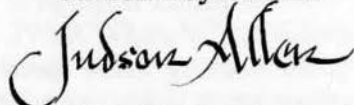1-1-1978

The *Grand Chant Courtois* and the Wholeness of the Poem: The Medieval *Assimilatio* of Text, Audience, and Commentary

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*T*HE GREAT DISCOVERY of modern studies of language is that language does what it does because of internal rules and structures. Old English *stan* becomes Modern English *stone* except in Scotland, where it remains *stane,* not because there is anything peculiar about the stones of Scotland, but because the sound of long *a* works that way. Oppositely, one project which seems to have interested 12th-century linguists was to exploit the relation between logic and language — i.e., to explain language in terms of some real connection between its parts and structures and the world which it purported to describe. [1] Though some modern theorists are also interested in this connection, [2] the main line of concern for linguists relating to that protean term, "structuralism," seems to involve the bracketing of the question of reference, in order to discuss word systems as such; Paul Zumthor, whose study of the *grand chant courtois* justly dominates current discussion, probably presumes this bracketing when he defines the *grand chant courtois* as a poetry which exists in circularity, which is defined by the image of Narcissus gazing into the pool, which is about itself. [3] This presumption has permitted him to focus clearly on the poem as code, and to define the code as such, helpfully clearing away a great deal of the autobiographical and confessional speculation with which this poetry had been encum-

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1. R. W. Hunt, "Studies on Priscian in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies,* 1 (1941-43), 194-231; 2 (1950), 1-56.
2. Under this rubric, I classify the work of Erving Goffman, and especially his *Frame Analysis, An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1974), as linguistic; Gérard Genette's *Mimologiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), for notice of which I thank Donald Maddox, is centrally concerned with the relation between words and things.
3. Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 218-219.

bered. As a result, we have made synchronic recovery of an important body of great verse.

In this paper I attempt a diachronic recovery, using as my instrument certain medieval attitudes toward language and its working, which are particularly rooted in 12th-century and later logical analysis, and which presume a radical relation between words and things. Popularly, these attitudes found expression in the study of etymologies as clues to the nature of things, and in the derivation of language as a historically changing phenomenon from the perfect language of Eden, via the calamities of the *segno trapassato* (Cf. *Paradiso* XXVI. 117) and the tower of Babel. Academically, the *modistae* whose speculative grammars are currently of renewed interest are a subtle and rigorous analysis of the logical modes of signifying in terms of which the relation is possible. Presuming both is a key structural term, *assimilatio,* whose range of meanings, taken in sum, defines the relationship of poetry to the world of whose rhetoric it is an integral part. In that version of Aristotle's *Poetics* which was accepted and read in the Middle Ages, [4] *assimilatio* displaces *mimesis.* It means, broadly, "likening," but not at all in the sense in which we mean *mimesis.* Rather, it refers, without distinction, to a variety of different linguistic acts which we habitually distinguish — simple reference, the relation between a description and the thing described, the relation between the two halves of a simile or metaphor, the relation between the two parts of a simile or comparison, and the relation among the parts of a proportionate analogy. In combining under a single category these very different relationships, the term asserts two things — first, that the relations internal to language are the same as the one which relates it to the real world, and second, that this relation is analogical — it is a relation of likening. Accepting these two assertions, we must see language as an analogising system which includes, rather than excludes, the world. The inclusion works because in the Middle Ages the worlds of nature and of human action were understood as things whose very being was linguistic. The Book of Creatures was more than a mere metaphor; Augustine's conversion, as Eugene Vance's analysis makes brilliantly clear, [5] is the experience of giving up his own rhetoric in order

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4. The "Middle Commentary" of Averroes, translated by Hermann the German. I deal with its doctrine and significance in "Hermann the German's Averroistic Aristotle and Medieval Poetic Theory," *Mosaic* 9 (1976), 67-81.
5. "Augustine's Confessions and the Grammar of Selfhood," *Genre* 6 (1973), 1-28.

to become a Word of God; and the *ars dictaminis* was one of the real and necessary components of the existence of a magnate in action. All these things continued to be true until the end of the Middle Ages and beyond — medieval nominalism was, at worst, less nominalist than is our normal theory of language; for the more platonist sensibilities of the 12th century, the easy interchange between language and the world, between the thingness of words and the wordness of things, was simply a feature of the nature of things. Under the notion of *assimilatio,* the principle of parallel, and of parallel systems, was the basis on which language in general and poetry in particular should be understood.

