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“Landscape and Culture in Medieval Poetry”

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In a sense there is no real “landscape” in medieval poetry. Countless lyrics open with a brief description of a beautiful spring morning, but this tends to fade from view once it has done its job of providing a backdrop to the speaker’s unveiling of his emotional state. In general, medieval poets representing their natural surroundings are rather like anxious parents discussing the conduct of an adolescent son or daughter. Nature was either wild or tame, *sauvage* or *courtoise*, surrounded by walls of well-cut stone or wholly uncontained and menacing.

To a certain extent this reflects actual conditions. Ornamental gardens in medieval Europe, even those described as parks or orchards, were probably for the most part comparable in size and setting to the cultivated spaces attached to modern apartment complexes or townhouses. But more important is the almost invariable subordination of natural description to ideas of order and disorder, control and abandon, which, in sophisticated lyric and romance, program and curtail its function. Some time in the fifteenth century it begins to be possible for painters, at least, to draw upon nature for a sense of mood, of poignancy or sublimity, but for most of the Middle Ages, to have indicated by a few visual details or a brief phrase that one’s setting was a *locus amoenus*, a beautiful place, or a *selva oscura*, a dark and potentially menacing forest, was to have done what the occasion required.

There are of course exceptions to the rigorous demarcation of tame from wild. One is the pastourelle, a widely popular form of love-lyric noteworthy in that the breaking-down of conventional barriers is very much to its point. The encounter it describes takes place invariably outside the walls of a castle, town, or cloister; it brings together a gentleman, a knight or cleric, and a woman of lower class, and it can lead to consummation, though it is just as likely to end in the knight’s being cleverly fended off and perhaps mocked by the woman. But there too the function of the natural setting is utterly conventional: the rural scene is sometimes more or less wild in keeping with the more or less transgressive action it frames, but it is never more than a prop.

What makes a landscape interesting to medieval poets, worthy of more than a passing glance, and capable of significant interaction with the human subjects it contains, is its association with the idea of Paradise. By “paradise” I refer not to the posthumous haven promised by Christ to the believing criminal, or the full-blown celestial rose of Dante’s *Paradiso*, but to the earthly Paradise, the primordial natural setting of the earliest stages of human life. The Hebrew Bible uses this Semitic word sparingly. Eden is not called a “paradise” by the authors of the Genesis story. The one memorable appearance of the word is in the Song of Songs, where the lover imagines his beloved as herself a paradise, a closed garden of rare fruits, spices, and scents. It is easy enough to see how the term came to be applied to Eden by the Greek and Latin translators of the Bible. Eden too is explicitly a garden, the supreme example of a

beautiful natural place, the most prolific in its fertility and sensory appeal. For the Middle Ages, “Paradise” was Eden, the *hortus deliciarum*, the garden of all delights, where burgeoning and fruition occur simultaneously and all forms of sensuous beauty are eternally present.

One of the fullest descriptions I know of Paradise in this sense, and an attractive lead-in to the main subject of my talk, is provided by Lorenzo di Medici’s commentary on a sonnet of his own composition. The poem begins by describing the effect on him of his first encounter with his lady, then compares her golden hair, flowing freely over her white dress, to sunlight on a beautiful snow-covered mountain, and ends with Lorenzo’s observation that he need not explain where this meeting occurred, since the place where so beautiful a woman could be found must necessarily be Paradise. In the course of his lengthy commentary, Lorenzo explains what he means by Paradise:

el luogo di necessità era paradiso, perché dove era tanto splendore, bellezza e pietà, cetamente si può dire paradiso. El quale paradiso, chi vuole rettamente diffinire, non vuole dire altro che un giardino amenissimo, abundante di tutte le cose piacevoli e dilettevoli, d’arbori, di pomi, di fiori, acque vive e correnti, canti d’uccegli e in effetto di tutte le amenità che può pensare el cuore dell’uomo. e per questo si verifica che paradiso era ove era sí bella donna, perché qui vi era copia d’ogni amenità e dolcezza che uno gentile cuore puo desiderare.ⁱ

The place was necessarily Paradise, because where there was such splendor, beauty, and compassionate grace, one can certainly speak of Paradise. And whoever might wish to rightly define this paradise would have to speak of the most beautiful of gardens, abounding in all things pleasant and inviting—of trees, of fruits, of flowers, fresh and flowing waters, birdsong, and, in sum, all the pleasant things a human heart can think of. And thus it was clear that wherever so beautiful a woman appeared was Paradise, since there one finds in abundance every beauty or sweet delight that a gentle heart might desire.

