

THE REHABILITATION OF PROPHECY: ON DANTE'S THREE BEASTS

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Out of the range of learned commentary helpful in the understanding of Dante's allegory I select, as a not entirely arbitrary starting point, Joseph Mazzeo's wide-ranging exploration of allegorical exegesis, entitled "Allegorical Interpretation and History."¹ This article, published in 1978, is notable for the unusually clear and firm distinction it draws between allegorical interpretation of texts, normally sacred texts, not actually designed to be read allegorically, and what Mazzeo terms "constructed allegory," that is, "The works of our literary tradition which *demand* to be understood as allegory rather than simply *allowing* allegorical interpretation . . ." (p. 17). After clarifying this essential but all too often obscured distinction, Mazzeo goes on to point out that constructed allegory "should generally be understood as following typological patterns rather than the more abstract and unhistorical patterns of allegorical exegesis." "Typological" allegory he defines as allegory that "assumes the existence of a central paradigmatic story, of a sacred or near-sacred character, set in the past and assumed to be historical . . ." (p. 17).

While Mazzeo's conclusions are by no means specifically directed towards Dante's *Comedy*, they do seem to be particularly relevant to that work, especially as they form a valuable corrective, or permit a necessary modification, to the interpretation of Dantean allegory put forward by John Hollander in his full scale monograph on this topic, *Allegory in Dante's*

"*Commedia*".² According to Hollander, it was the exegetical method, the allegory of the theologians, that was Dante's model. He writes, "With Dante it received its first and perhaps sole use as the central technique of signification in a fictional invention" (p. 24). When Hollander attempts to demonstrate, however, how such an exegesis of Dante's text would work in practice, the results are somewhat reductionistic and in fact a little disappointing, as Hollander himself suggests in his own chosen example of four-fold interpretation:

Take Ciaccio the glutton (*Inf.* VI), for instance. (Any other character will serve as well.) The literal sense shows us, as Dante says, the state of this man's soul after his death. The allegorical sense makes evident the connection between his present life in the Circle of Gluttony and its past causes in Florence. The moral sense warns us against this particular sin. The anagogical sense asserts God's divine plan, which includes punishment for sinners. It is, I'm afraid, as simple as that. And, insofar as Dante's simple theory is concerned, I could end this book here, for it would be a great bore to move through the poem making similar observations, the only point of which is to assert that there is a valid constructive approach to the poem which accords with the practice and theory of medieval exegesis. As the mathematicians say, this is a true but not an interesting result. (p. 51)

What we appear to need is a way of reconciling the positions of Mazzeo and Hollander and rendering the result not only "true" but also "interesting" in that it justifies, or at least explains, the very flat results of Hollander's analysis and also to some degree accounts for the undeniable and indeed overwhelming literary power of this most powerful of literary allegories. The key may be found in this very concept of typology, in the unique and perhaps underestimated relationship between allegorist and paradigmatic story in the *Commedia*.

Hollander's interpretation is largely based on Charles Singleton's essay, "Two Kinds of Allegory,"³ and to this we should first turn. The *Commedia*, for Singleton also, is an allegory of theologians rather than an allegory of poets. In spite of the evidence of *Convivio* 2.1.2, Dante's *Commedia* is no "bella menzogna," beautiful lie, but historical, to be justified as a history with varying allegorical significance rather than as an allegory of poets in which all details have to be justified by allegorical significance. Thus Vergil, for instance, is never to be interpreted as simply "Reason."

While largely in accord with Singleton's eloquent interpretations, I believe we are in need of further response to his challenge to Michele Barbi: "On what conceptual basis is an *allegory* given in a poem in which the first meaning is not a 'bella menzogna'?" (p. 97). Grant the force of Singleton's argument and we have to recognize Dante as the first poet to emulate the inspired writers of the scripture themselves -- task unattempted then in prose or rhyme. Dante in fact created an allegory for theologians rather than an allegory of theologians or an instance of exegesis, or more precisely, as I am attempting to show here, a scripture in which he uniquely combines the roles of prophet and exegete.

