The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages

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INTRODUCTION

For Christ is a sort of book written into the skin of the virgin. . . . That book was spoken in the disposition of the Father, written in the conception of the mother, expostulated in the clarification of the nativity, corrected in the passion, erased in the flagellation, punctuated in the imprint of the wounds, adorned in the crucifixion above the pulpit, illuminated in the outpouring of blood, bound in the resurrection, and examined in the ascension.

Pierre Bersuire, *Repertorium morale*

This book is intended, first of all, to carry on the work of such scholars as Johan Huizinga, Erich Auerbach, Ernst Curtius, Charles Singleton, and D. W. Robertson, Jr., who have helped to assess the place of literature among the various cultural forms of the middle ages.¹ But it is also devoted to reconsidering the grounds on which this place may be established in light of proposals in critical theory that have emerged since structuralism. I attempt to develop a systematic approach to the continuity of medieval ideas about speaking, writing, and texts—the history of auctores (“authors”) and auctoritates (“sources”); this history is studied in theological and philosophical traditions as well as in medieval fictional writing. Through close readings of poems by Dante and Chaucer, I analyze the extent to which fiction becomes the ground for departures in the modes of signifying meaning that were dif-

Introduction

Differ from and more consequential than developments in the history of thinking about language in other areas of learning, such as the trivium (grammar, dialectic, and logic). My overall aim is to examine the nature of historical change insofar as it may be reflected in linguistic change, and thus to use language as a model for rethinking the nature of the conceptual boundary lines at each end of the so-called middle ages—the archaic or mythological societies opposed by cultural traditions after Augustine and the “Renaissance” that emerged after Chaucer.

The approach to continuity in this book arises from medieval ideas themselves, principally from the commonplace attempt to gather all strands of learning together into an enormous Text, an encyclopedia or summa, that would mirror the historical and transcendental orders just as the Book of God’s Word (the Bible) was a speculum of the Book of His Work (nature). The function of the Bible as mirror has limits that are well established within medieval hermeneutics, and heretofore those limits have controlled to a great extent how the much broader idea of the Book as a reflection of cultural traditions has been analyzed. But in light of the vast and diverse attention that this topic has received in modern theory—for example, by Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida—the medieval image may be reopened for a new look at its role in the origin and development of cultural forms.2

One of the most seminal of recent proposals is that the Text fulfills certain expectations that mythology supplied in archaic cultures. In arguing this position with reference to various societies, Lévi-Strauss emphasizes a principle about the totalizing and classifying determinations of mythological thought that not only has been suggested in other areas of scholarship—such as prehistory—but has unusual bearing on the classifying forms of the medieval world. This conception of myth as a storehouse of a culture’s lore will, to begin with, subsume customary notions of medieval “mythography”; yet it has the capacity to offer a much wider explanation for the “encyclopedia” of culture. In attempting to read myth as the langue of a society, Lévi-Strauss (following Saussure) sees a distinction between the unexpressed system of cultural norms or rules and the many veiled manifestations in the individ-

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Introduction

ual parole of speaking and writing, the specific and idiosyncratic ways a people may act.\(^3\) Since this conception of a societal langue also has a parallel in Foucault’s idea of cultural “episteme,” both he and Lévi-Strauss have made available a systematic approach to studying seemingly diverse societies or historical eras in terms of their common “grammar.”\(^4\)

The following chapters maintain that in the middle ages the Text is the metaphor of such a structuring process or grammar; therefore, this study is not an encyclopedic survey of what medieval thinkers wrote about books, nor is it an effort to treat this metaphor as a container enclosing a defining content. It is rather a consideration of the conditions of signifying that produced the great books of the middle ages, an exploration of the “textuality” of traditions at work not only in writing but, just as important, in several cultural forms from the fourth century to the fourteenth. If the totalizing foundation of myth informs the model of a cultural Book, then it is worthwhile to consider whether medieval forms have roots in more archaic prototypes, those that supposedly were displaced by the development of traditions after Augustine and Jerome. For example, the treatment of space (taken up in chapter 2), specifically its sacralization in the ancient world, where volume, height, and density were considered to be attributes of holiness, is a compelling instance of the presence of divinity in visual forms. Medieval representations of the divine begin from a manifestly different grounding in the second commandment (Exod. 20.4) against making “likeliness” of God and in the continuing repudiation of idol worship throughout the prophetic books of the Bible. The pulpits of medieval Christendom surely thundered with these pronouncements, but the sacrality of stone and volume as well as the association of divinity with towering visible forms prevails over any diatribe against the “idols of the Market-place” and the “Theater,” as Francis Bacon would later call them.\(^5\) Space is radiant with meaning in these forms; it replicates a supernatural order; it is imbued with the presence of significance that is of a piece with the stress on heavy outlines and sharp borders. Accordingly, the effort to contain all within sacred confines becomes a determinant of structure: we see it perhaps most graphically in certain miniatures of manu-