Lorenzo’s rather cumbersome logic issues in a conjunction which is fundamental for medieval poets. The highest flight of which the medieval poetic imagination is capable, the act in which sensory and spiritual imagining converge, is the envisioning of a beautiful woman in a paradisaal setting. To experience one is in effect to experience the other.

The paradisaal garden and the female being who is its centerpiece are of course quintessentially pure, for the beauty and abundance of Paradise are sustained by a fountain of perfect purity, as a popular medieval formula has it, “just as Christ, the fount of all good things, springs from a chaste virgin.” But an important corollary to this principle is offered by the fabulous geographer Sir John Mandeville, who observes that “all the sweet waters of the world take their beginning from the well of Paradise.”ⁱⁱⁱ To imagine Paradise was a powerful stimulus, an invitation to draw from the known natural world a sense of connection with the unsullied origins of life. The stimulus was all the stronger when the appeal of nature was focused around

an erotic object, and articulating one's response to feminine beauty became the occasion for imagining Paradise.

A sense of the complementarity between these two impulses is widespread. With minimal alteration, the same lyric could be addressed to one's earthly lady or to the Virgin Mary. A remarkable treatise by the twelfth-century mystic Richard of St. Victor, whose title, if it were translatable, would be "The Four Stages of Violent Charity," gives vivid accounts of a hierarchy of symptoms of love in which the erotic is clearly a stage in the ascent to union with the divine. A treatise by the thirteenth-century Cistercian Gerard of Liège, with the again precarious title "Five Incitements to Loving God Ardently," punctuates its analysis of spiritual experience with quotations from the Troubadours, sometimes with the excuse that the vernacular poets were themselves borrowing their formulations of desire from Augustine, but more often taking for granted an intuitive spiritual quality in their expressions of erotic feeling.

The confusions to which so flexible a poetic idiom could give rise are obvious enough, and provided the occasion for a good deal of parody, which is not always recognized as such by modern critics. The idea that there exists a unity between earthly and heavenly love in which the values of *courtoisie* are ultimately grounded has been taken perhaps too readily for granted, and the mythology surrounding the troubadour cult of the lordly lady continues to grow. But if from one point of view courtly lyric can seem to reveal deep spiritual feeling, and even a solemn intimation of universal love, from another spirituality can be seen as undermined by a kind of puritanism.

Nothing is more remarkable about the cult of *courtoisie* than its taboos. In its purest form the vocation of the courtly lover involves an almost ascetic discipline, but one that requires submissiveness, total secrecy, and the acceptance of more or less perpetual suffering. Such are the dignity and honor of the loved lady, so sacred her purity and so efficacious the slightest sign of her favor, that the poet-lover remains at a distance, not daring by any overt gesture to risk incurring disdain, while hoping against hope for some small sign of grace.

The misery of the lover, and the despair to which his service inevitably leads are deceptive, for it is possible to see this cult of love in a very different light, as a kind of veiled misogyny. Fear and mistrust of the feminine are always lurking between the surface of courtly adoration, and the idealizing gesture that establishes the lady as quasi-divine is also a form of control. To the extent that the lady diverges from this standard—can be seen as merely human—she becomes vulnerable to the charge of instability and fickleness. Her very constancy can be read as hardness of heart, and the beauty whose influence exalts the lover at one moment is seen as a means of diabolical temptation at another.

At the heart of these contradictions, as Howard Bloch has shown, is the problem of virginity.ⁱⁱⁱ From the time of the Church fathers forward, physical virginity was commonly regarded as meaningless unless joined with a will wholly innocent of sexual desire. A virgin's status could be seen as compromised even to the extent that she became an *object* of desire, a result which was viewed as the more or less inevitable consequence of exposure to the male

gaze. Virginity was thus in effect an impossible category. To be seen was to become the occasion of male desire. A virgin seen was a virgin in some sense violated.