It seems, therefore, that the whole question of the mode of Dantean allegory has hardly been settled by the scholars, even after decades of debate. It is in fact this very disagreement that permits one to focus on the major question also left unexplored by Mazzeo, that is, the precise character of the relationship between constructed allegory (referred to here as "allegory") and allegorical exegesis (referred to here as "exegesis"). The essence of this relationship lies in the relation of both these forms to what, loosely, we may term "myth" -- represented here, primarily but by no means exclusively, by the sacred books which both exegesis and allegory ultimately depend upon and must acknowledge as source.

For purposes of demonstration, let us turn to the opening canto of this most famous of all (constructed) allegories. Out of the fearful confusion of images that characterizes Dante's dark wood, there finally emerges a clear point of reference, a stable landmark, the sunlit hill. The visionary poet hastens towards this *diletto monte*, confident, we understand, that its ascent will remedy the extraordinary state of external and internal dislocation in which he has inexplicably found himself. But, as we recollect, his hopes of a swift resolution of his dementia are thwarted by the progressive menaces of three hostile beasts, a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf, which frighten him off down the hill, back into the dark and deadly valley from which he has just emerged.

In Mazzeo's words, mediaeval allegory implies "a central paradigmatic story as reference system" (p. 19), and editors have not been slow to point out the reference here to the Biblical paradigm of Jeremiah 5:6, a cryptically menacing prophecy, of which the Vulgate version runs:

Idcirco percussit eos leo de silva,
Lupus ad vesperam vastavit eos;

Pardus vigilans super civitates eorum:
 Omnis qui egressus fuerit ex eis capietur,
 Quia multiplicatae sunt praevaricationes eorum,
 Confortae sunt aversiones eorum.

This might be translated:

Wherefore the Lion out of the forests has struck them down,
 The Wolf of the twilight has laid waste their lands,
 With the Leopard unceasingly watching their cities.
 They that go out from thence shall by no means escape their fangs,
 For they have multiplied their acts of deceit
 And turned ever further from the true way.

Before considering exactly what Dante has done with this passage from Jeremiah, let us look at the techniques of the allegorical exegete when confronted with this cryptic prophecy. Jerome, for example, interprets the beasts as referring to the three monarchies of Babylon, Persia, and Alexandria as successive chastisers of the wickedness of Israel.⁴ Certain editors of Dante, doubtless following this line of interpretation, have seen a political reference here to Florence, France, and the Papal See, as impediments to Italian unity. But while Jerome's political interpretation can be considered a credible (though hardly plausible) exegesis of the cryptic, open ended, Jeremian prophecy, the parallel reference to the enemies of Italy here seems a quite inappropriate interpretation of Dante's personal anguish in his efforts to find a way out of this terrifying spiritual wilderness.

Let us take a look at a more relevant instance of exegesis. Garnerus of St Victor, in an interesting comment on the term "bestiae," wrote:

By the term "beast" is meant the irrational mind, as it is declared through Moses: "If a beast should set foot on the mountain, he must be stoned to death" (Exodus 19:12). For the mountain is really the loftiness of contemplation, and the beast the irrational mind. The beast sets foot on the mountain, then, when the mind subject to irrational desires sets out to scale the heights of contemplation. But it is struck down by stones, in that, unable to gain the summit, it perishes through these blows of celestial power.⁵

In the nineteenth chapter of Exodus, Moses had been commanded by Jehovah to forbid any profane man to approach the sacred mountain of Sinai, a sensible

precaution, since, it would seem, no Israelite other than Moses or Aaron had sufficient spiritual maturity to withstand the shock of such a close encounter with the numinous. But a prohibition against beasts approaching the mountain bears all the marks of irrational taboo. The exegete therefore internalizes the beasts, reducing them to mental forces, "irrational desires," transforming the taboo into something quite acceptable to the thought patterns of the age. None the less, the mythic symbolism and its psychological or moral interpretation are expressed in quite separate statements, however effective the insight and interpretive skill of the exegete in linking them together.