I can begin to give precision to this definition of *assimilatio,* and the kind of linguistic reference which it presumes, by comparing this concept to an analogous one: Zumthor's "convenance" which "implique l'adhésion de l'auditeur à un univers mental et verbal dont le style comme tel assure la communication." [6] "Convenance" is a relation between the human mind of an auditor, which has itself been formed in terms of a certain set of linguistic habits, and a sample of language formed according to the same habits. *Assimilatio,* though it is formally similar, is a relation between things. Some of these things may be mental or verbal, but others are material. One may, of course, argue in modern terms that material things are known only conceptually, and so reduce the material component of *assimilatio* to phenomenology. But my point here is that medieval users of language did not do so, and that therefore strategies and events we would call poetic or linguistic merely were in the Middle Ages much more powerful. Under both Zumthor's term and mine, the presence of style is of course supremely important, but the medieval sensibility would presume a style of Being as the ground of its naming, and the modern one would, if linguistically sophisticated, insist on satisfying itself with a style of naming.

From the point of view of the Middle Ages, a defining example of *assimilatio,* and its implied principle of parallel systems, can be found in the *accessus* to the 12th-century *Metamorphoses* commentary of Arnulf of Orleans. There, in a context clearly dealing with scientific, moral, and spiritual matters, and above all with moral ones, he says that the kinds of transformation, or changes of substance, with which Ovid's book deals are

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6. Paul Zumthor, *Langue et techniques poétiques à l'époque romane (XI*e-*XIII*e *siècles)* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1963), pp. 142-143.

de re animata ad rem animatam ut de licaone homine in lupum, de inanimata in inanimatam ut domo Baucidis in templum, de inanimata ad animatam ut de statua Pigmalionis in virginem. De animata ad inanimatam ut de dracone mutato in saxum. [7]

Precisely the same schemata occurs in a large variety of grammatical contexts, ranging from Donatus to the *Catholicon,* specifying the four kinds of metaphor. I quote it from a fragment representing one of the longest and most detailed medieval commentaries on the *Poetria nova* of Geoffrey of Vinsauf. "Transumptio metaphorica de qua hic loquitur secundum Donatum fiat quatuor modis, scilicet ab animali ad animale, ab animali ad inanimale, ab inanimali ad inanimale et ab inanimali ad animale." [8] This coincidence of schemata is more than accident. What it means is that the structure of morality and the structure of metaphor are the same. The *Metamorphoses* is a great book of metaphors, but it is classified in the Middle Ages as ethics, and it is glossed as morality. Here again, the evidence might be misunderstood; medieval commentators might be accused of insensitivity to poetry, as they multiply their allegories. But properly we should see their belief as in a universe which was already (in modern terms) so poetic that there was no need to claim for the poet greater powers than those of an honest reporter. If the structures of morality and the structures of metaphor are the same, if the *forma tractandi* of poetry is discursive, [9] then obviously all that is poetic in medieval verse must, by medieval standards, be attributed to the world which that verse described and celebrated. The world, and words, assimilate because they are alike; the parallel systems of metaphor-making and moral change illustrate and define one another.

In the medieval world, of course, there were more parallels of systems than this one. In relation both to medicine and to psychology, one might mention astrology on the one hand, or the four elements and humors on the other. In relation to language *per se,* the most important such system of parallels was the one developed in exegesis of the Bible; this system implies a structure as well as an array of interpretations pious in content.

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7. Fausto Ghisalberti, "Arnolfo d'Orléans, un cultore di Ovidio nel Secolo XII," *Memorie del Reale Istituto Lombardo di Scienze e Lettere,* 24 (1932), 181.

