



## *The Strangeness of Allegory*

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### Chapter 7. Beasts and Men

Ere long she fownd, whereas he wearie sate,  
To rest him selfe, foreby a fountaine side,  
Disarmed all of yron-coted Plate,  
And by his side his steed the grassy forage ate.  
He feedes vpon the cooling shade, and bayes  
His sweatie forehead in the breathing wind,  
Which through the trembling leaues full gently playes  
Wherein the cherefull birds of sundry kind  
Do chaunt sweet music, to delight his mind.  
*Faerie Queene, I.vii.2-3*

So as he was pursuing of his quest  
He chaunst to come whereas a iolly Knight,  
In couert shade him selfe did safely rest,  
To solace with his Lady in delight:  
His warlike armes he had from him vndight.  
*Faerie Queene, VI.iii.20*

Thence passing forth, not farre away he found,  
Whereas the Prince himselfe lay all alone,  
Loosly displayd vpon the grassie ground,  
Possessed of sweete sleepe, that luld him soft in swound.  
Wearie of trauell in his former fight,  
He there in shade himselfe had layd to rest,  
Hauing his armes and warlike things vndight,  
Fearelesse of foes that mote his peace molest.  
*Faerie Queene, VI.vii.18-19*

No infant, on waking far after its hour, so suddenly rushes with face toward the milk, as then did I, to make yet better mirrors of my eyes, stooping to the wave which flows there that we may be bettered in it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Non e fantin che si subito rua  
col volto verso il latte, se si svegli  
molto tardato do l'usanza sua  
come fec'io, per far migliori specgli  
ancor de li occhi, chinandomi a l'onda  
che si deriva perche vi s'immegli

*Paradiso XXX. 82-87*

Taking off armor, in *The Faerie Queene*, always enacts multivalency. It embodies unmasking as well as disarming, baring the truth as much as lowering the guard. It presents vulnerability in all its senses, bad and good and neutral, moral and psychological, ethical and narrative. It enacts opening, unclosing, disclosing, as well as unclothing, stripping, baring, revealing everything that should – and shouldn't – be seen. Taking off armor betokens unreadiness and readiness for anything, the failure of discipline and the transcendence of discipline, the abandoning of a role and duty and/or openness to all roles and duties. It shares all the ambivalence of nakedness: innocence and guilt, shamelessness and modesty, nature at once unfallen and fallen.

These, of course, are all reasons why *The Faerie Queene* in particular, and allegory in general, are always and especially the form (or genre or mode) of openness, to which nothing is more opposed in practice or in theory than any program of closure. This of course is also why allegory is so uniquely the language of The Other, the space of The Other, in all its richness and multiplicity. For instance: allegories have been engaged with The Other in its feminist sense at least since *The Odyssey*, whose rashly self-identified No-Man hero has to pass through all the stages and tests of unmanhood – Circe, Calypso, Nausicaa, Teiresias, the Shades, the beggar disguise, Penelope – before he can reclaim his now altered identity, no longer “sacker of cities,” but now “father” and “son” and “husband.”

Because it is a form of openness, allegory has never conceived or even utilized The Other exclusively in the feminist sense – not even in *The Odyssey* – because it has always understood The Other not as only adversarial but as ultimately assimilable to The Same, conformable to The One – as witness the dazzling role reversals of Thomas Pynchon's gender-bent version of *The Odyssey*, *Vineland*, which tropes Homer's poem most pointedly in terms of sexual roles and identities.<sup>2</sup> Pynchon's text wears its Homeric strange attractors lightly, comically, and they compete for the reader's attention with others just as strange and just as attractive – that, after all, is part of the mechanics or physics or co(s)mics that make allegory – but they incarnate The Other in Pynchon's allegory just as surely as they form part of its own self-conscious literariness, its peculiar and gymnastic con-textuality.

### Literal

For all that allegories are so deeply and complexly committed to textuality and to literariness, to the condition of existing as words arranged on pages with a long, invokable history of other such words before or behind them, all allegories reinvent for themselves their own literary history and redefine for themselves the precise status of their literariness. Every allegory is self-

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<sup>2</sup> Consider just these few (here crudely stated) parallels: Zoyd as the faithful Penelope, Frenesi as Odysseus, Brock as the Suitors and Calypso, Prairie (so named because she is a wide open space, like Telemachus lacking an identity and needing her same-sex parent to form one) as Telemachus, Desmond the dog as Argos the faithful dog, and the final descent to hell of the dead suitors guided by Blood and Vato as Hermes Psychopompos.

contradictorily self-contained and dependent. Each exists in relation, if not to every other allegory, at least to a self-selected congeries of stories, social systems, poems, plays, customs, movies, politics, fables, folklore, myths, jokes, histories, religions, dialects, styles, paintings, beliefs, statues, philosophies, slang, hypotheses, and sciences – plus a handful of irreducible facts, like life and death. By its selection of its fields, each allegory creates, even as it defines, the conditions of its own existence. This paradoxical referentiality and independence create both the self (the text) and its world (that text's particular history of textuality) at the same time, all the while insisting on the autonomy of each.

This strange posture gives to allegory, at first glance, a deluding appearance of finitude: that it chooses some things and omits others seems to point to a kind of closure, to limitation, and ultimately perhaps to allegory's confinability, to its commensurability with some system of literary or linguistic measurement, to its conformity to some theory as yet unborn or unarticulated. No such luck, I think. Chaos theory warns of the probability of infinite variation within a seemingly finite system containing only a few variables. Allegory's paradoxical self-referentiality is not a stopping point but a starting point: it might be better called efferencing. It is the working basis of all the rest (and they are many) of allegory's paradoxes, the generator of an ongoing series of "efferences" within the text – bifurcations, the mathematicians would call them – that propel the allegory's meaning onward and outward beyond the closures of word and page and story, that set in motion a process of doubling and redoubling, unfolding and infolding, that will ultimately reach beyond textuality into what we are pleased to call reality (if we give our own thinking that much credit).

The three "disarming" texts quoted from *The Faerie Queene* at the head of this chapter furnish apposite illustrations of what I'm trying to describe here. Looked at from purely narrative or rhetorical points of view, what Spenser has created in these texts amounts to a narrative "topos" (for lack of a better word), an action sequence of relatively fixed verbal and physical components, the whole usable or adaptable to a variety of characters and situations. Whether the knight is Arthur or Calepine or Red Crosse, he sprawls upon the ground: he is sometimes even characterized as being "loosely displayd." He lays his armor aside: the word "undight" appears most of the time, and the armor is frequently "warlike," in stark contrast to the pleasance in which the knight finds himself. He relaxes and briefly forgets his quest and/or his warrior status: "rest" and "delight" are the key words. He is frequently, but not always, accompanied by a woman: in the case of Red Crosse Knight, Duessa disguised as Fidessa; with Calepine, Serena. Finally, the seemingly idyllic interlude is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of an (usually) unanticipated foe: Orgoglio, the Blatant Beast, Turpin. The nature of this foe or the threat he/she/it poses usually makes explicit the danger or temptation that has been implicit in the preceding topos, and the subsequent interaction of the foe and the protagonist of the topos serves as a spring to propel the poem's further narrative development.

*The Faerie Queene* is rich in such narrative topoi. They include such particularly multivalent actions as the maiden encouraging her warrior, the maiden circled by (frequently ambiguous) admirers, the protagonist learning about him- or herself from a face-to-face interlocutor, even the fight with an animal-monster, of which there are three versions in Book I alone, and of which Calidore's struggle with the Blatant Beast in Book VI is an especially significant variant. The maiden-encouraging-her-warrior topos begins with Una's attempts to rouse Red Crosse in

his struggle with Error, passes through (to stay just in the confines of Book I) the avatar of Duessa as Fidessa calling out in the middle of Red Crosse's fight with Sans Joi, and concludes with Una again, this time snatching the knife from Red Crosse's hand and upbraiding him for his weakness in his debate with Despaire. The latter sequence also initiates the topos of the protagonist learning about himself from an interlocutor: Red Crosse attains his first real self-knowledge through Despaire's analysis and depiction of his derelictions. In Book I that process culminates in Red Crosse Knight's parallel interview with the blind hermit Contemplation, who informs him fully about his character and identity. Its numerous manifestations in later books include actions as diverse as the priest of Isis's explanation of Britomart's dream and Calidore's conversation with Melibee about the joys of the retired life.<sup>3</sup> The topos of the maiden encircled by admirers encompasses an even wider scope: starting with the court of Lucifera, it passes through Una and the Satyrs, the court of Philotime and the Bower of Bliss, the Temple of Venus and the House of Busirane, the Tournament of Beauty, the pastoral dances of Book VI, and the dance of the Graces on Mount Acidale.

