast crowned us, as with a shield of thy good will." But we should not pursue this practice in such a way that everywhere we read of a shield raised for defense we should think of nothing except the good will of God; for it is also said that there is "the shield of faith, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one." Nor again with reference to this kind of spiritual armor must we attribute faith to the shield alone, since in another place the breastplate is said to be faith: "having on," he says, "the breastplate of faith and charity."

XXVII

When, however, from a single passage in the Scripture not one but two or more meanings are elicited, even if what he who wrote the passage intended remains hidden, there is no danger if any of the meanings may be seen to be congruous with the truth taught in other passages of the Holy Scriptures. For he who examines the divine eloquence, desiring to discover the intention of the author through whom the Holy Spirit created the Scripture, whether he attains this end or finds another meaning in the words not contrary to right faith, is free from blame if he has evidence from some other place in the divine books. For the author himself may have seen the same meaning in the words we seek to understand. And certainly the Spirit of God, who worked through that author, undoubtedly foresaw that this meaning would occur to the reader or listener. Rather, He provided that it might occur to him, since that meaning is dependant upon truth. For what could God have more generously and abundantly provided in the divine writings than that the same words might be understood in various ways which other no less divine witnesses approve?

XXVIII

However, when a meaning is elicited whose uncertainty cannot be resolved by the evidence of places in the Scriptures whose meaning is certain, it remains to make it more clear by recourse to reason, even if he whose words we seek to understand did not perhaps intend that meaning. But this is a dangerous pursuit; we shall walk much more safely with the aid of the Scriptures themselves. When we wish to examine passages obscured by figurative words, we should either begin with a passage which is not controversial, or, if it is controversial, we should conclude with testimonies applied from places wherever they are found in the same Scriptures.

(Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*)

END