8. Munich, MS. Clm. 14482, fol. 94v.

9. I discuss the notion of *forma tractandi* in "Commentary as Criticism: Formal Cause, Discursive Form, and the Late Medieval *Accessus*," in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Lovaniensis,* ed. J. Ijsewijn and E. Kessler (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1973), pp. 29-48.

Properly understood as such, this structure permits an approach to the reading of medieval poems in general, and of the poetry of the *grand chant courtois* in particular, which is in no sense allegorical or reductionist, but a powerful instrument for the understanding of the letter.

My understanding of four-level exegesis as a structure — even, in modern terms, as a kind of structuralist system — is the result of a long-continued study of medieval literary commentaries and glosses, i.e., of a study of the medieval act of reading poems. [10] As conventionally understood, four-level exegesis is a method for extracting from, or supplying to, literally unedifying portions of the Bible, suitably pious meanings and associations. Structurally understood, the method defines the array of expectations possible because of the interaction of world and word, and thus, in medieval terms, defines the wholeness of poems — a wholeness larger than their merely synchronic textuality.

In exegetical terms, the literal level consists of some text, usually narrative, which names or contains a particular. The allegorical is this text's doctrinal meaning — i.e., the meaning which is achieved by considering it a parallel to Christ, and thus to the central Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. The tropological is the text's moral meaning — i.e., the meaning achieved by taking it as an example suggesting some detail of right behavior to the exegete himself, or to one or some of his contemporaries. The anagogical is the text's heavenly meaning — in practice, a meaning which involved placing some description of heaven, hell, or some transitional force of eschatology parallel to the literal text.

What this fourfold schema defines for literature is not a range of possible meanings for a text, which the modern critics must reconstruct, Robertsonian fashion, with the help of the *glosa ordinaria*, but rather a range of possible kinds of reality which a text may assimilate. This range, of course, is a medieval range, and not a modern one; though quite strange to the modern sensibility, it is a range of reality which medieval readings, over a vast consistency in the treatment of a wide variety of poetic texts, makes completely clear. First, medieval criticism makes clear that poetry is not really about "individua cadentia in sen-

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10. Developing the preliminary discussions cited in notes four and nine, it deals with the fact that medieval critics classified literature as ethics, and with the crucial notions of *forma tractandi, forma tractatus, assimilatio,* and the *consideratio* which makes a text credible to an audience. This present paper is a brief and largely theoretical excerpt and development of that study, which for reasons of space must lack the bulky primary documentation which I will eventually publish.

sum," but rather about customs and beliefs — *consuetudines* and *credulitates.* [11] These are made credible to an audience by an intrinsic quality of poetic texts called *consideratio,* which has the effect of rhetorical persuasiveness, but depends on no extrinsic rhetorical devices, such as gesture and facial expression. Further, this subject matter — these *consuetudines, credulitates,* and powers of *consideratio* — is organized simultaneously in two ways, by two distinct levels of form — the *forma tractatus,* which means simply the text's literal series of parts, and the *forma tractandi,* which means the text's discursive outline, and which may, and indeed often did, exist as something external to the text and independent of it. *Forma tractatus* thus varied from text to text; the *forma tractandi,* being external, might be more universally specified. Collections of medieval *distinctiones* are, in these terms, compendia of *formae tractandi;* the norm in terms of which specific variation occurred was that the *forma tractandi* was *quintuplex*: *divisiva, definitiva, refutativa, probativa, exemplorum positiva.* The best known example of the occurrence of this formula is probably Dante's letter to Can Grande; in medieval literary criticism, it is common and utterly conventional.