These by no means exhaust the narrative topoi that Spenser creates or adapts for his poem, but they are sufficient to make the point: such narrative and verbal theme-and-variation constitutes one of the most fundamental building blocks of the poem. These topoi are not simply an ornament or a verbal device: what I am describing is a phenomenon at once rhetorical, narrative, and structural: not a vehicle of meaning only, but a way of meaning, a component of meaning, even meaning itself. And the manner of Spenser's use of this phenomenon amounts to a literary – or, if you prefer, verbal – version of what chaos theory describes as self-similarity across scale. Each usage preserves basic elements of the root topos: that is what provides the self-similarity. But each usage also alters the circumstances, characters, and significance of the topos: that is what parallels the differences of scale within physical systems. Nor do the correspondences with chaos theory stop there. At the same time that it is generating these similarities-with-differences, Spenser's usage approximates the kinds of mathematical bifurcations of events that take place within analyses of turbulent systems: division and replication (in *The Faerie Queene*, of characters and actions; in physical systems, of things and conditions) lead to further division and replication until flow “degenerates” into turbulence, within which there occur paradoxical or anomalous pockets of order – not unlike the stately marriage of the Thames and the Medway in the confusions of Books III and IV, or the orderly dance of the Graces in the midst of the disorderly pursuits and fortuitous catastrophes of Book VI. The same principles that create disorder in the first place also give rise to order. The interwoven dance of the Graces provides the template for the confusing interlacement of character and narrative at the heart of *The Faerie Queene*.

The Graces can in fact serve quite well as an example of *The Faerie Queene's* joyous immersion in the destructive element of textuality. First and foremost, the Graces exist textually, literarily, artistically, before Spenser ever deals with them. Before Spenser incorporates them into his poem, the Graces have a long history as rather recondite figures of classical myth, as icons in the plastic arts, and particularly as richly interpretable figures in Renaissance continental art. Inevitably, they enter *The Faerie Queene* trailing some of that learned commentatorial nimbus

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<sup>3</sup> James Nohnberg cites numerous correspondences between Books I and VI in *The Analogy of The Faerie Queene* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 655ff. On the specific point of the parallel of the Melibee-Calidore conversation and Red Crosse with Despaire, see pp. 716-18.

of glory with them:<sup>4</sup> Colin Clout provides some of it in his gloss to Calidore about the creatures he has seen dancing (VI.x.21-28). In addition to this, Spenser himself has “textualized” the Graces already within his poem: they appeared first in a dream vision, albeit a false one, in the First Book of *The Faerie Queene*. Worked upon by Archimago’s temptations, Red Crosse Knight dreams that Venus and the Graces lead Una to him, “a loose Leman to vile seruice bound” (I.xlviii). This distinctly carnal “incarnation” of the figure significantly complicates the subsequent appearance of the Graces in *The Faerie Queene*, at least insofar as their unbreakable link to Venus is concerned.

The place and circumstances in which the Graces make their major appearance in Spenser’s poem only adds to their “bookishness,” their hyper-textual mode of being: Mount Acidale serves a classical locus of poetic inspiration, the haunt of the Muses for whom the Graces seem, in Book VI, to be substituting or with whom Spenser is conflating them. In fact, as Spenser well knew (see *Epithalamion* 310), Acidale is properly the name of a stream, not a mountain – another magical fountain of which poets must drink, another “destructive element” in which the poet, be he Spenser, Colin Clout, or Calidore, must immerse<sup>5</sup> if any poem is to result. So Spenser’s Graces exist within his book as creatures of the book, at the same time that they are, in some way or another, begetters and creators of the book. After all, “Colin Clout” is an alter ego for and a textual interpolation of Edmund Spenser: like the Graces, he has an existence prior to and outside *The Faerie Queene*, and like the Graces/Muses and Acidale stream/mount, his task is primarily making books and poems, not starring in them.

Unless, of course, the books and poems in question are pastorals, as *Faerie Queene* VI emphatically is – in which case the makers are very much a piece of the made, and “How can we tell the dancer from the dance?” is very much a question to be asked. Pastoral is a peculiarly rich form for the Renaissance. As a genre, pastoral approaches the thorny issues of truth and artifice in very complex ways. The account of each pastoral’s coming into being, which it customarily encapsulates within itself, seriously complicates the status and nature of pastoral’s textuality. Spenser in *Faerie Queene* VI takes full advantage of these aspects of pastoral. The

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent treatment of the Graces in Renaissance iconography, see Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> Such a stream in fact exists in Spenser’s text at the foot of Mount Acidale, “an hill plaste in an open plaine” (VI.x.6), itself a significant locus in the topology of *The Faerie Queene*:

And at the foote thereof, a gentle flud  
 His siluer waues did softly tumble down,  
 Vnmard with ragged mosse or filthy mud,  
 Ne mote wylde beastes, ne mote the ruder clowne  
 Thereto approach, ne filth might therein drowne:  
 But Nymphes and Faeries by the bancks did sit,  
 In the woods shade, which did the waters crowne,  
 Keeping all noysome things away from it,  
 And to the waters fall tuning their accents fit. (VI.x.7)

Indeed, Spenser’s “topology” is particularly dense at this point, since the entire Mount Acidale episode marks a convergence of his use of the *locus amoenus* or pleasaunce topos, plus the magical stream (such as the one that enervates Red Crosse Knight and slays Mordant), plus the encircled maidens topos here being discussed, plus a version of the unarmed knight and his beloved intruded upon by an unexpected arrival (compare everything from Orgoglio attacking Red Crosse and Duessa to Calidore interrupting the dalliance of Calepine and Serena), as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

last generated of the classical genres,<sup>6</sup> pastoral comes into being as the form of nostalgia for a past, lost world, but a world that never was – egalitarian, simple, peaceful, suffused with music and poetry, alive with the usually benevolent presences of the gods, non-laborious, without violence or pain other than the pain of unrequited love. Because it is the creation of urban courtiers, in a time and place where real sheep and real shepherds, with all their attendant dirt and stink, were hardly unknown entities, pastoral is, from its very beginning, a genre of artifice, a genre that “falsely” transforms a known squalid reality into purity and grace, a poetry that consciously, even blatantly, uses every sophisticated poetic device to pose as artless. It is a very reasonable supposition, however, that neither Theocritus nor any of his followers ever believed for a second that sheep herding was a glamorous or even hygienic activity. (See Touchstone and Audrey for more on this subject.) A major part of the fun of pastoral for its practitioners must have been its startling, contrary-to-fact transformation of the most unpromising materials into the most elegant and refined poetry, the artistic tour de force it accomplishes by its paradoxical simplicity.

The internalized figure of the poet as shepherd and singer was present in pastoral from the start: the pastoral elegies of Bion and Moschus merely confirmed and made explicit what was already there in Theocritus. And an internalized awareness of its own artifice was already present in Theocritus’s *Idylls*. (See especially the first seven, the so-called “Coan Idylls.”) Subsequent classical versions of pastoral compounded its already dense self-referentiality: deliberately, by weaving into it overt and covert political content (Virgil), and inadvertently (Virgil again, in the famous Fourth Eclogue), by providing a channel for the infusion into pastoral of a whole body of Christian and Biblical imagery, themes, and figures – the shepherd/psalmist David, Christ the Good Shepherd, even Christ as the Lamb of God, the whole idea of the priest/pastor – that dramatically expanded the whole range of poetic pastoralism. Elizabethan England compounded that referential density yet further by quasi-officially adopting pastoral as the mode by which the Queen and her subjects construed each other, converting the props of pastoral poetry into the clichés of court decorum and transforming the pastoral disguises of Hellenistic poets and courtiers into the pastoral masks and masques of English poets and courtiers. They did this so pervasively and so successfully that the terms of pastoral – especially its erotic politics – become virtually interchangeable with the terms of court politics.<sup>7</sup> The courtier-shepherd and Eliza, his unattainable goddess/shepherdess/beloved, exist almost as fused figures in the poetic politics and politic poetry of the period.