\(^3\)See Lévi-Strauss, Pensée, chap. 1.

\(^4\)See Foucault, Mots, chap. 2.

script painting that show an attempt to reduce to manageable size the meaning of an elusive biblical passage, to contain and stabilize its significance. And similar totalizing efforts are, to some degree, commonplace by the time of late Gothic architecture, especially in the ribbed column, vault, and window.

Insofar as these are forms of replicating a divine ordo, of revealing or illuminating its structural principles, they reflect the textual properties of the Book of nature and the Book of Scripture, where all of God’s plan is set forth. Any number of chapters in the medieval Text of cultural forms may be probed for their mythologizing structure, and among those treated in the following pages, musical theory offers especially rich evidence. It indicates how a metaphor can be fixed so firmly that its capacity as a mere analogy of apprehending a transcendent meaning becomes fascinating in its own right and is treated as a structure of reality itself: the music of the spheres determines the *musica* in the physical world and in the heart of man. The bond between image and referent, signifier and signified is highly motivated or natural in these examples, and they suggest that the structure of the summa or encyclopedia is continuous with the larger Book of medieval culture. It is a continuity motivated by the firm belief that the books of man’s making would never come into existence without the Logos spoken by God.

The “idea” of the Book presented here, therefore, is not a specific abstraction that descended into writing, but rather is a structuring principle of far-reaching potential. It is an “idea” in the broad sense of an inherited or received supposition about the ordo radiating throughout the physical universe and the language composed in explanation of it. While it prevails in learned traditions from Augustine to Chaucer, it is not a transhistorical concept but is determined and stabilized by the unique homogeneity of medieval learning. It represents an “episteme” that changed radically by the time of Francis Bacon, and consequently the Book studied in these pages is a definite medieval idea. Yet the Text cannot be situated so simply, since the totality and presence of meaning represented by it have obviously corresponding forms in mythological cultures both antedating and postdating the middle ages. As a result, the medieval idea of the Book is a particular form of this larger, mythologizing phenomenon of Western tradition.

Although the effort to establish the grounds of this idea touches on several cultural forms—manuscript painting, sacred architecture, Scholasticism, and musical theory—the intention of these chapters can only be to assemble suggestive evidence, rather than
to write a prescription for how the culture made itself. Much more
work can be done on the textuality of any of these forms. One of
the most challenging areas of its manifestation is grammatical and
hermeneutic theory, which is given separate and extensive treat­
ment (in chapter 3). A tradition full of potential comparisons for
modern theoretical interests in the *abecedarium culturae*, medieval
sign theory has recently attracted several engaging studies. An
increasing section of this scholarship regards the subtle treatment
of signs in the middle ages as on a par with the strategies of signi­
fying that have become commonplace in the wake of structuralism
and especially in “deconstruction.” When the medieval sign is de­
defined as a tripartite structure—a *signum* (“sign”) that is divided into
a *signans* (“signifying”) and a *signatum* (“signified”)—the work of
Saussure comes to mind; and when Augustine imagines the cosmos
as a vast “script” written by the hand of God, in contrast to his own
pale, flawed imitation of it, modern readers may see the decon­
structive project of Derrida “prefigured.” Indeed, a fourteenth­
century illumination of Apocalypse 10.9, in which the visionary is
told, “Take this book and eat it,” might appear to suggest an unus­
ually vivid instance of the deconstruction of textuality in this diges­
tion of the Word.7

Although these possibilities may be intriguing, they should be
pursued only in full appreciation of the extent to which signs and
signification, as they were explored in *grammatica* (the first disci­
pline of the seven liberal arts) and in the hermeneutics of Scrip­
ture, remained committed to a larger intellectual preoccupation
with stabilizing the sign, moving it out of the realm of potential ar­
bitrariness, and tracing utterance back to a fixed origin, such as the
primal Word spoken by God the Father. There can be no doubt
that grammar in the middle ages makes tremendous strides in ex­
ploring the “ways of signifying” through spoken and written dis­
course, particularly among the speculative grammarians (or mo­