In these terms we can relate the medieval range of possible kinds of reality involved in a text to the structure defined by exegesis. "Individua cadentia in sensum" and their assimilated descriptions are literal, and obey the mode *exemplorum positiva* of the *forma tractandi.* The *consuetudines* and *credulitates* which are really what poetry is about, and which are implicit in literal particulars, correspond to the allegorical level. In practice, they tend to occur therefore as commentary. The tropological level is that of the reader or hearer, whom *consideratio* evokes. Both commentary and audience assimilate to examples of customs and beliefs in an ethical parallel; it is this ethical implication which evokes the tropological. The anagogical level, finally, has to do with the ideal. It is difficult to define to the modern sensibility, because we are not idealists; in medieval practice, this level is most visible to us when a text achieves that figural power whose medieval name was either typology or *prosopopoeia.* There is no modern equivalent. The archetype comes closest, but makes lesser claims both on rationality and on ontology.

Normally, as might be expected, medieval poetic texts occur at the literal level of this scheme, and commentary, analysis of rhetorical effect

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11. In the medieval *Poetics,* these concepts displace plot and character from the genuine Aristotelian list of the six parts of tragedy.

on audience, and final conclusion about "meaning" occupy the three remaining levels. But the words as such, which preservation in writing makes synchronic, and for which I use the word "textuality" when I mean the poem considered apart from imputed rhetorical, generic, or interpretative involvements and assumptions, are not always necessarily literal. This is of course the norm, but the norm has exceptions, and it is the central point of this paper that this structural scheme of four is most powerful as a tool of analysis for the exceptional poems — i.e., for the poems whose textuality does not occur at the level of letter, and which therefore displace commentary, audience, and meaning. The obvious example is Dante's *Commedia,* whose textuality, as Dante himself tells us, is "status animarum post mortem," and is therefore literally anagogy. [12] The example which is the subject of this paper is the *grand chant courtois.* Its textuality, I shall argue, occupies the level of tropology, and displaces audience and commentary in a way which accounts perfectly for our paradoxical need both to avoid and to supply autobiographical, occasional, or rhetorical commentary in treating these poems.

The problems presented to modern understanding by the lyrics of the *grand chant courtois* are not problems of literal meaning, nor of social context, historically understood. We know well enough what these poems say, and we know the social class and the typical biographies of the people who liked, commissioned, wrote, heard, and supported them. What we have not decided for sure is their rhetorical character — we do not know what they are as a part of a complex involving audience, doctrine, and ideal or real behavior. The old criticism, which found a real adultery behind every sigh and languishing word, has been fortunately discredited. [13] Paul Zumthor's analysis of the code of the

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12. *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae,* ed. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), Epistola X [to Can Grande], p. 177. Because Dante's text occupies anagogy, commentary is displaced; this fact explains why for Dante's poem commentary is so fittingly preoccupied not only with doctrine, but also with literal annotation — it thus explains why Dante's poem, alone in literature, is one which accepts as morally and even poetically significant our assignment of our own literal contemporaries to their appropriate places in [usually] Hell.

13. A recent collection of studies is F. X. Newman, ed., *The Meaning of Courtly Love* (Albany, N.Y.: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1968). John F. Benton's contribution, "Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love," is the telling one; he makes the sensible point that real people who behaved as courtly poetry recommended would have caused themselves serious trouble with the law. Surviving court records suggest that they did not.

grand chant courtois, qua code, is a vast improvement. But it probably goes too far. What is needed is a critical schema which can permit this poetry real rhetorical effect without requiring the hypothesis of some historically implausible or even silly literal result. In order to propose such a schema, it is of course necessary to apply it. In application, I have concentrated on certain poems by Bernard de Ventadour, not only because he is early and a recognized master, but also because he is justly credited with the invention of much of what became the conventionality of the *grand chant courtois.* When one considers a tradition of code, it is obviously wise to take special account of the encoder. At the level of generality on which I am dealing with theory, I am confident that what can be said validly of this one supremely exemplary poet can by extension be said of others.