In a sense, then, virginity must remain unknowable, or at least invisible, in order to survive, and what is true of this elusive religious value is true as well of the lady who is the object of courtly desire. For to imagine her too vividly is to risk subjecting oneself to her influence in its destructive aspect. The classic expression of this dilemma is a *canço* of the great Provençal poet Bernart de Ventadour, his famous “Can vei la lauzeta mover”:

1. Can vei la lauzeta mover
de joi sas alas contral rai,
que s’oblid’ e-s laissa chazer
per la doussor c’al cor li vai,
ai tan grans enveya m’en ve
de cui qu’eu veyea jauzion,
meravilhas ai, car desse
lo cor de dezirer no-m fon.

2. Ai, las, tan cuidava saber
d’amor, e tan petit en sai,
car eu d’amar no-m posc tener
celeis don ja pro non aurai.
Tout m’a mo cor e tout m’a me,
e se mezeis e tot lo mon,
e can se-m tolç, no-m laisset re
mas dezirer e cor volon.

3. Anc non agui de me poder
ni no fui meus de l’or’ en sai
que-m laisset en sos olhs vezer
en un miralh que mout me plai.
Miralhs, pus me mirei en te,
m’an mort li sospir de preon,
c’aissi-m perdei com perdet se
lo bels Narcisus en la fon.

4. De las domnas me dezesper.
Ja mais en lor no-m fiarai
c’aissi com las solh chaptener,
enaissi las deschaptentrai . . .^{iv}

1. When I see the lark beat her wings for joy
against the sun’s ray, until for the sheer
delight which goes to her heart she forgets
to fly and plummets down, then great
envy of those whom I see filled with

happiness comes to me. I marvel that my heart does not melt at once from desire.

2. Alas! I thought I knew so much about love, but really I know so little. For I cannot keep myself from loving her from whom I shall have no favor. She has stolen from me my heart, myself, herself and all the world. When she took herself from me she left me nothing but desire and a longing heart.

3. Never have I been in control of myself or even belonged to myself from the hour she let me gaze into her eyes:—that mirror which pleases me so greatly. Mirror, since I saw myself reflected in you, deep sighs have been killing me. I have destroyed myself just as the beautiful Narcissus destroyed himself in the fountain.

4. I despair of women. No more will I trust them; and just as I used to defend them, now I shall denounce them. . . .

Bernart, we should note, has created a significantly larger context for his lament than that of the mere suffering lover. The “paradisaal” character of the landscape is quietly affirmed, distilled into the innocent joy with which the lark, her wings beating in bright sunlight, first ascends, then in self-forgetfulness lets herself fall, as the sweet feeling fills her heart. It is just this spontaneity and abandon that the human lover yearns to know, and can never realize; his lady and the lark’s pure delight are equally remote, and the narcissistic misery into which he subsides expresses his sense of alienation, not simply from love, but in a more general sense from nature itself.

Nature is a particularly important term in the twelfth century, when a renewed interest in ancient philosophy and science was generating a new concern with the implications of form and order in the natural world. The idea of nature as an autonomous system to which human nature bears an analogous relation has a significant influence on artistic production in this period. Literature, too, could claim a certain autonomy, formally independent of any systematic religious framework. Hence there is a new interest in aesthetic form, and in nature at large as a formal principle.

A clear expression of these new concerns appears in a Latin lyric attributed to the courtier-cleric Peter of Blois. Almost the sole purpose of the lyric is to proclaim Peter’s lady the centerpiece of creation, the consummation of the handiwork of Nature:

A globo veteri
 cum rerum faciem
 traxissent superi
 mundique seriem
 prudens explicuit
 et texuit
 Natura,
 iam preconceperat
 quod fuerat factura.

Que causas machine
 mundane suscitans,
 de nostra virgine
 iamdudum cogitans
 plus hanc excoluit,
 plus prebuit honoris
 dans privilegium
 et precium laboris.

In hac pre ceteris
 tocius operis
 Nature lucet opera . . .⁵

When the gods had drawn forth
 the visible universe from ancient
 chaos, and wise Nature was
 unfolding and coordinating the
 cosmic order, she had already
 preconceived all that she would
 create.

While she was giving life to the
 motive forces of the world
 system, she was thinking
 already about creating my
 lady. She endowed her with
 extra refinement and beauty,
 offering her as the seal and
 consummation of her handiwork.

In her, more than in all the rest of
 creation, the handiwork of
 Nature shines forth . . .