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Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). Full documentation for
medieval sign theory is provided in the notes to chapters 1 and 3 below. A few re­
cent and important items came to my attention after completing this book, but revi­
sions allowed for some references to them: R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Geneal­
ogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1983); Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of
Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1983); Eugene Vance, “Saint Augustine: Language as Temporality,” in *Mime­
sis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes*, ed. John D. Lyons and Stephen G.

7See plate 1.
Introduction

distae) of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But it is also true that the end of learning about language was ingrained profoundly in education, and that end was to carry out the well-known instructions for finding the “right reading”—the correct historical, moral, and anagogical interpretation—of the pages in the Book of nature and Scripture. Eating the Book, such as we find it glossed by Hugh of St. Cher and Pierre Bersuire, was an act of reconstructing the life of Christ through the proper understanding of the Old and New Testaments; and the illuminator of Apocalypse 10 makes a connection predicted by such glosses as he represents the scene in the familiar gesture of taking the Eucharist, through which the “Word made flesh” becomes “bread” by the words of the priest (as Aquinas says), and the Logos of Christ’s life is truly ingested. When a theological idea is represented so literally in visible things, as in this painting, word and thing are interchangeable; nature and Scripture constitute a transparent Text whose digestion is simultaneously a reconstruction; it is maintained by validating learning in a source or end; it is intensely teleological and organic; and it is accordingly dominated by motifs of deliberate causality and sequentiality: the “narrative” of the Book is the “history” of mankind from creation to the ascent into the celestial city. Narrative as a structure of moralizing never had better illustration than in the medieval Text of culture.

Against such “logocentric” structures of language and meaning, the analysis of signs in the middle ages does not appear to establish a significant subversion. Consequently, in distinction to that branch of scholarship that sees medieval sign theory as inclining toward, if not prefiguring, modern concerns with arbitrary signs, deferred meaning, postponed ends, and textual indeterminacy, the study of linguistic disciplines in these chapters moves in a different direction—toward the larger received idea of post-Augustinian tradition that found a place for everything (as C. S. Lewis has remarked) and kept everything in its right place, even the errant

*Bersuire’s remark is the epigraph of this Introduction. Hugh of St. Cher’s gloss is: “Indeed this book is the life of Christ . . . the sacraments and mysteries of the Church”; Opera omnia, 8 vols. (Venice, 1732), 7:397. Aquinas meditates on these images in his Corpus Christi hymn for Vespers, especially the untranslatable verses: “Verbum caro panem verum / verbo carnem efficit”; The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse, ed. F. J. E. Raby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 401. Translations from Latin throughout this book are mine unless otherwise noted.

potential of the written or spoken sign. Thus does the end determine the beginning of the idea of the Book in the middle ages. It remained a determinant of cultural growth from the time of Augustine’s emphasis on it and continued at least until its magnificent illustrations in late Gothic art, when the “unbinding” of the Book became inevitable in the ornamentality and artificiality that eventually flowered in Baroque styles of the seventeenth century.

But the idea of the Book after Augustine is also analyzed in these chapters with attention to writings that were composed outside the formal institution of language study taught by the church. This writing, medieval poetic fiction, surely inherited models of textuality along with basic conceptions from the trivium about the ways that signs signify. Whether or not fictional discourse carries out the prevailing commitment of the inherited structure to imitate past models and thus contribute to the stabilization of tradition cannot be affirmed as unilaterally as, for example, Singleton and Robertson once assumed. The chapters on the poetry of Dante and Chaucer in this book take a new look at the place of fiction within the encompassing Text of medieval cultural forms; they suggest that the customary view of medieval fiction as an affirmation of inherited linguistic and textual models needs to be renovated. Dante’s *Commedia* (taken up in chapter 4) is perhaps the most prominent and engaging test case for this claim, since the poem represents the fiction of the poet as a *scriba* (“scribe”) who is copying from the “book of memory” his experience of religious conversion. All the trappings of medieval textuality are here: the determinate origin in a book, the progress of the journey as a narrative with deep moral commitments, the comparison between the poem and the “art” of nature, and the encyclopedic scope of the work. The language of the poem, as Singleton and others have maintained, is an imitation of the writing of God etched in the rock over the hellgate in *Inferno* 3.