Against that rich background Spenser creates the pastoral world of *Faerie Queene* VI and the dance of the Graces to the piping of Colin Clout. By this point in the narrative, *The Faerie Queene* has already become its own source, its own pre-text and area of reference, even its

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<sup>6</sup> Unless you accept satire as a genre, which I do not. In Greek and Latin literature, a genre comes about through the coalescence of a particular set of subjects, a specific form or limited set of forms, and a level of style (often also with a proprietary set of topoi and figures of its own), such as the heroic poem in dactylic hexameters in high and highly ornamented style (using always invocations of the Muse, elaborate similes, catalogs, etc.). Pastoral fits that description: classical satire on the whole does not.

<sup>7</sup> See the writings of Louis Adrian Montrose on this subject; “The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text,” in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, edited by Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 303-340; “‘Eliza, Queene of shepherdes,’ and the Pastoral of Power,” *English Literary Renaissance* 10 (1980), 152-182; and especially “Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: The Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form,” *ELH* 59 (1983), 415-459.

own strange attractor. The dance of the Graces here near the end of the poem as we have it answers quite symmetrically the dance of the Graces in Red Crosse Knight's dream near the beginning of the poem. It corresponds too, in position and in significance, to Red Crosse Knight's vision, in the tenth Canto of Book I, of "The new *Hierusalem*" (I.x.57), a vision which, like Calidore's sight of the Graces, Red Crosse is only briefly allowed before having to return to the more mundane tasks of serving his lady and conquering his monster, again like Calidore.<sup>8</sup> Just as the Hermit Contemplation explained the New Jerusalem and his identity and goal to Red Crosse Knight, Colin Clout explicates the Graces for Calidore:

These three on men all gracious gifts bestow,  
Which decke the body or adorne the mynde,  
To make them louely or well fauored show,  
As comely carriage, entertainment kynde,  
Sweete semblaunt, friendly offices that bynde,  
And all the complements of curtesie:  
They teach vs, how to each degree and kynde  
We should our selues demeane, to low, to hie,  
To friends, to foes, which skill men call Ciuity.  
(VI.x.23)

Colin's explanation quite evidently makes the Graces the sources and teachers of courtesy in its broadest application, as Book VI has been assiduously construing it for us. In that light, the figure taking the place of the absent Venus at the center of the knot of the Graces ought to be the ambiguous "soueraine Lady Queene" (VI.proem.6), Elizabeth Gloriana, whom the poet of the whole work – that is, the "Spenser" who creates both *Faerie Queene* and Colin Clout – has identified as "So faire a patterne . . . of Princely curtesie" (VI.proem.6). Colin confirms this in its full ambiguity by apologizing to "Great *Gloriana*, greatest Maiesty" (VI.x.28) because the lady he pipes for at the center of the Graces is not herself but "a cuntrye lasse" (VI.x.25), whose "Diuine resemblance, beauty soueraine rare,/ Firme Chastity" (VI.x.27) and numerous other virtues have "graced her so much to be another Grace" (VI.x.26). So Spenser's other Elizabeth usurps the place of the Shepherdess Eliza and/or Queen Gloriana at the climactic moment of

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<sup>8</sup> The ring of the Graces may contain echoes of a theology closer to Spenser's own (whatever it might be) than to classical paganism. John Freccero, in discussing the dance of the stars in *Paradiso*, cites a passage from the apocryphal Acts of John: "So He [Jesus] commanded us to make as it were a ring, holding one another's hands and Himself standing in the middle. He said, 'Respond "Amen" to me.' He began, then to sing a hymn and to say 'Glory to Thee, Father!' And we, going about in a ring, said 'Amen':

Glory to Thee, Word! Glory to Thee, Grace! Amen...  
I would wash myself and I would wash. Amen.  
Grace is dancing.  
I would pipe, dance all of you! Amen.  
I would mourn, lament all of you! Amen.  
An Ogdoad is singing with us! Amen.  
The Twelfth number is dancing above. Amen.  
And the Whole that can dance. Amen..."

*Acta Joannis*, edited by Theodor Zahn [Erlangen: Deichert, 1880] 220; translated by B. Pick, *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul, Peter, John, Andrew and Thomas* [Chicago: Open Court, 1909], 181; quoted in John Freccero's "The Dance of the Stars: *Paradiso X*," in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, edited by Rachel Jacoff [Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, and London, 1986], 229.

vision in *The Faerie Queene* as we have it, and the poet's complex interweaving of the "real" world outside the poem – the world of courtly politics and pastoral fictions – with the "fictive" world of the poem – the world of courtly politics and pastoral fictions – coalesces in a triumph of the personal and subjective over the public and objective, the individual over the communal, in the celebration of the most communal of all virtues.

That celebration, moreover, takes the form of – literally: but then what else could it be, in allegory? – of "dis-gracing" Elizabeth/Gloriana, of asserting the authority of the author/subject over the subject/sovereign.<sup>9</sup> This is an extremely subversive moment in the narrative of *The Faerie Queene*, but it also a typically allegorical one: it subverts the assumed order of the "real" world by exposing the vulnerability of the powerful to the very symbols they manipulate, and it subverts the assumed order and orthodoxy of the "readerly" world by forcing us to see the coincidence of things we thought were orders apart – not just Acidale and the New Jerusalem, but Spenser's/Colin's "real-life" country lass and Acidale and the New Jerusalem, and Venus and Gloriana and Elizabeth and Elizabeth. By using the language of conventional literary compliment to undo literary conventionality and to force us to read what the words say, the Acidale episode stands on their heads all the assumptions we have been making about the values of the poem and the airtightness of Faeryland. Like the vision of the New Jerusalem in Book I, the dance of the Graces at Mount Acidale depicts and narrates the source of the values from which *The Faerie Queene* springs. Unlike the vision of the New Jerusalem, which concludes with the simple postponement of those ultimate values, in the dance of the Graces those final values are completely transvalued, transformed into something else – which is, of course and exactly, the dance of the Graces.

In that central literary critical text of the English Renaissance, George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*, the device that is allegory is assimilated to the fact – image, role, metaphor, and reality – of the courtier. Puttenham contradictorily describes it as "*Allegoria* or the Figure of false semblant" and "the Courtier or figure of faire semblant"<sup>10</sup> (299). Its work is dissimulation and disguise, "a duplicite of meaning or dissimulation under covert and darke intendments" (154), "that our wordes and our meanings meete not" (186). In the Elizabethan court and in Elizabethan poetry, a common form of that dissimulation was the use of pastoral, in which, as Louis Montrose succinctly puts it, "amorous motives displace or subsume forms of desire, frustration, and resentment other than the merely sexual" ("Gentlemen and Shepherds," 440). In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser bonds shepherds and courtiers even more tightly by making his own *Book of the Courtier* a pastoral excursus from the Biblical and romance codes that have largely governed the rest of the poem.

I think we are entitled to conclude that two things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. Allegory is a courtier; a courtier is a shepherd; ergo, pastoral is allegory, the figure of faire and false semblant. The Graces, remember, among the other things they teach, include

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<sup>9</sup> See Montrose, "Pastoral of Power" and "Elizabethan Subject," for more on this aspect of Spenserian pastoral.

<sup>10</sup> *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), edited by Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), p. 186. Subsequent quotations from Puttenham will be cited by page numbers in the text. Louis Montrose, in "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," from which I have drawn several particular points in my discussion, argues very persuasively for Puttenham's identification of allegory as figure and courtier as role, as well as for the link between courtiers and pastoral.