The image of creating Nature here, and the language in which it is couched, are borrowed from the opening of another twelfth-century poem, the widely influential *Cosmographia* of Bernardus Silvestris, a vivid and powerful account of the creation of the universe. In Bernardus's remarkable vision, the universe is not just the result of the self-diffusing goodness of God, but is brought into being as a response to the passionate appeal of an emphatically female goddess Nature, who demands that primordial matter be endowed with form and order—demands, in effect, that she herself be granted a beautiful body. The lady of the lyric is a microcosmic version of that body. Her beauty is Nature's beauty distilled, the "seal" which consummates and validates Nature's handiwork.

Bernardus's poem is shadowed by a fundamental irony. The Nature who appeals to God on behalf of the yet-to-be-created universe is borrowed from the ornate mini-epic *De raptu Proserpinae* of the late-antique poet Claudian. This poem stages the story of the carrying off of Proserpina, daughter of Ceres, by the lord of the underworld as a cosmic event, the ravaging of primordial nature by necessity in the form of violent desire, and the transformation of its perpetual springtime into the ongoing cycle of generation and decay. Claudian's poem became a standard medieval textbook, and the myth of Proserpina became for medieval poets an alternate version of the fall of humankind. We will see later the significant role it plays in Dante's earthly Paradise, and already in Bernardus it serves, as it will in Milton, to make the vision of the natural order in its primal purity simultaneously a foreshadowing of the loss of that purity.

On its more modest scale, Peter's lyric conveys a similar irony. After a conventional inventory of his lady's physical charms, the poem ends by reverting to the lady's place in Nature's scheme, and the overwhelming effect of her beauty on the poet:

Rapit michi me Coronis,
privilegiata donis
et Gratiarum flosculis.
Nam Natura, dulcioris
alimenta dans erroris,
dum in stuporem populis
hanc omnibus ostendit,
in risu blando retia
Veneria
tetendit.

Licensed by the flourishing gifts
with which she is graced,
Coronis steals me from myself.
For Nature lets us feed on the
sweets of folly in displaying this
maiden to the astonishment of
all, and sets the traps of Venus
through that fair smile.

“Rapit michi me.” The lady’s ravishing of the lover presumably has none of the violence of Pluto’s assault on Proserpina, but it places the poet-lover in a similar position of alienation. The imaginative flight which has enabled him to make the order of creation itself the framework for his vision of love, the sensibility which articulates the continuity of the maiden’s beauty with the primal artistry of Nature, is unable to endure the power of the beauty it has evoked, and idealization is turned to entrapment and betrayal.

At this point I would like to move ahead and consider two larger works in which the dilemma that haunts the courtly lyric and its treatment of nature is explored in a context of narrative. I will first examine the dramatization of the psychology of love in the *Roman de la Rose* of the early thirteenth-century poet Guillaume de Lorris, which tells a story that embodies the entire experience of courtly love, and shows that experience issuing in a fundamental impasse. I will then show how Dante, the one medieval poet who can be said to have transcended the dilemmas of *courtoisie*, deals with essentially the same impasse.

The *Roman de la Rose* does something new and significant: it is a synthesis of courtly lyric and chivalric romance. Love itself, in romance traditionally the knightly hero’s reward for the fulfillment of his quest, has become the poem’s central concern, and the attainment of the object of love displaces chivalric *aventure* as the focus of the narrative. The natural setting counts for a great deal in this poem. The enchanted forest of romance, with its obscure and often menacing symbolism, is replaced by a landscape that seems to flaunt its innocent beneficence, an enclosed, explicitly paradisaical garden of which Love and Delight are the presiding spirits, and which provides the setting for the youthful hero’s initiation into love. But the lover’s experience is fraught with ambiguity and anxiety; when the poem breaks off abruptly, the Rose, the object of his love, has been immured in the castle of Jealousy, and the lover has succumbed to a despair that makes him feel himself on the point of death.

The *Rose* is about initiation in two senses. It is archetypal: a version, spiritually attenuated and disguised by an overlay of sophisticated eroticism, of the dream of Paradise, the desire to return to a sacred source. At the same time it is an initiation into a world which is the highly artificial habitat of a social elite. The lover is in a state of suspension, always in danger of lapsing into a mere narcissistic infatuation with his own condition as lover, but at the same time dimly aware, as we are, of a powerful symbolism that points to a deeper meaning in his experience.