What we have in much medieval poetry, and supremely in the *grand chant courtois,* is the language of idealism. Formally, this language of idealism is indeed a code, as Zumthor defines it. It is verbal, mental, circular. As in all Platonisms, words control things, even speakers, "et nous inclut dans la circularité de cet échange in-dicible." [14] These words are formally symbols, myths, abstractions, and often negations; but the mirror of Narcissus would have reflected truth instead of *accidia* and death had Socrates, and not a foolishly self-centered lover, looked into it. [15] This code exists to make demands on Being. It is a verbal enterprise requiring real sweat (as Thrasymachus and Alanus de Insulis remind us) but refusing simple reference to the flesh. It demands of those who use it a sublimation into a world which appears, indeed, to be mere language, but which could never have the authority it exercises if it were really only mere language. We are, in short, face to face with a quality of belief; it is as absurd to believe that the *grand chant courtois* could have existed apart from belief in the reality of love as to believe that Bernard of Clairvaux could have interpreted Canticles as he did without believing in the reality of God.

The distinctive quality of the *grand chant courtois* is that it has higher hopes than most other medieval idealisms for some material union be-

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14. Zumthor, *Essai,* p. 219.
15. The Narcissus theme, and the implied theme of the mirror, are complex and extremely important. In mirrors one often finds truth, even when one sees one's self, rather than what is seen "per speculum in aenigmitate," but one may also find the *accidia* of Narcissus. For a treatment of this theme, see Frederick Goldin, *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U. P., 1967).

tween language and concrete fact. The love which it celebrates is a love which, in rare moments of joy, unites real people; even more, it is the love which one can interpret, by lyric convention dramatically, [16] as the meaning of observed or hypothetical human behavior. This love is not always, in fact, achieved; at the level of perfection which the poetry enacts, it is never achieved, in this life. But *something* is achieved, if only in the rhetorical existence of the words, before an idealist audience. The *grand chant courtois* does not display merely "the infinite play of difference by which a word sends us off to other words instead of linking directly with a world," in "premature foreclosure." [17]

The chief glory of language is not that it plays games with itself, but that when it is spoken someone understands it, and in the act of this understanding recognizes a certain manipulation of reality as well as of sounds or spellings. What the structuralists leave out, bracket, or postpone, is this manipulation of reality, and so make medieval poetry into something post-Cartesian, if not post-Kantian, and essentially solipsistic. In very recent times this solipsism may trace to literary critics' having derived themselves more from the structuralism of the linguists than from the structuralism of the anthropologist, and thus, in using language as a metaphor for language rather than for everything, may have trapped themselves in a half-empty metaphor. Further, the critical solipsism, and the wish to bracket reference which indulges it, may relate to the poverty of modern metaphysics. It is incapable of making a completely valid description of the *grand chant courtois* precisely because that poetry existed in a world which was indeed capable of metaphysics, and was therefore capable of taking words as referential without becoming liable to "unseemly" or merely material (i.e., in this case, merely adulterous) foreclosure. Modern description is unfair to the quality of medieval belief.

This belief is pervasive; I propose Dante as an example of it only because his doctrine has been particularly well analysed by a recent

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16. According to Zumthor, *Langue, texte, énigme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), p. 171, the dramatic ego, the *je*, "n'a d'autre existence pour nous que grammaticale." In his terms, this is another assertion of linguistic circularity. But medieval grammatical theory sometimes distinguishes first and second person pronouns, as demonstratives, from third person, which are only relative. Such a distinction would suggest, for the dramatic "je" of lyric poetry, ontological as well as merely linguistic status. I treat these matters in an essay, "Grammar, Poetic Form, and the Lyric Ego: A Medieval *A Priori*," forthcoming in a collection on medieval vernacular poetics edited by Lois Ebin.

17. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U. P., 1976), pp. 107, 130.

critic. [18] Dante understood the power of language in terms of his myth of Eden, of a power damaged, but not destroyed, by the event to which the story of Babel refers. The nature and structure of language and the nature and structure of reality in the intention of God are absolutely commensurable — hence, among other things, the quite metaphysical medieval interest in etymology. Therefore the great tragedy of language is a failure of communication. Like Prufrock, one casts one's words upon the waters, and they return void — "That is not what I meant at all," says the Lady. It is this tragedy to which Bernard de Ventadour refers, in the lyric, "Can vei la lauzeta mover." [19] The tragedy is of a self-projection which is merely that, which sees merely itself in what set out to be an experience of the other. The glory does not always happen; one wishes in *accidia* to suppose that the world is recalcitrant. But Bernard makes very clear that the fault is in the speaker, and not in either the world or the word.