“Sweete semblaunt” (VI.x.23). The convergence and implosion of all these strands and vehicles of meaning in the Mount Acidale episode results in the overt contradiction of the “courtly” premises of the proem and the displacement, the disgracement, of Elizabeth Gloriana, who in the proem is posited as the center from whom courtesy flows out to the court and the world. Spenser’s acknowledgement that it is he who demotes her and replaces her with one of the least of her own subjects – he claims his responsibility for this rebellion or discourtesy by means of his textualized self, Colin Clout – is impolitic and anti-courtly. By its honesty and straightforwardness, it inverts both the techniques and the goals of both the courtier’s and the allegorist’s dissimulation and indirection. It is an act that, in guise of courtly politeness and poetic grace, remains at once simple, rude, and rustical – just what one would expect of a shepherd.

It is also an act that uses doubleness and duplicity in the service of integrity. In the largest sense, everything that happens in *The Faerie Queene*, everything that is *The Faerie Queene*, grows out of the initial division of Red Crosse Knight and Una “into double parts” (I.ii.9) by the immediate agency of Archimago and the ultimate agency of life – even fictive life.<sup>11</sup> The virtue that governs the first book of Spenser’s poem is not just Holiness, but also Wholeness: completeness, inclusiveness, integrity, unity – Oneness, if you like. That Wholeness, that unity, is not attained in Book I, or if it is attained – that depends on how you understand Red Crosse Knight’s and Una’s betrothal/marriage – it cannot be sustained. Wholeness collapses, implodes. Unity bifurcates. Not only are Una and Red Crosse divided, but the unity or integrity that Red Crosse and Una embody and enact breaks down into its component parts. Each part in turn must be learned or mastered piecemeal, in its component parts, by other knights and ladies. These characters in turn replicate Red Crosse and Una in their own peculiar circumstances and scales and embody and enact bifurcations and divisions of those two “archetypal” phenomena. Archetypal here carries not only its Jungian sense, but especially the scientific and physical senses of establishing the initial conditions of the poem. Una and Red Crosse Knight constitute the initiatory conditions that determine the nature and dimensions of the system that flows from them.

The poem’s prolific multiplication of characters and incidents emerges naturally from its radically restricted initial conditions: “A gentle knight was pricking on a plaine.” The profound simplicity and integrity of that vision is never again attained in *The Faerie Queene*, because even there, even at that point of still-unitary, still-whole vision, stillness has already been shattered. At the outset of the poem, stillness has already surrendered to motion, to flux, to flow. Indeed, had it not, there almost certainly would have been no poem, at least as we know “poem.” From that premise, the rest is inevitable: flux, flow, turbulence will remain dominant in *The Faerie Queene* and in the poet’s reality until “that same time when no more *Change* shall be,” when “all shall rest eternally/ With Him that is the God of Sabbaoth hight” (VII.viii.2).

Only when change and motion cease,<sup>12</sup> when the host of things returns to their single spring – the paradoxical “God of Sabbaoth,” the monad of polymorphs – only then can there be true

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<sup>11</sup> “Reality is one,” Giordano Bruno remarked, in an apothegm Spenser might have known, “but it falls into the mind in dichotomies.”

<sup>12</sup> This is a key part of Spenser’s double entendre in “that *same* [my stress] time when no more *Change* shall be.” That “same” time is the time of sameness, when differentiation – otherness – shall stop.

rest, the shadow of which the poem's heroes seek each time they remove their armor. Only with the paradoxical vision of the coincidence of multiplicity and unity, the One and the many, Wholeness and division, stillness and motion, Sabbath and Sabbath, can *The Faerie Queene* truly end. This is why and what Spenser prays for in his poem's last line: "O that great Sabbath God, graunt me that Sabbath's sight."

The language and ideas of chaos theory are not simply a modern jargon that I am attempting to overlay on a poem readily explicable in other terms. What chaos theory has exposed to our view as the rules of behavior of complex, seemingly disorganized physical systems also serves, *mutatis mutandis*, to explain the behavior of large, complicated, and seemingly disorganized verbal systems. Chaos theory has invented nothing: what it has been opening to our view has always existed. The patterns, the systems, the behaviors that govern seemingly random action have always been there. We have simply not known about them: we have lacked the concepts and the language to talk about them.

We have lacked the language – but allegory hasn't necessarily been so handicapped. Allegory exists precisely for this purpose: to talk about that for which we have no language, to lead us to apprehend concepts we cannot yet formulate or verbalize – which is a part of my difficulty here. What I am trying to suggest is that the deep structure of *The Faerie Queene*, the language and behavior of *The Faerie Queene*, all point to Spenser's grasping concepts and ideas that we now can recognize as key elements of the theories that explain "chaotic" behavior, that reconcile order and disorder within the same system. I do not presume to say – at least not with any certainty – whether Spenser realized these ideas consciously, so as to be able to formulate them to himself in some way, or whether his conscious comprehensions were supplemented by un- or pre-, sub- or supra-conscious apprehensions, so that what I am calling the deep structure of the poem remained subliminal for him, latent in the poem he imagined. Nor can I affirm either that such behaviors are peculiar to his poem or that they constitute an inescapable part of the deepest structure of all allegory – though this last is my belief.<sup>13</sup> But I can and do say that the patterns are there in the poem, that the language is there: in the terms

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<sup>13</sup> The "autonomy" of allegory, once rightly launched, may be one of the implications of what other critics have described as "the textual foregrounding of the process of textualization itself" (Montrose, "The Elizabethan Subject," p. 322). I refer to the appearances of the Spenserian persona Colin Clout in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene* and especially to the poet's remarks, in the opening stanzas of the Proem to that book, about the fact that Faery Land itself has now become one of his sources of refreshment and strength as he works his way through the composition of the poem:

The waies, through which my weary steps I guyde,  
 In this delightfull land of Faery,  
 Are so exceeding spacious and wyde,  
 And sprinckled with such sweet variety,  
 Of all that pleasant is to eare or eye,  
 That I nigh rauisht with rare thoughts delight,  
 My tedious trauevell doe forget thereby;  
 And when I gin to feele decay of might,  
 It strength to me supplies, and chears my dulled spright.

The fact that this language also recreates the narrative topos of Una and Red Crosse Knight's entrance into the Wood of Error, the first of many subsequent steps of bifurcation and division that call into being the confused heartland of *The Faerie Queene*, only strengthens the notion of allegory's autonomy and the generation of "chaos theory" patterns out of its own nature: in the Proem to Book VI, then, we witness the outreach of those patterns from poem to poet, text to reality.

he had and with the tools he had, Spenser and his poem are talking about and narrating the orders and disorders, the samenesses and differences that Chaos theory describes.

So are Dante and his poem.

### Littoral

The symmetries and consonances of Dante's great work have, over the centuries since the poet fell silent, drawn clamorous attention to themselves. Indeed, it is impossible on even a superficial reading of the poem not to notice them, and it requires only the smallest realignment of readerly perspective to begin reconceiving them as fractal similarities. One could easily go further and argue, intelligently if a bit facetiously, that the analogous relation of microcosm to macrocosm and the whole medieval system of correspondences across orders and across history – the root ideas that are conventionally understood to underlie *Commedia's* internal symmetries – can themselves be construed as a perceived pattern of self-similarities across scale, a pre-scientific mode of discerning the order inherent in apparent chaos. It will be no more than belated justice if such a reconceptualization brings us to realize that medieval thinking could be not only subtle (which criticism has been willing to concede for some time now) but also “correct,” according to the most contemporary (and therefore momentary) notions of correctness.