The subtlety of the narrative of the *Rose* and the many allegorical personae who populate it make it very difficult to summarize. I will instead focus on two moments which seem to me to define the terms on which the poem’s lover-hero experiences love, his discovery of the fountain of Narcissus and his encounter with *Dangier*. Both, I think, can finally be understood as confrontations with himself.

On entering the garden, the lover finds himself involved in a *carole*, a formal dance whose nobly arrayed participants represent love in its social aspect. He then goes off alone through the garden’s endlessly varied flora, half-aware of being “stalked” by the God of Love, and comes upon a fountain bearing the inscription, “here died the fair Narcissus.”

Recalling the story of Narcissus' fatal infatuation with his own image, the lover first hesitates, then rebukes his own foolishness and approaches. After a moment of suspense as the fountain itself is described, we learn the properties of two crystals that the lover sees at the bottom of the pool. In sunlight they become a mirror, and from any angle they reveal one half of the garden in all its rich detail. This account is followed by a sudden outburst against this "perilous mirror" and the madness it instills, and rueful reflections by the lover on his own subsequent fate.

Particularly striking is the disjointed character of the lover's experience in this brief episode, and the lack of psychological integration it reveals. He half-realizes the implications of the story of Narcissus, shifts abruptly between fear and shame, and throughout the experience is clearly responding to the fascination of what he dimly understands as a rite de passage. Love, Guillaume tells us, is at once the most natural and the most socially conditioned of experiences, and one in which discovery is always in danger of preemption by self-consciousness. Like Bernart de Ventadorn, the lover has learned at the fountain that he can *never know* the meaning of his desire.

Continuing to gaze into the mirroring crystals, the lover sees, first, a bed of rosebushes, whose beauty and scent arouse in him a mad desire to possess their blooms. Restrained by fear of reprisal, he nonetheless finds his desire centering on a single particular bud, the Rose, which becomes the object of his desire. Instantly he is assailed by the God of Love, who first wounds him with arrows which quicken his attraction, then proceeds to instruct him at length on the conduct proper to lovers, and the joys and pains of love. He then disappears, leaving the lover alone and disconcerted.

Soon, however, the lover encounters *Bel Acueil* or "Fair Welcome," an offspring or extension of the courtesy of the Rose-lady. Encouraged by the apparent receptiveness of this figure to his polite attentions, he approaches the Rose, and incautiously reveals his desire to possess it. What happens next marks a fundamental turning point in the action of the poem, an equal and opposite reaction to the confused impulses which had determined the lover's conduct at the fountain of Narcissus. Shocked by the revelation that the Rose is the lover's "death and life," that he has "no desire for any other thing," *Bel Acueil* rebukes his desire as that of a *vilein*. Immediately the lover is confronted by another *vilein* in the person of *Dangier*, who has been lurking in the shrubbery nearby:

Granz fu et noirs et hericiez,
 Si ot les ielz roges comme feus,
 Les neis froncie, le vis hideus,
 Et s'escrie com forcenez:
 "Bel acueil, comment amenez
 Entor ces rosiers ce vassaut?"^v

He was huge and black and hairy,
 he had eyes red as fire,
 a flat nose, a hideous face,

and he cried like a madman:
 “Bel Acueil, why have you brought
 this young man among the roses?”

Dangier quickly drives the lover away and threatens harsh treatment if he returns. The lover’s demoralization is complete:

Lors s’en est bel acueil fuiz
 Et je remes touz esbaïz,
 Honteus e maz; si me repens
 Don’t j’onques dis ce que je pens.
 De ma folie me recors,
 si voi que livrez est mes cors
 A duel, a poine et a martire.^{vi}

Then *Bel Acueil* fled away,
 and I was left, stupefied,
 overcome with shame, and I repented,
 that I had ever said what I thought.
 I thought over my folly,
 and say that my body was given over
 to suffering, pain and martyrdom.

Dangier has been a puzzling figure for readers and critics of the *Rose*. He is often seen as embodying the Rose-lady’s standoffishness, her readiness to resist any threat of encroachment on her person. But there is clearly more to him than this. His coarse physical appearance, red eyes, and distorted features, repeatedly emphasized, and the demonic quality in his behavior seem to be set in deliberate contrast to the attributes expected of a courtly lady.