It is not necessary, in this poem, to know what it is the speaker loves, because the poem is not about the object of love, but about the condition of loving in a state of self-preoccupied *accidia*. In the most general sense, one could call the "lady" Dame Nature herself, who was one of the genuine great ladies of the 12th century — and if one must name her, then "Nature" is a better name than "Eleanor of Aquitaine" or any other particular, if only because it is nature, so beautiful and vital in appearance, who willingly "laisse morir" anyone who is foolish enough to say, "ja ses leis non aura be." But the problem is not with the lady. It is with the speaker. The solution to the speaker's problem is not a different kind of attention from the lady, but a different attitude in himself. The self-preoccupied *accidia* in which he wallows is a mortal sin, both against God and against love. The poem, by dramatising this attitude, indicts it. Idealism, directed in this exclusive way toward material reality, is necessarily disappointed.

In part, this disappointment is inevitable because platonism, though it is according to Augustine the best philosophy with which to discuss

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18. Roger Dragonetti, "Aux frontières du langage poétique," *Romanica Gandensia* 9 (1961), 9-116.
19. My analysis uses the poems of Bernard de Ventadour as central examples, because he is generally held important, influential, and typical. This lyric is conveniently available in Alan R. Press, ed. and tr., *Anthology of Troubadour Lyric Poetry* (Austin: U. of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 76-79. For poems not anthologised, I have used Bernard de Ventadorn, *Chansons d'amour*, édition critique avec traduction, introduction, notes et glossaire par Moshé Lazar (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1966).

God, must never be taken as more than instrumental, and the attention of the *grand chant courtois* to the world of love sometimes fails to remember its instrumentality. In part this disappointment is inevitable because, in medieval terms, the world is fallen. But even the failures, the frustrations, recorded in this poetry express indirectly the very powerful and true moral judgement that something has indeed gone wrong with the universe. Love ought to be true. Idealism should work.

When language succeeds the result is communication, by a speaker whose language makes him worthy of his words. To mention Love fitly is to evoke it, and create the lover as well. It is in these terms, I think, that we can understand Bernard's "sincerity." In the lyric "Chantars no pot gaire valer" (Press, pp. 66-69), the song must indeed be sincere, in that it must come "dal cor," but the heart is the result, and not the cause, of "fin'amors," and the song, when it is finished, is "fis e naturaus." All this language is extremely normative; the conclusion is not that Bernard's Wordsworthian or existential sincerity validates his feelings, but that correct love, when submitted to, permits one to achieve that posture of selfhood which is true, and in which therefore one is a true self. The song is natural — i.e., in accord with the definition of the nature of things. The heart comes from it as much as it comes from the heart. Bodies, then, are "convinen," and persons have for love an intrinsic, definitive, "talans." [20] That which is most natural is artful; for "ops d'amar" bodies must be "talhatz" and "depens" (*Can l'erba fresch'e.lh folha par*, Press, p. 80). One becomes "sincere" by escaping from, not into, Plato's Cave.

The escape is not always possible. Hence Bernard's oscillation between joy and despair, in the moral condition of the idealist. In the real world — either of literary criticism or of love; it should make no difference — what can one do with his words? His texts are in the first person. They are not relative. They are not descriptions, not even of the literal speaker. They are the utterance of an "Ego." They present

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20. This word, which is one of the most frequently used terms in courtly poetry, means basically "desire" — but it is an *enabling* desire, rooted in the Latin meaning of "a very large sum of money." Its usage in this poetry convinces me that it should be taken as meaning, as part of desire, something very close to Plato's *arete*, or the corresponding Renaissance Italian *virtù*. "Convenience," as well, is connected to the eternal medieval fitness of things, as Michel Foucault rightly notes in making it one of his four similitudes: *convenientia, aemulatio, analogy,* and *sympathy.* See *The Order of Things* (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. 17-25.

objectively and dramatically the existence of an interior state of consciousness — as it happens, the consciousness which desires the ideal achievement of love in this world. This state is not his own — Bernard is not writing autobiography. It is not that of Eleanor of Aquitaine — he is not a public gossip. It is the state as such.