And yet the evidence of textuality in the poem does not function simply according to a principle of mimesis. A close look shows that Dante read Augustine very carefully on the notion of the separation between divine language and human writing and established that separation or departure in terms that were fundamentally resisted within the formal confines of reading and writing that

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composed the Text of the past. As one modern study has argued, Dante’s poem is less an allegory of history than a reflection of the reading process, with all its limitations in the uncertainty of meaning and the temporality of understanding. It may be true that one of Dante’s most important sources was the Bible; but it is also worthwhile to consider the degree to which his *Commedia* responds to the style of biblical writing per se, that is, to the discourse of Scripture stripped of the medieval mythology that was made of it from the ways of signifying taught in the tradition of the Text. In this way we are invited to reflect on the separation or split between the Book of tradition and the text of fictional writing and to consider this writing as the ground for changes in the modes of signification that were only foreshortened in the disciplines of grammar and hermeneutics. Fictional signifying introduces a galaxy of possibilities for meaning that could not be encouraged within the fixed “geocentric” cosmos of the Book of culture.

What Dante’s poem introduces, *The House of Fame*—in a certain respect Chaucer’s “Dante”—explores much more boldly. In this poem (the subject of chapter 5) the foundational principle of the Text, its insistence on the fixed origin of language, is confronted in no uncertain terms as a plot that makes little if any sense. As the quest for the source of “fame” in writing is submitted to the outrageous parody of discovering the garrulous goddess of discourse and the windy house of sticks, the whole idea of containment, narrative order, and determinate meaning loosens with such humor that the sacrality of the medieval myth can no longer be taken for granted: signification destabilizes as it never had before in the pages of the grammarians and exegetes, and the question about locating the authority of meaning in an origin or text is postponed indefinitely in this poem of uncertain ending and dubious figures of “auctoritee.” The questions Dante asked about the textuality of history and nature are taken up so fully by Chaucer that two more of his works are considered separately.

In the “Prologue” to *The Legend of Good Women* (examined in chapter 6), a work that follows directly from the convention of the dream vision in *The House of Fame*, the disjunction between the myth of the Text and the discourse of poetry corresponds to the opposition in the work between narrative order and textual matters with hardly any interest in it. The question of the reliability of

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the narrator’s voice, which Chaucer exploits thoroughly in later poems, is sharply figured in this early work as a construct that does not completely prevail over the meaning of the text, and consequently the question of the determinacy of signification is confronted outright. As the voice of the text plays with the insistence of the speaker, complaining against the way he and his narrative are inviting us to read, the location of the authority for meaning has shifted clearly away from a source and its author, where it had been so well protected in the tradition of the Book; instead, it has been set loose in the play of plurivalent senses allowed by the hypothetical boundary lines of fictive response. The causality and sequentiality of storial sense give place to the more abiding interests of the poem in how, for example, the participants in the court scene, even Queen Alceste, speak without full control of the errancy and distraction in their discourse. The narrator promises to give us the “naked text,” to make present the plain sense of things, but the play of the text with his voice proves a far more alluring and pleasant experience. In short, this poem in self-defense of “Chaucer’s” poetry and in preface to his tales of good women turns out to engage some of the most compelling arguments about the order and validation of signification in language that had come down through the hierarchy of the textual tradition of the middle ages. The “Prologue” amounts to a subversion of that hierarchy long before such a critique took over all branches of learning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and thus the poem is, contrary to the opinion of those who count it as one of Chaucer’s incidental pieces, a crucial stage in his reflection on the problems of reading and writing: it looks forward immediately to the staging of these matters in his subsequent poetic efforts, notably *The Canterbury Tales.*

To a significant extent, Chaucer’s dream visions and Dante’s *Commedia* demonstrate an alternative to one of the basic premises of the idea of the Book in the middle ages—its firm grounding in the Platonic and Augustinian concept of imitation. This premise is at work most obviously as one medieval reader of Scripture after another copies precedent *auctores* on the interpretation of a passage. Interpretation in the grammatical and hermeneutic traditions is a form of imitation under definite control of a poetics in which the pages of nature and Scripture are imagined as copies of God’s *Verbum.* But in Chaucer and Dante the idea of copying or

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Introduction

rewriting is displaced by a new kind of interpreting, one that no longer allows for the straightforward validation of meaning in an “old book,” the sequence of events, or the voice of a speaker. This movement from imitation to interpretation—“from mirror to method”—is an unmistakable concern of fictional writing in the late middle ages, and nowhere more provocatively than in The Canterbury Tales. The whole work could be studied for its analysis of this problem, but Chaucer gives enough attention to it in the “General Prologue” that a consideration of this poem (in chapter 7) may serve as a preface.