Dante, however, is interested in more than subtlety and much more than correctness, and as much as he is interested in similarity across orders and across history, he is also much more deeply concerned with differences from order to order and with the shattering of historical typology, or rather its implosion to a single unreplicable moment. That moment most readers assume they know. They assume it to be the one that all orthodox readings of *Commedia* demand: the Incarnation and death of Christ. Certainly in Dante's schema the fact of the Incarnation is historically, theologically, and psychologically central: it has left ineradicable marks in Hell and Heaven and the human mind. For all that, however, the Incarnation is not the central event of Dante's poem. In *Commedia*, the coming of Christ plays a poor second fiddle to the advent of Beatrice, whose incarnation and appearance in Florence constituted the central event of Dante's life and art, whose arrival in Hell precipitates the action of *Commedia*, whose arrival in *Purgatorio* provides the poem's emotional climax, and whose withdrawal in *Paradiso* completes the poem's self-closure. If the whole, complex edifice of the *Commedia* were to be construed as Dante's exfoliation of the content of a single word, that word would be Beatrice, not Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Beatrice arrives three times in *Commedia*: once to Virgil in Hell, as Virgil recounts to Dante (*Inferno* II.52-126); once to Dante on earth, as Beatrice herself reminds the poet (*Purgatorio* XXX.109-138; XXXI.49-63); and once in the Terrestrial Paradise (*Purgatorio* XXX.22-48 ff) – that is, twice in memory and once “in fact.” In heaven she will disappear from Dante's side as Virgil disappears at the moment of her arrival in the poem, as Statius disappears, unremarked, after

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<sup>14</sup> This is yet one more reason why the allegory of Dante's poem can have nothing to do with the fourfold allegory of Scripture. Scriptural allegory is rooted in typology, as I have already argued, and for Dante typology is over. Typology governs strictly the relation of Old Testament events to New, and the earthly, historical life of Christ – the antitype of all Old Testament types – exhausted it.

that. In the relatively short space of the poem in which she is present *in propria persona*, Beatrice takes over Virgil's role as guide and teacher of the pilgrim. That, however, scarcely explains her importance to Dante or to his poem: to truly grasp that, we must look with non-Singletonian eyes at what Charles Singleton has so aptly described as "the pattern at the center."<sup>15</sup>

Beatrice materializes in *Purgatorio* in the place of Christ. She fills the empty space in the chariot, the empty spot in the procession, arriving in glory, with angels scattering flowers, to the voices of an angel chorus. Dante's similes compare her arrival to a dawn and to the Final Judgment (XXX.13-27).

We go back thus to that expectation as to a thread that can guide us through all this by revealing to us, as we move along it, the certain outline of a poet's intention. We expect Beatrice. But all the while everything, the pattern of the whole, the image of time immobilized and expectant at its center, all seems to call for Christ. (Singleton, *Elements*, 50)

And here now, at the center, where the very configuration of the procession itself has seemed to call for Him, here now, as angels strew a cloud of flowers in the air and shout *Benedictus qui venis*, here Beatrice is at last given to us by the very image which, so long before, had given Christ in His coming... (*Elements*, 51)

At last there is someone in triumph upon the chariot at the center. What in so many ways was called for is now delivered. A pattern is fulfilled. It is not Christ who comes. It is Beatrice – Beatrice who comes as Christ. (*Elements*, 52)

It is a figure almost too transparent in the way it reveals a poet's intention. There may be no mistake about it. The coming of Beatrice has completely fulfilled the demands of the pattern. As Christ will come at His second coming, so does Beatrice come here: in a cloud of glory, at the end of time and at the center of time – to judge. The analogue is complete. (*Elements*, 53)

The analogue is more than complete: it's overflowing. It's overflowing because (as Singleton himself is very aware: *Elements*, 50) Christ is already present in the procession as the gryphon who pulls the chariot that Beatrice comes to occupy. Dante's figures (as Singleton was always wont to warn us) are rarely transparent, and "a poet's intention" is no easily knowable thing. The sequence of the procession, however, is an ascertainable datum, and in that procession the gryphon pulls the chariot that Beatrice arrives in glory to ride: it is her triumphal procession, not Christ's. She, not Christ, judges Dante, and she forgives him, just as she interceded for him and even "harrowed Hell" for him ("For this I visited the gate of the dead": XXX.139). Beatrice does not appear as Christ though she acts like Christ – indeed, she acts for Christ, and in place of

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<sup>15</sup> The phrase is a chapter title from Singleton's *Dante Studies I: Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London, 1954, reprinted 1977) 45-60. Everyone writing in English about Dante must owe an enormous intellectual debt to the life and work of Charles Singleton, and in what follows, as in everything I have previously had to say about *Commedia*, that debt will be quite apparent. I am in the position to argue with Singleton's conclusions only because of what I have learned from Singleton.

Christ, and that is no negligible phenomenon. Christ is in fact significantly absent from *Commedia* as an agent, though present as a historical datum and a theological entity, while Beatrice is pervasive in the poem.

Singleton is quite correct in postulating a pattern at the center of *Commedia*, but it is no orthodox pattern of analogues for Christ. There are precious few analogues of any kind in *Commedia*, even in the spiritual and linguistic halfway house of *Purgatorio*, where Dante the pilgrim must learn to see – and Dante the poet to speak – in ways other than the literalist vision and univocation of *Inferno*. Nevertheless, Beatrice's place in the procession constitutes as literal a datum as anything else the pilgrim sees and the poet reports of *Purgatorio*, and as such it requires just as much attention to its literal statement and placement as Singleton gives to the chariot's.<sup>16</sup> That placement argues, the whole poem argues, that Beatrice supercedes Christ and replaces the priests – at least for Dante. For Dante, Beatrice is the agent of salvation and the channel of grace. She is Dante's intercessor and guide, without benefit of clergy, without consultation with Christ. In the procession, the gryphon awaits and looks to her. The chariot bears her; the gryphon draws it. To take the statements of the poem literally, we must conclude that Christ acted during a single historical moment that had and continues to have eternal consequences, but that moment is past and Christ is now passive, as withdrawn and symbol-shielded (the gryphon) as any other aspect of the godhead. As the pilgrim's final revelation in *Paradiso* shows, Christ is the avenue by which humanity is grafted onto divinity; equally clearly, the action of the poem declares that Beatrice is the portal through which divinity affects humanity.<sup>17</sup> Beatrice, not Christ, is now the active agent of salvation in human time and history.

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<sup>16</sup> See Singleton's very acute reading of the procession, its pause, and the chariot's placement as the Scripture in time and out of time: *Elements*, 47-50.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Paradiso* XXI.79-90, Dante's prayer to Beatrice in glory:

“O lady, in whom my hope is strong, and who for my salvation did endure to leave in hell your footprints, of all those things which I have seen I acknowledge the grace and the virtue to be from your power and your excellence. It is you who have drawn me from bondage into liberty by all those paths, by all those means by which you had the power so to do. Preserve me in your great munificence, so that my soul, which you have made whole, may be loosed from the body, pleasing unto you.”

o donna in cui la mia speranza vige,  
 e che soffristi per la mia salute  
 in inferno lasciar le tue vestige,  
 di tante cose quant' i' ho vedute,  
 dal tuo podere e da la tua bontate  
 riconosco la grazia e la virtute.  
 Tu m' hai di servo tratto a libertate,  
 per tutte quelle vie, per tutt' i modi  
 La tua magnificenze in me custodi.  
 si che l'anima mia, che fatt' hai sana,  
 piacente a te dal corpo si disnodi.

Significant too is that fact that Beatrice, in her first appearance to Dante in *Purgatorio*, manifests herself “with hue of living flame” (XXX.33). In the *Vita Nuova*, the red garment that veils Beatrice's body becomes a figure of that body – that by which her reality is seen and known – and her hidden body becomes a figure of what the body hides, the soul, her noumenon. Take this a step further, as I believe Dante does in *Commedia*, and the phenomenal veil which simultaneously hides and signals Beatrice's noumenon resolves itself into a figure for what embodies Beatrice's noumenon, that is, the poem. So the veil, the garment, becomes a figure for the veil of poetry or of allegory, and the poem's literal statement is thereby true. For a slightly different understanding of Beatrice's garments, see Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and

That is what the text says, and – as I’ve had other occasions to say in this study – *honi soit qui mal y pense*.