It is important, that *Dangier* emerges at the moment when the lover has been rebuked as *vilein*, and is himself immediately identified as *vilein*. *Vileinie*, or low-born behavior, we are told earlier in the poem, is expressly excluded from the paradisaal garden. That the lover is confronted by the very embodiment of *vileinie* at this crucial moment suggests a kind of distorted self-recognition, an awareness of something uncourtly and potentially violent in his love for the Rose-lady. The menace of *Dangier* is that he forces the lover to confront just those aspects of male desire which it is the business of *courtoisie* to conceal or euphemize, and of which the lover, an adolescent whose experience of love has been dominated by a schooling in courtly values, had been unconscious. There is support for this view in manuscript illuminations such as that I have included here,^{vii} which shows *Dangier* in a posture of unmistakably phallic erectness, his feet set firmly on the ground outside the frame of the picture, within which the lover seems almost to float, a discreetly placed handkerchief denying or disguising sexual intention.



Certainly the effect of *Dangier*'s rebuke is to eliminate any hint of aggression in the lover's posture. The description of his demoralization echoes the poet's description of Narcissus' feelings on seeing himself reflected in the fluntain, and the lover's own state after his encounter with it. The lover is induced to approach the Rose again, and actually succeeds in gaining a kiss, which gives him a momentary sense of having been healed of all the pains of love. But in almost the same instant he is seized by Shame, who, with the help of *Dangier* and other agents of debilitating self-awareness, engineers a reaction even more devastating than before. The remainder of Guillaume's narrative describes the immuring of the Rose in the nightmarish castle of Jealousy, which wholly displaces the paradisal garden as the setting for the subsequent action in a transformation as vivid and shocking as the displacement of courtly yearning by the coarse physical presence of *Dangier* in the lover's own sensibility. In a long final soliloquy, the lover abandons hope and senses himself close to death.

Dante knew the *Roman de la Rose* intimately, and his name is persistently associated with a thirteenth-century work, *Il Fiore*, which translates the French poem into a sequence of 232 Italian sonnets. From the opening of the *Commedia*, where he strays through the dark forest and recalls his narrow escape from what he calls "the lake of his heart," to the climax of the *Paradiso*, where he sees Beatrice enshrined at the heart of the great celestial rose, images from Guillaume's allegory provide archetypes for his own experience. Dante's narrative, like Guillaume's, is shaped by the paradigms of courtly lyric, and no medieval poet exploits the possibilities of lyric language more fully. Throughout the *Commedia*, the idiom of courtly poetry enjoys a privileged status as a way of expressing spiritual desire, and it is in comparison with his great predecessors in vernacular lyric that Dante makes his highest claims for his own poetry. The last spirits he encounters in his ascent of the mountain of Purgatory are the Bolognese poet of the previous generation Guido Guinizelli, whom he hails as the father of Italian love-lyric, and the twelfth-century Provençal troubadour Arnaut Daniel, whose sheer verbal artistry, Dante claims, set a standard to which all medieval lyric poets must aspire. It is with the voices of these poets in his ears that Dante is emboldened to pass through the wall of fire that separates him

from the earthly Paradise and Beatrice. By making this passage, he will accomplish what no previous poet has done, and what he utters from this point forward will be lyric of a new, higher order.

The conventions of troubadour lyric shape Dante's dialogue with Beatrice even in Paradise (in the *Paradiso*, of course, the heavenly, rather than the earthly Paradise). The confusion to which this sublimation of love-poetry could give rise is acknowledged, at times almost coyly, by the casting of their exchanges as a sort of celestial flirtation which, like the blushing of Milton's Raphael, celestial rosy red at the thought of love among the angels, is as close as Dante comes to revealing a sense of humor. At one point the Pilgrim daringly describes the effect of Beatrice's smile: "I thought I had fully attained my glory and my Paradise" (*Par.* 15. 36). A little later, Beatrice feels obliged to remind her disciple that "not only in my eyes is Paradise" (*Par.* 18. 21).