The work begins with undermining the convention of imitation by casting the narrator in the role of copyist or reporter. If the rich and complex suggestions that have been made about this pose have anything in common, it is that the narrative strategy of the “General Prologue” is an instance of Chaucerian “irony” or “paradox”; this idea is more conventional than it may appear, since it still holds firmly to the validation of meaning in an authorial voice of which the fictive expression is an inversion or opposition. But the text of the “General Prologue” invites us to construe its speaking in many ways and through many voices whose structural order cannot be explained by appeal to an organic principle of ironic language. Yet the question of voice is only one example of a much more complex set of issues about structure in the poem. Of the major principles of form that have been set forth in scholarship, each has been taken from the more encompassing Book of tradition according to its preferences for understanding influence and order in terms of mimesis. Whether the model of the poem is regarded as the narrative of pilgrimage, the architecture of Gothic building, or the art of memory—all of which have been proposed—a poetics of imitation controls the understanding of the poem. These are strong suggestions offering deep insights into medieval poetry and the relation of language to other cultural forms; but they all testify to the prevailing influence of the medieval idea of the Book on the ways we read the books of the poets. If, by contrast, the suggestions from Dante’s Commedia and Chaucer’s early poetry have bearing on the Tales, then we have occasion to see a correspondence between customary models of the Text and Chaucer’s narrative

13Cf. the essays collected by Lyons and Nichols in Mimesis: From Mirror to Method.
14These proposals, documented fully in chapter 7, are associated with the work of D. W. Robertson, Robert Jordan, and Donald Howard.
and at the same time to recognize narrative signifying as only one strand among several created by the poem. A divergence or disassociation is established between Chaucer’s treatment of narrative and other conditions of signifying in the “General Prologue.” Speaking, sequence, and validation no longer have convenient roots in the old form of the Text by the time we reach the palinode at the end of this poem. In little, the problem of textual meaning in the “General Prologue” identifies the much more comprehensive issue Dante and Chaucer confront as they situate fictional writing next to the broader and more dominant discourse of the past.

It would be incomplete or at least oversimplified to continue to regard the relation of fictional voices to the *auctores* of tradition as an instance of “irony” and the writing of poetry as a “language of paradox.” For these medieval poems become the grounds for new ventures in the ways of signifying meaning that expand the limits of irony by deferring the boundaries of proper response. Augustine’s fear of the pleasure of reading poetry, recorded in the *Confessions*, issues from the potential erosion of such limits, and his advice on how to protect them by reading correctly was taken seriously for at least one thousand years. So too were the powerful commitments of the idea of the Book, its grounding in fixed meanings validated in a definite origin—the Bible, nature, tradition, God. Chaucer and Dante embraced those commitments firmly, but at the same time they emphasized what linguistic disciplines tried to suppress—a discourse that recognizes its own impossibilities and proceeds by locating the authority for making sense no longer in the pages of the past, but in the hands of the reader.

A shift is under way in the writings of the poets, one that was forestalled or prevented from surfacing in any dominant way in the tradition of the Text. Reflection on this development invites a reconsideration of the extent to which linguistic change may initiate historical change during the middle ages of Western tradition. While it is customary to mark such shifts in seventeenth-century writers like Bacon, the following chapters carry out a suggestion, forthcoming from various areas of medieval and renaissance studies, that the notion of a “rebirth” or “epistemic break” needs to be rethought. I suggest that the language of poetry is an essential area in which this historical change was taking place. If the discourse of history writing that has taken its form from the emphasis on sharp demarcations in sequential and causal models bears a certain re-
Introduction

semblance to the medieval idea of the Book, then I would offer the writing of critical commentary on poetry as an alternative discourse that can move closer to explaining historical consciousness because it responds to the writers who demythologized its medieval forms to begin with.