The dimensions that Dante assigns Beatrice shouldn’t surprise us: Beatrice has been for Dante always the embodiment of otherness, of The Other in all its richness and strangeness. Her role in *Commedia* embraces, but is not confined by, all the conceivable feminist senses of The Other. Most especially, her Otherness includes a complete reversal, a total transvaluation, of all the conventional linkages of the female in the conventional medieval systems of correspondences. It is not enough to point to the shadowy figures of the Shekinah and Wisdom – *Sapientia*, *Sophia* – to explain her attributes in the poem: that merely trivializes how radically Other they are by assimilating them, and through them Beatrice, to a logocentric, Christocentric theology. Dante does not minimize the difference in gender between Christ and Beatrice as the theology of the Logos erases the gender of Wisdom. On the contrary, Dante maximizes it<sup>18</sup> as he maximizes the role of matriarchy in the godhead: Heaven, after all, is an image of Mary, the multifoliate rose, and since images do not lie in *Paradiso* (even when they are not “true”), Heaven then *is*, in some sense not yet clear, Mary, female, woman, Other. *Commedia*, like all allegories, is a much stranger work than orthodoxy wants it to be.

In the terms in which we have talked about allegory, *Commedia* is the poem *par excellence* of liminality, of borders and borderline states and of the crossing of borders, even their transgressing. Fractals are all borders, and pilgrims inveterate and unavoidable crossers of them. The borders of life and death, this world and the other, hell and purgatory and heaven are fractal dimensions, resembling each other across the borders of scale and nature and existence that separate their orders, and Dante the pilgrim crosses them all, with a quite irregular passport and very dubious guides.

Even Virgil wonders about Beatrice’s appearance in hell, Cato questions both Dante’s and Virgil’s right to enter purgatory, and everyone everywhere wonders about Dante’s corporeal journeying. He crosses Acheron, he passes over Styx and Phlegython, he bypasses the circling river of ocean, crosses Lethe and Eunoe, drinks of the river of light – all limits, all borders, all Jordans (which imagery the poet does not use) – that mark off states and conditions the pilgrim has no right to, does not belong to, should not be able to see. Each border crossed, each liminal transgression or trespass, brings him only to another border, in an infinite, synchronic and synoptic progression and recession that in the last line of the poem loops back to the poem’s beginning, to return the pilgrim – now about to become the poet – to his and our starting point, his and our first borderline, the entrance to the poem.

Transgression and trespass brought Dante – and us – to our wanderings in the obscure thickets of figuration, and only transgression and trespass will deliver us from them. In the ecology of

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London, 1988), esp. 25-30. For the relevance of *La Vita Nuova* to this part of the *Purgatorio*, see Charles Singleton, *Elements of Structure*, 53ff.

<sup>18</sup> So much so that even critics as perceptive as Charles Singleton have felt obliged to explain away the discrepancies by having Beatrice appear as a redundant Christ (who is already present as the gryphon) in the procession. See especially Singleton’s remarks on the gender of *Benedictus qui venit* (in *Elements of Structure*, 51ff), where the masculine case ending highlights the conventional expectations of Christ and thereby underlines the shock of Beatrice’s incarnation.

*Commedia*, purging souls move slowly upward, heavenly souls move where they will, and only the damned are fixed, confined forever within the borders of their order, locked into their unrelenting choices – if you will, imprisoned in the armor of their univocal vision. The poet and the reader who accompanies him must constantly change their minds – resonant phrase! – as they change their perspectives. The pilgrim, the poet, and the reader – *Commedia*'s most holy trinity – together must cross all the borders, ford all the rivers, because it is only in the poem's final fractal dimension – the repetition of the trespasses, outside the text, in the reader – that the pilgrim's journey and the poet's repetition of it can finally come to rest.

Most of the rivers Dante crosses mark the limits of linguistic orders and their attendant, prerequisite modes of perception. Charon contains within its borders a world perceived and expressed corporeally. Its language is a form of dialectical materialism, embracing everything that those words imply to twenty-first-century ears about political acuteness (the characters of *Inferno* are more preoccupied with the *realpolitik* of Dante's world than those of any other sphere) and esthetic or spiritual obtuseness. The surprises for the reader – and the pilgrim – come first with the realization “that people of great worth were suspended in that limbo”:<sup>19</sup> Virgil himself, Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, characters of classical literature and history (Aeneas, Caesar), and the philosophers, Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, and many others. All are people of words, of the word which, for Dante's age, was second only to the Word in authority and prestige; and the pity their plight evokes in Virgil's face shakes the pilgrim. He is moved even more deeply, to the point of swooning, by his meeting next with Paolo and Francesca and hearing from them the story of the treacherous book – “*Galeotto fu' il libro e chi lo scrisse*” (V.137) – that moved them to the sin that damns them. None of this is allegorical – at least not by itself. Encountered in their sequence these statements/events are entirely literal. They contain meaning, it is true, but that meaning is in no way other than what the characters say and do.

All this changes with the crossing of the sea to the island and mount of Purgatory. For one thing, Dante doesn't in fact cross that sea, thereby perhaps escaping the fate of Ulysses, who is damned precisely for doing so. Dante's sea crossing is metaphoric, figurative: even though the very first words of *Purgatorio* describe the poet's progress to this narrative point and physical place as a sea journey,<sup>20</sup> the reality of his pilgrimage has been the dramatic descent into the pit of hell and re-ascent up the ladder of Satan's body. So we have re-entered a realm where there may be a distance between what words literally say and what they mean, where a literal falsehood may yet be a true statement. Dante signals this change and what it may imply in multiple ways at the outset of *Purgatorio* – for instance, in his plea for the resurgence of “dead poetry” (*la morta poesi*, l.7) and his parallel contrast of the serene sky over Purgatory as opposed to “the dead air that had afflicted my eyes and breast.”<sup>21</sup> The pilgrim now sees “alively,” and consequently his language is alive.

<sup>19</sup> *Inferno* IV.44-45: “che gente di molto valore/ connobi che ‘n quel limbo eran sospesi.”

<sup>20</sup> Per correr miglior acque alza le vele  
omai la navicella del mio ingegno,  
che lascia dietro a se mar si crudele...

To course over better waters the little bark of my genius now hoists her sails, leaving behind a sea so cruel...

<sup>21</sup> *Purgatorio* I.17-18: “l'aura morta/ che m' avea contristati le occhi e 'l petto.”

But this aliveness is ambiguous, troubling. Dante's figure of the sea journey rings false. It has the hackneyed sound of the "*cammin' di nostra vita*," the ring of the clichés of the dark rhetorical woods where the poet first lost his way and became a pilgrim. The way by which Dante reached *Purgatorio* is so much more wondrous than anything that the imagery of rough seas and little barque can convey that the figure belittles the reality instead of enhancing it – and that gulf between what the pilgrim has done and what the poet says about it should be deeply disturbing to the attentive reader. Has Dante learned nothing from his tour of Hell? Are we really right back where we started, wandering in dead language and pointless figuration? At very best, the "poetic" metaphors of the barque of genius and the cruel sea only point to the duality of the pilgrim's "factual" arrival at the island of Purgatory and the poet's mental, memorial, figurative revisiting it in his narrative, a duality we nowhere felt nor were in any way troubled by in *Inferno* (odd solace, that). The very opening lines of *Purgatorio* create a tension between the reader and the text, an unease between the reader and the narrator, that all the narrator's apparent and convincing relief at his escape from hell cannot dispel.

In turn, the first consequences of the narrator's new – or old – way of seeing and speaking, this new and troubling relation of language to "truth" or "reality," involve a reappraisal of some of the things the pilgrim and his fellow-travelers learned in *Inferno*. This reappraisal takes the form of a narrative and/or figurative reprise of some key elements of the *Inferno* story. For instance: as at the very beginning of the poem, when the pilgrim found himself unable to mount the slope and Virgil appeared to guide him out of his quandary, so here in Purgatory the august figure of Cato quickly appears to explain what must be done and to show the way up the mount of Purgatory.<sup>22</sup>

Cato clearly parallels Virgil both as classical author and as guide – but Cato also *de facto* contradicts and revises some of the data we acquired in Hell. Why isn't he in Limbo with Aristotle and Plato, or King Latinus and Brutus? What did he know or believe that they didn't? This is the first inkling we have that Virgil may have left something out in his account of why the "virtuous pagans" are in Hell: he is, after all, an interested party. Cato, however, by his mere presence in Purgatory, even more pointedly critiques the completeness of hellish knowledge: Cato is a suicide, a fact that Virgil specifically calls to all our attentions by his mention of Cato's death "in Utica, where you did leave the raiment which on the great day will be so bright."<sup>23</sup> That raiment is of course Cato's body, which, according to everything we know to this point, ought to be hanging on a branch in the grove of suicides.