How does this compare with Dante's treatment of this "beasts on the sacred mountain" topos? The most obvious difference is that the interpretation of the beast as the irrational mind will appear very differently in a "constructed" allegory. The dramatic force of the original mythic situation is recaptured and indeed enhanced rather than being rendered relatively inert by exegetical analysis. Thus as Dante attempts to climb the mountain the irrationalities of his mind appear as active external impediments, forcing him downhill again. In allegory the powers of the psyche manifest themselves in the form of corresponding realities within the external world. Dante has plunged us into the seemingly arbitrary proceedings of a dream experience. The significance of the events will receive no immediate exegesis, however. As in real life, we have to wait for the answer.

Moreover, the notion of a crowd of ancient Hebrews stoning an animal that has set foot on a sacred mountain is rather too bizarre an event for a mediaeval constructive allegorist to feel comfortable with. As Mazzeo emphasizes, allegory concerns the "life of everyman in an individual mode"⁶ and, one might add, it tends (Prudentius' *Psychomachia* apart) to present spiritual experience to us from the point of view of a hero whose adventures are offered for our imaginative participation. Thus Dante takes us back to a prime archetypal or mythic situation: the encounter of the hero with the monsters of the forest.⁷

But in this passage, since we are no longer at an evolutionary stage when monsters manifest themselves under the obscure nightmarish forms of Grendels or "chimeras dire," they are identified with named beasts, and as such are the less fearful. For by the fourteenth century western man had succeeded in separating zoology from nightmare, and Dante was of all men not lacking in a sense of the evolution of images. Indeed, allegory is itself one of the processes by which western man learned to control nightmare, in that it functions essentially through analysis, separating out the rational from the

irrational elements of mythic experience, and thus enabling the mind to comprehend and control events otherwise unassimilable by the reason.⁸

The role of allegorist as analyst of the human psyche and of spiritual adventure is in fact somewhat more complex than that of the exegete. In the first place we should not fail to notice the frequent presence of exegetes among the allegorist's own *dramatis personae*. Thus in the *Commedia* Vergil, Beatrice, and a host of other characters act as interpreters of the frequently obscure significance of the visionary landscapes. And we find indeed in almost all mediaeval allegory (outside the *psychomachia*) an essential element of dialogue between visionary and exegete to supply analytic interpretation of the experiences depicted.

Yet is it really fair, it may be questioned, to call these strange figures, who interpret the very visions in which they appear as characters, by the name of exegete? In one sense, of course, their role seems very different from that of the humble biblical critic at your elbow. For these mighty spiritual authorities, shadows of forgotten ancestors like Dante's Vergil or allegorical descendents of ancient goddesses such as Boethius' Lady Philosophy, hold for the dreamer the keys of heaven and hell. On the effectiveness of their aid may hinge the spiritual fate of the dreamer; his choice of salvation or eternal death. Thus their exegetic activities acquire a dramatic force lacking elsewhere. In visionary allegory, the gap is closed between text and exegesis, experience and interpretation, myth and history. In Dom Bede Griffiths' phrase, the way is open for a "return to the centre."⁹

But this equation of the exegete with the spiritual guides of the dream vision might be challenged on other grounds. Returning to the cryptic incident of Dante's encounter with the three beasts, on the sunlit mountain, do we actually find in the *Commedia*, it may be asked, any authoritative explanation on the part of these alleged visionary exegetes? It is true that Vergil makes a thorough, assured, and reasonably clear ("assai chiaro") analysis of the various categories of sin in the *Inferno*, (Canto XI, especially 82-83). The three main divisions he distinguishes, incontinence, bestiality, and malice, have in fact been associated by some commentators with the three beasts, but Vergil does not make this connection himself.¹⁰ The sparse actual references to the beasts encountered later in the *Commedia* are themselves cryptic and hardly enlightening. The she-wolf is associated with avarice in a terse aside by Dante himself in *Purgatorio* 20.10, while modern exegetes are still arguing over the precise significance of the cord Dante mentions as the instrument with which he once tried to snare the leopard, in *Inferno* 16.106. But these explicit references are surely less significant