In order to deal properly with texts like these, we must find their textuality, in the scheme of four which I defined earlier, in the place of tropology, and at that level only. By their situating in this way, they can account for all the demands that they make, without either denying reference or exhibiting literal courtly adulteries. The *grand chant courtois* does indeed express a desire for existence at both the empirical or literal and at the doctrinal and anagogical levels, but the desire is not the same as the fact. If the textuality exists at tropology only, but occupies that entirely, then the elements which have to be located in the array of *assimilationes* outside the text are the audience and the commentary. As usually understood, audience occupies the tropological place, commentary the allegorical, and the textuality the literal. But audience must be seen here as displaced, and this displacement defines the expected commentary. The question we must ask to define this displacement and fulfill this expectation, is this: What can properly be said about this poetry, or rather in the presence of it? I suggest that the most profitable arrangement is to admit the aspiration of the text. Though the *grand chant courtois* exists textually at the level of tropology only, what it strives for, wishes for, and points to is anagogy — the perfect, iconic life, in which persons find themselves transformed into personifications. Here, I suggest, is the proper place to locate the real audience. In other words, this scheme of four, in which textuality occurs at tropology and audience at anagogy, suggests that the only fit use of the *grand chant courtois,* as a piece of language with rhetorical effectiveness, is to teach mortal aristocratic people how to exist as the achieved personifications of their roles. In the light of this application, this posture of audience, then, commentary can proceed to discursive definition and discussion of those roles, and to analysis of the empirical achievements and shortcomings of the people who are supposed to live and be those roles. In the synthesis of *assimilatio* which poems, audience, and commentary achieve, personally held idealism is validated as anagogy. The other elements serve this one, and this one, occupied by real persons who are the audience of the lyric which sings their song, saves real life both from *accidia* and adultery.

The problem which modern audiences have with the *grand chant courtois*, which in terms of this scheme of four permits us to locate textuality wrongly at the level of letter (courtly love) or at the level of allegory or *doctrine pure*, as suggested by Zumthor, arises from the fact that, as I have said, anagogy is not a modern category. As a secular culture, we believe neither in heaven nor in sacramental or figural human roles. In our world kings have largely disappeared, and for the current sovereign to call herself "England" seems either an absurdity or a piece of merely antiquarian language, and not the inevitable *prosopopoeia* of politics. Therefore a poetry which occupies our own personal tropologies, attempting to displace us into our potential anagogies, must inevitably make for us no rhetorical sense, and must therefore in failing tempt us to allow it merely and only poetic or aesthetic sense.

The scheme of four saves us from ourselves. It works because medieval poems are larger than their textuality. The medieval poetic, which classifies poems as ethics, and has no separate category for literature at all, makes poems a normal part of human life and thought. Thus a poem, fully understood, includes by assimilation its audience and its commentary, by which and because of which it functions as a part of the system of parallel systems of which the real world is composed. The medieval poetic is radically different from the modern one — much less a prisoner of words and of language. Thanks to commentaries, the medieval poetic is recoverable diachronically as well as synchronically, and once recovered, is as available to the present as to the past. The duty of the critic is to look beyond textuality, and beyond even his own accidentally post-Cartesian predicaments, in order to draw the boundaries of his enterprise of literary criticism large enough to include all the parts, including proper commentary, and the proper application to audience which is ethics, as a part of the poetry if not a part of the textuality. The structure which makes all this possible is *assimilatio*. It is a structure which once had great power. Enough of that power persists, however amputated, in textuality, to suggest that we should recover it all. The *grand chant courtois,* in which the power of *assimilatio* was to an unusual degree concentrated on making demands of reality, is a genre for which that recovery is, as I have tried to suggest, more than usually valuable.

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