Why it and he aren't there remain mysteries that are not solved by facile references to his love of liberty: that is not the condition for salvation in any orthodox Christian universe, however

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<sup>22</sup> "At no point in the whole of the journey beyond this life are we more unmistakably referred back to the scene in Canto I *Inferno* than in Canto I *Purgatorio*. Here the wayfarer girds himself again, here the ascent may finally begin. It is daybreak and, as the light dawns, a scene comes clear in outline which returns us by direct reflection to the situation in the first canto of the poem. We sense at once the striking resemblance. Dominant in both scenes is the outline of a mountain: a mountain to be climbed, for there, at the summit, in both instances, lies happiness and peace. At its base and below, in the one scene, is bitter darkness, a wild wood and a path to Hell; in the other, there is Hell itself which has but now been left behind. By a mountain to be ascended the way of a journey is given, upward or downward as it may be, between the two poles of light and darkness." Singleton, *Elements*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Purgatorio* I.74-75: "in Utica...ove lasciasti/ la vesta ch'al gran di sara si chiara."

admirable it may be in pagan or Christian contexts. Even Virgil's reference to Cato's formerly beloved Marcia, and the old man's indifference to her – "Now that she dwells beyond the evil stream no more may she move me, by the law that was made when I came forth from there"<sup>24</sup> (when was that? what law?) – reprise and reverse Paolo and Francesca's romantic devotion to each other – harshly, it seems to most readers, but nevertheless from a perspective that reinforces how great is the gulf, how radically different the angle of vision, that separates the saved from those "beyond the evil stream."

Even Dante's and the purgatorial souls' response to Casella's song – "all rapt and attentive to his notes," "as if naught else touched the mind of any" – draws Cato's immediate rebuke: "What is this, you laggard spirits? What negligence, what stay is this? Haste to the mountains to strip off the slough that lets not God be manifest to you."<sup>25</sup> *Purgatorio* may be the realm where "dead poetry" revives, but clearly that doesn't mean that poetry is automatically virtuous: the perspective of the second cantica of *Commedia* isn't the same as that of the first, but it isn't the same as "this world's" either. Vision and revision is the order of the day. Indeed, Dante the poet goes out of his way to force us to an awareness of these revisions by his pointed use of the word *galeotto* to describe the angel who pilots the ship of souls to the shores of Purgatory (II.27): its only other appearance in all of *Commedia* occurs in Francesca's denunciation of the book that misled her. The moral ambiguity of poetry and the pilgrim's ambiguous responses to it – the ambiguity pointed sharply by where he is – link the beginnings of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* in a similar concern with the status of art.

That concern will be differently oriented in Purgatory, with its almost living sculptures and Dante's increasing visions, than it was in Hell. Dante's ascent in Purgatory will be toward an experience of the Word and the Book as lived and living things, while art in Hell was defined as, and confined by, *contrapasso*. By *contrapasso* I mean to indicate not simply the conventional notion of Dantesque punishments as condign retaliations, sinners punished in and by the form of their own sin, but also the fundamental idea of *Inferno* itself, the mode of writing of *Inferno*, as *contrapasso* in the sense of counter-poetry – that is, understanding *passus* not only as suffering but, as it is commonly used in Medieval Latin, as a division of a poem, a canto in effect. *Inferno* and its *contrapasso* are therefore anti-poetry, poetry inverted and frozen into language utterly without connotation, and therefore without any possibility of transcendence.<sup>26</sup> John Freccero argues that the vast difference that he – quite rightly – perceives between the poetry of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* results from "a gradual attenuation of the bond between poetry and representation, from the immediacy of the *Inferno* to the dreamlike mediation of

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<sup>24</sup> Or che de la dal mal fiume dimora,  
piu muover non mi puo, per quella legge  
che fatta fu quando me n'usci' fora. (*Purgatorio* I.88-90)

<sup>25</sup> Lo mio mastro e io e quella gente  
ch' eran con lui parevan si contenti,  
come a nessun toccasse altro la mente. (II.115-117)  
... "Che e cio, spiriti lenti?  
qual negligenza, quale stare e questo?  
correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio  
eh'esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto. (II.120-123)

<sup>26</sup> It is well worth noting in this regard that the sole use of the word *contrapasso* in the poem is in Hell, and the user is Bertran de Born, a damned soul and a poet.

the *Purgatorio* to the attempt to create a non-representational poetic world in the last *cantica*.<sup>27</sup> I would differentiate slightly but significantly in the light of what I have been postulating about allegory. It is not a question of representation, because immediacy of representation is a poetic problem everywhere in *Commedia*. It is a different problem in different places, and the nature of those topical differences rather than representation itself accounts for the different poetics of the three *cantiche*.

In *Inferno*, language does not, cannot, pass beyond itself to other meanings or Other meaning, save through the pilgrim's or the poet's or the reader's personal associations: of itself, it is limited strictly to a bare denotation. In *Purgatorio*, where language once again approximates the conditions of language in this world, it re-acquires the dimensions of simile and metaphor: it can and does pass beyond itself to similar or related meanings – as when Virgil's use of the word *galeotto* to describe the angel pilot reminds us of Francesca's use of the same word to describe the book that led to her sin, or when Beatrice's eventual appearance draws into the orbit of *Commedia* all of her actions and significance in the *Vita Nuova*. The language of *Paradiso* presents the hardest case. In another essay, Freccero says "The structure of the *cantica* depends, not upon a principle of *mimesis*, but rather upon metaphor."<sup>28</sup> Again, I agree in part and I distinguish. Metaphor depends upon relations of like to like. *Paradiso*, contrarily, is built out of language that passes beyond itself to Other and totally different meaning. Hell is literal language without figuration; Heaven is literal language that is all figuration, real and unreal, true and untrue, simultaneously, like the bank of flowers that metamorphoses into a river of light, or the M that becomes a talking eagle. Hell is total consonance, complete coincidence of language and phenomenon. *Paradiso* is total disparity: disparity and incommensurability are its mode and its point. Freccero is absolutely right in saying that "paradise and the poem are co-extensive" ("Introduction to *Paradiso*," 212), but they are co-extensive not in the manner of metaphor, which is similitude, but in the manner of allegory, which is difference.

The language of *Paradiso* could not exist in the poem without the bases of hellish and purgatorial language to build upon, and our understanding of purgatorial language in particular is still quite unfinished. The arrival of the angel's barque in the second canto of *Purgatorio* has other effects on the language and perspectives of *Purgatorio* than those we've yet discussed. For one thing, the ship with its sails of angel wings almost over-literalizes the nautical metaphors that Dante used to describe his own poetic arrival at Purgatory in the first Canto. At the same time, it also reprises, *in bono* rather than *in malo*, the physical description of Satan with his mighty wings – "sails at sea I never saw so broad"<sup>29</sup> – fanning the frozen sea of Cocytus. A negative simile proffered in the realm of total literalism becomes, in *Purgatorio*, a metaphor literalized. The hymn sung by the purgatorial souls – *In exitu Israel de Aegypto* (Psalm 113 [114]) – recalls the mordant adaptation of the hymn *Vexilla regis prodeunt* to Satan and his wings at

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<sup>27</sup> John Freccero, "An Introduction to the *Paradiso*," in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, edited by Rachel Jacoff (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, MA, and London, 1986); 210. This collection of Freccero's articles on Dante contains many striking insights. Essays I have found particularly illuminating include "Infernal Irony: The Gates of Hell" (93-109), "Casella's Song: *Purgatorio* II, 12" (185-194), and the above-cited "Introduction to *Paradiso*."