than the elucidatory parallels that Dante draws to his situation in the dark wood. In the *Inferno*, for instance, the beasts reappear as the dogs ("cagne") who hunt down the wretched inmates of the sombre, bleached-out wood of the suicides (Canto 13). They embody the self-destructive tendencies of the dark wood in their most violent form, although in the harsh clarity of Hell they have lost something of the independence, the mystery of the beasts of Canto I. They are hunting dogs, functioning in accordance with "the will of another."

Again, in the "divine forest" of the Earthly Paradise (*Purgatorio* 28.2) the energies represented by these beasts manifest themselves in a higher dimension, in the traditional form of the apocalyptic animals, and are associated with the triumphal car of the procession of the elders. This time referred to as "animali" (29.92) rather than "bestia" they awe rather than alarm or horrify, still expressing the character of these mysterious spiritual forces but admitting a greater typological precision in their manifestation.

But why then are these striking parallel instances of "the beasts of the forest" topos linked by no explication on the part of Dante's exegetes, Vergil or Beatrice? One can hardly presume that such a master of imagery as Dante would simply miss such connections. Bearing in mind that his original readers were accustomed not only to exegesis of the Bible and other texts but also of their own dreams and even their significant waking experiences, the best explanation would seem to be that the reader himself is intended to be, in many crucial instances, his own exegete. Not that this challenge to his exegetical faculties is to be considered a mere crossword-puzzle test of ingenuity. The reader's participation in the actual process of exegesis is in fact vital to the type of reading the poet intended. For if Dante is "everyman in an individual mode" he is more than any other individual the reader himself.

In the first canto of *The Inferno* the level of statement is almost purely mythic: mystery without exegesis. The appearance of the Jeremian beasts is sufficient indication that the narrator in the disorientation of the dark wood has reverted to a mythic, pre-rational state of consciousness. Lacking a prophet, a mythmaster, he is lost, a victim of the darkness, of Jeremiah's wolf out of the twilight. When Vergil first appears in the wilderness he speaks in the cryptic voice of the prophet; indeed, his prognostication concerning the greyhound ("Veltro") who will one day subdue the wolf is as enigmatic as anything in Jeremiah.

And so Dante moves the reader from myth to allegory, from obscurity to enlightenment, sparing us the rationalistic interpretations of the exegete, while having us participate in the whole process of realization that culminates

in the act of exegesis, a journey which on the perceptual level is parallel to, in fact constitutes a dimension of, that journey from misery to blessedness that Dante would have us travel. In the first canto, before we can begin the journey itself, we have to encounter and find guidance through the disorientating confusion of dissociating landscapes, but in allegory, as Foster Provost has noted, each fragmentary image contains or implies the total cosmos in potential form.¹¹ Allegory, as Quintilian put it, is continued metaphor,¹² and the metaphors or images of the dark wood have to be continued, indeed expanded and analyzed, over the whole journey of the *Commedia* before we can attempt a valid interpretation. As Charles Singleton has observed, "When the poem is unfolded in its entirety and we may stand back from it for a comprehensive view of these matters, we realize that the opening scene in Canto I *Inferno* figured and forecast, as well as any scene might do, the whole configuration of the journey beyond."¹³ And Aldo S. Bernardo has commented on "the extent to which the poet has introduced into his opening verses all the blocks for the entire structure."¹⁴