But the Dante whose impetuosity is thus rebuked is in the unique position of one whose soul has been purified to the point at which he is capable of apprehending things far more profound than his still-human resources can express. What sounds like erotic hyperbole in his address to Beatrice is in fact the most sincerely religious response of which he is capable, grounded as it is in the conviction, formed years before in Florence, that his salvation would finally lie in "words that praise my lady." To the end these remain the words of love-poetry, even late in the *Paradiso* when he must descend again into the world and leave Beatrice in bliss. Looking upward to where she is seated, close to the center of the celestial rose, he first speaks a prayer which makes remarkably explicit the sense in which she has performed the office of Christ in his spiritual journey, then describes her response to his farewell in terms which plainly evoke the Troubadours:

Così orai; e quella, sì lontana
 come pareva, sorrise e riguardommi;
 poi si tornò a letterna fontana.^{viii}

So did I pray; and she, so distant as she
 seemed, smiled and looked on me,
 then turned again to the eternal fountain.

The lady invoked at a great distance, *si lontana*, is the sole focus of the lyrics in which the Troubadour Jaufré Rudel expresses his yearning for an *amor de lonh*, a far-off love, and the smile and gaze of such a distant lady are the gifts through which Bernart de Ventadour again and again feels himself reborn.

The relationship of Dante and Beatrice is of course unique in literature, and the Paradise where they commune is a wholly transcendent realm, as far from the earthly *hortus deliciarum* as the sun from the landscape on which it shines. But Dante's experience is also unique in that he gives articulate expression to every stage of his psychological evolution from earthly love to mystical vision. A crucial stage in this evolution is his entry into the earthly Paradise itself,

which both confirms Lorenzo's definition of Edenic pleasure in every detail, and introduces significant complications.

At the threshold of this new realm, Vergil assures his disciple that his journey up the mountain of Purgatory has reconstituted his *ingegno*, his genius or understanding, and perfected his art as poet. Now, in full command of both these resources, Dante can appreciate Paradise as fully as human nature allows. And as Vergil makes plain, an important aspect of his new condition is a new capacity for pleasure:

Tratto t'ho qui con ingegno e con arte;
 lo tuo piacere omai prendi per duce;
 fuor se' de l'erte vie, fuor se de l'arte.

Vedi lo sol che 'n fronte ti riluce;
 vedi l'erbette, I fiori e li arbuscelli
 che qui la terra sol di sé produce . . .^{ix}

I have brought you here with understanding and with art.
 Take henceforth your own pleasure for guide.
 Forth you are from the steep ways, forth from the narrow.

See the sun that shines on your brow, see
 the tender grass, the flowers, the shrubs,
 which here the earth of itself alone produces . . .

Once reunited with Beatrice, Dante will enter on a new process of self-realization, but for the moment his heightened sensory and aesthetic awareness enables him to experience his Edenic surroundings for themselves in their full perfection, as a supreme work of art. A constant sweet breeze, stirring the lush greenery, provides a *bordone* or accompaniment to the song of the birds, while the fragrance and variety of the flowering grove draws him into itself. At the center of the place flows a stream of incomparable purity, and looking across it he sees

una donna soletta che si gia
 e cantando e scegliendo fior da fiore
 ond'era pinta tutta la sua via.^x

a lady all alone, who went
 singing and culling flower from flower,
 with which all her path was painted.

In a later canto we learn this lady's name, Matelda, and she will be assigned a modest role in Dante's preparation for the further ascent to Paradise. But at this her first appearance, she is something unique and enigmatic, neither angel nor wood nymph, but a kind of tutelary spirit.

The lady clearly harbors a special meaning for Dante himself, the poet of courtly love par excellence, for if she is in some sense a *genius loci*, an embodiment of the natural purity of Paradise, she is also the crowning detail of the scene conceived as art. Her dance-like movements are in perfect harmony with the song she sings, and when she pauses, smiling and “arranging in her hands the many colors” which flourish spontaneously in this place, she seems to draw the landscape into a harmonious convergence around herself.

The poet’s first words define Matelda in the lofty terms of idealizing *stilnovo* lyric, as an embodiment of love:

“Deh, bella donna, che a’ raggi d’amore
ti scaldi, s’I’ vo’ credere a’ sembianti
che soglion esser testimon del core,

“pray, fair lady, who do warm yourself in
love’s beams, if I may believe outward looks
which are wont to be testimony of the heart,”

vegnati in voglia di trarreti avanti,”
diss’ io a lei, “verso questa riviera,
tanto c’io possa intender che tu canti.”^{xi}

I said to her, “may it please you to draw
forward to this stream so near that I may
understand what you sing.”