<sup>28</sup> "The Dance of the Stars," in *Poetics of Conversion*, 222.

<sup>29</sup> *Inferno* XXXIV.48: "vele di mar non vid' io mai cotali."

the beginning of *Inferno* XXXIV. Finally, for readers of the letter to Cangrande, the hymn serves too as a dramatic reminder of what that text claims is the status of literal and allegorical statements in *Commedia* – with, of course, the allegorical content of conventional narrative here forming the literal level of this narrative, and thereby calling into question the whole order of allegory in the poem as a whole. (Not to mention the fact that the psalm also provides a means for the poet to textualize his own exegesis, should anyone wish to pursue that line of inquiry.)

Nor is that enough for Dante: at the same time that all that metalinguistic byplay is going on in the first two cantos of *Purgatorio*, the poet is also introducing into his narrative elements that assimilate the entrance into Purgatory, and the subsequent ascent of its mountain, with the classical descent to Hell, particularly – as one might expect – as Virgil depicts it in *Aeneid* VI. The reed that Dante needs to bear about his person and that grows anew as soon as plucked replays the Virgilian Golden Bough. The three-fold attempt of Dante and the soul of Casella to embrace recalls Aeneas's encounter with the soul of his father Anchises in the Virgil's underworld.<sup>30</sup> What was the fact of the first cantica becomes the metaphor of the second, except – of course – it isn't a metaphor.

As this profusion of hymns, songs, literary allusions, and dubious metaphors seems to imply, the status and nature of artistic language constitute central concerns for *Purgatorio*. Casella, and Virgil before him, are only the first of a string of artists and poets and patrons – Sordello, Nino Visconti, Conrad Malaspina, Oderisi, Statius, Bonagiunta, Guido Guinizzelli, Arnaut Daniel – that Dante will encounter as he climbs the terraces of the mountain toward his fated meeting with Beatrice. She, of course, is as much the creation of Dante's own poems as the garden in which he finds her is the creature of literary and Biblical (though Dante would not have made the distinction) tradition. Indeed, the *debat* of Dante and Beatrice in the *locus amoenus* of the Terrestrial Paradise, the procession in which Beatrice first manifests herself to him,<sup>31</sup> the mode of figuration of that procession and that garden: all these amount to encounters with books and the Book, words and the Word, artistic figuration and divine typology. *Purgatorio* epitomizes the *lectura Dantis*: the reading of Dante, Dante's reading.

Purgatory, even the arboretum of the Terrestrial Paradise, shares the same mode of figuration, the same patterns of rhetoric, with the *selva oscura* of the poem's beginning, because both exist in time and space and matter, while Hell and Heaven exist in spirit and eternity – sort of. In eternity, both language and being attain the limits of their capabilities, exhaust their potential. In *Inferno*, this exhaustion of possibility is signaled by language shorn of all connotation, by a language univocally wedded to a very physical imagery, by, in short, a univocation of vision and speech. In *Paradiso*, the exhaustion of possibility is conveyed by

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<sup>30</sup> As I have argued elsewhere (*Epic to Novel, Three English Epics*), the epic descent is also an ascent. Dante's purgatorial journey has many parallels to this epic descent, not the least of which is the aspect of that journey that converts it to a journey to self-knowledge, involving meetings with former friends and enemies, which constitute a review of the pilgrim's past life, and culminating in total revelation of his character and goals. That aspect of the descent/ascent is provided in *Purgatorio* by Dante's various meetings with other poets and, most important, by his climactic meeting with Beatrice and her arraignment of his sins.

<sup>31</sup> That procession itself constitutes a spelling out, a literalization, of the procession implied near the end of *Inferno* by Virgil's adaptation of the Easter hymn *Vexilla regis prodeunt*, and, as it appears, in *Purgatorio*, it presents in the guise of a historical pageant, the "procession" – Dante's pun – of the persons of the Trinity: see *Elements*, 37-49.

unending openness, by words and images that insist that they both are and aren't true at the same time: Dante sees what he sees, but what he sees is conditioned – almost created – by the limits and capabilities of his vision. Everything that Dante sees in hell, the home of falsehood, is literally true as he sees it. Everything he sees in Heaven, where there can be no lies, is false as he sees it. Between those two points lie the dark wood of rhetoric and the garden of the Word, where the mystery of the Incarnation – the Word become flesh and dwelling amongst us – both complicates and explicates language and being.

Every basic pattern in the poem plays with these same paradoxes. The pilgrim's descent to Hell is in fact, at every step of the way, an ascent – not just morally or metaphorically but “actually,” physically, in that he is with every apparent step downward drawing nearer to Purgatory. The ascent of Mount Purgatory is simultaneously a descent into language: the form and function of the terraced mount and the Tower of Babel coincide. Only in Heaven does the motion of ascent coincide with the fact of ascent, in any and all senses, and there the summit of the pilgrim's clear vision is the realization of Heaven as the means of God's descent to man: Heaven as the multifoliate rose, i.e., Heaven as Mary, the channel of the Incarnation, the figure in which the Word becomes flesh, the vehicle whose tenor was God. The final image that Dante records in the poem is the negative of that: three coinciding circles of different colors, containing the human image in its own color (XXXIII.115-132) – God pregnant with man, Incarnation apotheosized and stood on its head, difference and sameness coinciding simultaneously and in multiple respects. In short, allegory again.

The pilgrim's situation in *Paradiso* is remarkably like the pilgrim's dilemma at the very beginning of *Commedia*. He is wandering in a *selva*, bright this time rather than dark, clear rather than obscure, but a *selva* nevertheless, and one, like the one at the poem's opening, wherein words themselves, the pilgrim's language, and the poet's figures do not bear a literal relation to things. Each is a *selva* where the *silva* of rhetoric does not correspond to the *silva* of reality. In *Paradiso* the abstractions of geometry – the three circles – may replace the abstractions of iconography – the three beasts – and the apotheosized human likeness may transcend the uncertain “shade or living man” (*od ombra od omo certo: Inferno* I.66), but the pilgrim's wish and way are still obstructed by the limitations of his own vision, and his movement is still checked by external reality until divine grace moves him onward. Sameness and difference, difference and sameness, and we're not out of the *selva* yet.

And this – though it may be false to orthodox theology – is true to the Incarnation. Indeed, in a very fundamental and quite precise sense, the Incarnation *is* allegory: saying one thing and meaning another, the One and the Other locked in the same articulation, the disjunct conjunction by which the world is bound. Dante says this, as clearly as allegory can say anything, in his nearly final vision of the universe as book:

In its depth I saw ingathered, bound by love in one single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe: substances and accidents and their relations (*costume*), as though fused together in such a way that what I tell is but a simple light.

The universal form of this knot (*nodo*) I believe that I saw, because, in telling this, I feel my joy increase.<sup>32</sup>

In his highly unorthodox prayer to Beatrice (*Paradiso* XXXI.79-90), Dante employs the same root word – *nodo*, knot – to refer to the linking of body and soul: death is “*l’anima . . . dal corpo si disnodi*” (89-90). The same knot that binds the leaves that hold the words that become flesh also ties the soul to the body, the spirit to the flesh, the letter to the spirit. The secret at the center of *Commedia* is not the eternal sameness of God but the eternal fixity of Hell and the eternal mutability of a God that cannot find enough forms in which to exhaust itself, enough words in which to say itself. The univocation of Hell is a travesty, a parody, a *reductio ad absurdum* of that God’s endlessly varied, endlessly differentiated self-saying – of which allegory is the inevitable medium. For that reason too, for that reason above all, Dante calls his poem *Com-media*.

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<sup>32</sup> *Paradiso* XXXIII.85-93:

Nel suo profondo vidi che s’interna,  
 legato con amore in un volume,  
 cio che per l’universo si squaderno:  
 sustanze e accidenti e lor costume  
 quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo  
 che cio ch’i’ dico e un semplice lume.  
 La forma universal di questo nodo  
 credo c’i’ vidi, perche piu di largo,  
 dicendo queto, mi senti c’i’ godo.