Our comparison of traditional mediaeval exegesis of this "beasts of the mountain" motif with Dante's own allegorization has attempted to show that where the exegete demystifies and demythologizes biblical prophecy in order to make it tolerable to contemporary intellectual and ethical expectations, Dante seems to have been the first mediaeval visionary bold enough to employ the techniques of allegory in order to invoke and rehabilitate the ancient mythic and prophetic energies, while at the same time submitting these vast energies to an even more powerful analytic and structural control. This paper then calls for the recognition of the role of what Mazzeo terms constructive allegory as essentially a means towards the analysis and control of the energies of myth as they manifest in their archetypal dramas, and a harnessing of those energies to empower the human spirit to attain higher levels of consciousness. Finally, as in the *Paradiso*, such energies allow man to become the master rather than the victim of that mythic consciousness in which inner and outer worlds attain the awesome unity already manifested in the *Anteinferno*.¹⁵ In such an interpretation, allegory becomes primarily "other speaking" as the essential mode by which phenomenal realities represent that psychic or spiritual world which lies beyond form and phenomena.

Grant this as an essential role of Dantean allegory, and we find different answers to the critical dilemmas concerning the allegorical dimension of the *Commedia*. When Hollander finds the fourfold interpretation of Dante's allegory valid but uninteresting, or where such different critics as Luigi Pirandello and Etienne Gilson deny the existence of allegory altogether in

the *Commedia*, we may point out that what is missing is indeed recognition of that mythic dimension. The last two authors begin with an untenably limited definition of "allegory" that does not reflect the mediaeval experience, although it can perhaps be justified as a definition of the eighteenth-century's demythologized allegory.¹⁶ Myth and allegory are two sides of the same coin. Allegory can, of course, exist with the mythic element weak or entirely absent, and indeed frequently it does in eras when the mythic element in a society's experience is for profound socio-cultural reasons being ignored or suppressed. Such eras, while often relatively weak in creative accomplishment, tend, not surprisingly, to the production of rationalistic analysis, including rationalistic systems of rhetoric and definitions of allegory. Thus it is also not surprising that classical definitions of allegory take little account of the role of myth.

While both exegetical and constructed allegory function as modes of responding to the challenge of interpreting sacred myth and prophecy, the reason that the creative form has proved by far the more abiding and memorable is that it succeeds in incorporating the function of exegesis within itself, without relinquishing the energy of the original myth. In fact, at its best, allegory constitutes a form of literature harmonizing dialogue, exegesis, and the symbolisms of myth into a total statement on all these levels of meaning, a form of communication of unrivalled depth and comprehensiveness. In this way Dante, representing mediaeval allegory at its highest reach, answers the romantic demand for a literature of power as well as classical expectations of a literature of order.

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NOTES

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¹ *Comparative Literature* 30 (1978) 1-21.

² (Princeton 1969).

³ *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* (Baltimore 1954; rpt. 1977) 84-98.

⁴ PL 24.714.

⁵ PL 193.197.

⁶ (At n. 1) 18.

⁷ Walter Abell, *The Collective Dream in Art* (Cambridge, Mass. 1957).

See also Paul Piehler, *The Visionary Landscape* (London and Montreal 1971) 72-74.

⁸ Abell (at n. 7) chap. 10.

⁹ *A Return to the Centre* (London 1977).

¹⁰ E.g., Dorothy L. Sayers in *The Divine Comedy* (London 1949) 75; John Ciardi in *The Divine Comedy* (New York 1970) 6; Mark Musa in *Dante's Inferno* (Bloomington 1971) 6-7 and 93 ff.

¹¹ Foster Provost, "Treatments of Themes and Allegory in Twentieth-Century Criticism of the *Faerie Queene*," in *Contemporary Thought on Edmund Spenser*, ed. Richard C. Frushell and Bernard J. Vondersmith (Carbondale, Ill. 1975) 18.

¹² *Institutes*, 9.12.46.

¹³ (At n. 3) 5-6.

¹⁴ "The Three Beasts and Perspective in the *Divine Comedy*," *PMLA* 78 (1963) 23; see also *The Visionary Landscape* (at n. 7) chap. 7.

¹⁵ See Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances* (London 1957), especially chap. 20, "Final Participation."

¹⁶ See Etienne Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy* (New York 1963) 73 and 291 ff., and Luigi Pirandello, "The Poetry of Dante," in *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Freccero (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1965) 22.