But despite their conventional ring, these lines represent a departure from the typical scenario of Dante’s earlier poetry. In his *Vita nuova*, it is the poet himself who is warmed by beams which emanate from the eyes of his lady, and *his* face that attests their effect on his heart. There too the poet’s response to his lady and her power is consistently one of reverence, and her every movement or gesture affects him powerfully. Here it is Dante the poet-observer whose imagination exercises a programmatic influence on the lady, projecting onto her the conventional preoccupations of the lover and reading her every action into conformity with the beauty of her setting. In itself, this exercise of aesthetic control is as compelling, a tour de force of courtly imagining, but Dante’s next words strike a more ominous note. Having established Matelda as the embodiment of the perfect beauty of Paradise, he proceeds to imagine the desecration of this beauty:

Tu mi fai rimembrar dove e qual era
Proserpina nel tempo che perdette
la madre lei, ed ella primavera.^{xii}

You make me recall where and what
Proserpina was at the time her mother
lost her, and she the spring.

Nothing has prepared us for this revelation that what provokes Dante's intense experience of Matelda's presence is not an Edenic sense of affinity, but an impulse of simple lust, and that he is fully conscious of the implications of his condition. For in the myth he invokes, as I have suggested, is expressed the fall of man. In the very dwelling-place of primal purity, Dante's feelings are dominated by a drive which is the hallmark of historical man, a lust which his reconstituted will can master, but not deny.

Though he makes plain his resentment of the stream which separates him from the lady, Dante does master his feelings, and indeed it is the tension between his intense desire and the poetic control exhibited in his allusion to Proserpina, which both acknowledges his lust and objectifies it, that enables us to appreciate the full significance of this moment. And it is a part of the complexity of the scene that the allusion to Proserpina, on the one hand so devastating in its implications, should at the same time be a decisive confirmation of Dante's attainment of maturity as a poet. For as Matelda will later explain, his entry into Paradise represents the consummation of a poetic vision which he now shares with the great poets of the classical past:

“Quelli ch'anticamente poetaro
 l'età de l'oro e suo stato felice,
 forse in Parnaso esto loco sognaro.
 Qui fu innocente l'umana radice;
 qui primavera sempre e ogne frutto;
 nettare è questo di che ciascun dice.”^{xiii}

“They who in olden times sang
 of the Age of Gold and its happy state
 perhaps in Parnassus dreamed of this place.
 Here the root of mankind was innocent;
 here is always spring and every fruit;
 this is the nectar of which each tells.”

Dante is making a tremendous claim to authority here, and the allusion to Proserpina is an important part of that claim. His characterization of his lustful response to Matelda shows him acknowledging the harsh view of world history which poetry of the highest seriousness entails. By recalling the loss of the happy place, he confirms the authenticity of the moment even as he defines the limits of his capacity to possess it, and concedes what a lifetime's study of Vergil has taught him. No merely human art or *ingegno* can regain Paradise; for Dante as poet it must remain what it was for the ancient poets, the object of a desire irreparably sundered from innocence.

Footnotes

- i *Comento de Miei Sonetti* VI, in Lorenzo di Medici, *Tutte le opere*, ed. Paulo Orvieto, Rome, 1992. p. 398. Translation mine.
- ii *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, ch. 33; tr. C. W. R. D. Moseley, London, 1983. p. 185.
- iii Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, Chicago, 1991. pp. 93–119.
- iv Text and translation from Frederick Goldin, *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvères*, Garden City, N.Y., 1973. pp. 144–47.
- v Guillaume de Lorris, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Armand Strubel, Paris, 1992. Lines 2920–25.
- vi *Le Roman de la Rose*. Lines 2949–55.
- vii From New York, Morgan Library Ms. 245, f. 22v.
- viii *Paradiso* 31. 91–93. Text and translation from Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. Charles Singleton, Princeton, 1970–75.
- ix *Purgatorio* 27. 130–35.
- x *Purgatorio* 28. 40–42.
- xi *Purgatorio* 28. 43–48.
- xii *Purgatorio* 28. 49–51.
- xiii *Purgatorio* 28. 139–44.