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A Christian Perspective on the Theological Underpinnings of Literary Study

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Over the ivy-encrusted halls of Harvard University hangs the college seal emblazoned with the school motto: three open books containing the Latin word VERITAS. Before the second half of the nineteenth-century, however, scions of the nation's leading families matriculated under a different seal: two books face up and one book face down. The change, instituted in 1885, was subtle enough to pass undetected but profound in its implications for the mission and purpose of the institution. Through its original seal, Harvard University officially recognized that some knowledge lies beyond the bounds of human reason. It acknowledged that we see the world through a glass darkly and that the universe of knowledge is spanned only by reason plus revelation.¹



It is to Harvard's first seal that I turn for an image of late medieval textuality. At one pole, scholars like Richard de Bury considered books invaluable conduits of ancient wisdom. At the other pole, mystics like the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* emphasized God's transcendence and considered the greatest truths ineffable. Had these writers seen Harvard's first seal, Richard would have smiled at the open books, and the

1. Image of Harvard's old seal courtesy of the Harvard Square Library website, "The History of Cambridge," cited 24 September 2003, available: www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/chistory/section8.htm. For more information on the history of Harvard's seals, see Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard: 1636-1936* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936).

Cloud author would have nodded silently at the one turned down. Most medieval thinkers fell somewhere between these two extremes, attracted to varying degrees by the pole of *auctoritas* and the pole of ineffability. Many late medieval poets were split between fetishistic attachment to the written word and narrow-eyed suspicion of any human endeavor aspiring to arcane knowledge. It is from this paradoxical image of medieval textuality that I derive a Christian perspective on the discipline of medieval literary study.

In the years of decline leading up to his death in 1345, Richard de Bury composed a volume in praise of his favorite subject, books. He gave his volume a Greek title, *Philobiblon*—On the Love of Books. According to his biographer William de Chambre, Bishop Richard was a man of court affairs, Edward III's emissary to France, Germany, Scotland, and the Papal Court in Avignon. In between diplomatic and ecclesiastical duties, Richard trolled for books in monastic libraries, universities, and bookstores. He seldom left empty-handed and always paid what a book was worth, if not well more. A coterie of famous scholars gathered around Richard, holding after-dinner disputes for his entertainment and patronizing his extensive collection. Four months before his death, as he was finishing the *Philobiblon*, Richard arranged to establish a library at Oxford University where he had distinguished himself thirty years before.

The claims Richard makes on behalf of books—and sometimes in their voice—border on idolatry. They also reflect the intense bookishness of medieval *literati*. “This ecstatic love,” Richard writes in his Prologue, “has carried us away so powerfully, that we have resigned all thoughts of other earthly things, and have given ourselves up to a

passion for acquiring books.”² As he describes them, Richard’s books shade into embodiments of wisdom, and from embodiments of wisdom into divine beings. In the following passage, it is hard to tell whether de Bury is addressing quires of parchment or God Himself:

Where dost thou chiefly lie hidden, O most elect treasure, and where shall thirsting souls discover thee? Certes, thou hast placed thy tabernacle in books, where the Most High, the Light of lights, the Book of Life, has established thee. There everyone who asks receiveth thee, and everyone who seeks finds thee, and to everyone that knocketh boldly it is speedily opened. Therein the cherubim spread out their wings, that the intellect of the student may ascend and look from pole to pole, from the east and west, from the north and from the south. Therein the mighty and incomprehensible God Himself is apprehensibly contained and worshipped; therein is revealed the nature of things celestial, terrestrial, and infernal; therein are discerned the laws by which every state is administered, the offices of the celestial hierarchy are distinguished and the tyrannies of demons described. (p. 17)

Through its rich metaphors, this passage associates books with the Tabernacle which housed God’s presence, the pined-for lover in the Canticles, God the Father meeting out the beatitudes, the Virgin Mary in whom Jesus was conceived, the flesh in which Emanuel was incarnated, a vehicle to the heights of the empyrean, the source of natural

2. Richard de Bury, *Philobiblon: The Text and Translation of E. C. Thomas, Sometime Scholar of Trinity College, Edited with a Foreword by Michael MacLagan, Fellow of Trinity College* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959), 13.

and moral law, and a window into the numinous. A fourteenth-century author would be hard-pressed to find higher terms of praise.

If Richard does not surpass this mark in the remainder of his encomium, he does add a myriad of supporting claims. “In books,” Richard writes, “I find the dead as if they were alive” (p. 17). The idea that stories keep alive the great events of the past is familiar to us from Shakspere. “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee,” wrote William Shakspere in Sonnet 18.³ “So long as the book survives, its author remains immortal and cannot die,” writes Richard de Bury (p. 19). Books, Richard next asserts, are also the greatest teachers:

They are masters who instruct us without rod or ferule, without angry words, without clothes or money. If you come to them they are not asleep; if you ask and inquire of them, they do not withdraw themselves; they do not chide if you make mistakes; they do not laugh at you if you are ignorant. (p. 21)

These lines, which paint a frightening picture of medieval education, depict books as man’s primary source of knowledge and wisdom.

In Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, Richard points out, Lady Philosophy holds a scepter in one hand and a book in the other. From this he concludes that “no one can rightly rule a commonwealth without books” (p. 131). In Greek and Roman history, no prince won fame or success who was ignorant of literature. In Deuteronomy, Moses instructs the king to have the divine law read to him all the days of his life. Richard has no small opinion of the moral effects of wisdom on a ruler:

3. William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare: The Complete Works* 2nd ed. Gen. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1846.

She as a heavenly dew extinguishes the heats of fleshly vices, the intense activity of the mental forces relaxing the vigour of the animals forces, and slothfulness, being wholly put to flight, which being gone all the bows of Cupid are unstrung.
(p. 137)

Because books exalt our minds over the desires of our flesh, they grant us a glimpse of paradise: “The truest likeness of the beatitude to come is the contemplation of the sacred writings, in which we behold in turn the Creator and the creature, and draw from streams of perpetual gladness” (p. 141). Six-hundred-fifty years after his death, one is tempted to imagine a rapt Richard de Bury pouring over the Book of Life in an out-of-the-way scriptorium somewhere in Heaven.

Richard draws from the Bible to support his valorization of books. Jesus often used the Hebrew Scriptures to underwrite His authority: “Girding himself with the shield of truth and indeed of written truth, Jesus declared ‘it is written’ of what he was about to utter with his voice.”⁴ When confronted by men eager to stone the woman taken in adultery, Christ stooped down and wrote with His finger on the ground (John 8). He did this, Richard writes, in order that “no one, however exalted, may think it unworthy of him to do what he sees the wisdom of God the Father did” (p. 149). We never see Jesus, Richard points out, engaging in any occupation—sowing or reaping, sawing or digging—other than writing. Like the Son, God the Father is also depicted as an author:

4. *Philobiblon*, 27. De Bury refers to Matthew 4.

God Himself inscribes the just in the book of the living; Moses received the tales of stone written with the finger of God....Balshazzar trembled when he saw the fingers of a man's hand writing upon the wall. (p. 149)⁵

According to medieval tradition, God had revealed Himself in two books: the Bible and the world. God wrote of His existence in the words that created the universe; He wrote of His identity in the words that comprise the Old and New Testaments. When medieval authors took up the pen, they were consciously imitating an attribute of God.

Because God's two books had been written long before, medieval intellectuals associated antiquity with authority. Great value was placed especially on the writers of classical antiquity. "The memory of those fathers should be immortal," Richard declares, "who delighted only in the treasures of wisdom, who most laboriously provided shining lamps against future darkness" (p. 53). The "fathers" spoken of in this passage are not only church fathers like Augustine and Origen, but classical fathers like Cicero and Virgil. Whether the superiority of the ancients derived from "greater vigour of mental sagacity, or whether they perhaps indulged in closer application to study," the classical authors surpassed the moderns to such a degree that "their successors are barely capable of discussing the discoveries of their forerunners" (p. 99). The clerks of his own day, consumed by wine and ambition, de Bury laments, are no more than schoolboys snatching at their masters' caps.

5. Of interest to me as a part-time furniture craftsman is Richard's startling claim that Moses commanded construction of the first bookcase: "Moses, the gentlest of men, teaches us to make bookcases most neatly, wherein they may be protected from any injury: Take, he says, this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God" (*Philobiblon*, 161).

The belief that wisdom had declined since the ancient world was a fundamental medieval tenet. Antithetical to modern Western positivism, medieval people were largely anti-melioristic. Since the days when giants like Aristotle and Horace walked the earth, things had been going steadily downhill. The best medical knowledge was drawn from Galen, not the doctor researching tumors at Salerno. The best philosophy came from Aristotle with his “lynx-eyed penetration,” not the threadbare clerk investigating universals at the University of Paris (p. 109). The best stories, likewise, were retellings of old tales, not fresh ones devised by contemporary authors. Of twenty-four tales and tale fragments included in the *Canterbury Tales*, for instance, only two or three appear to be Chaucer’s original compositions. John Gower and Giovanni Boccaccio could scarcely have claimed even this much—had they wanted to. Throughout the Middle Ages, copyists toiled in dusty scriptoria revivifying ancient texts; authors translated and adapted inherited material, gleaning, as Chaucer called it, new corn from old fields.

Richard de Bury beams as he describes the books he rescued from dusty oblivion in monastery libraries. His anecdotes lapse easily into personification:

Cases were unlocked and caskets were undone, and volumes that had slumbered through long ages in their tombs wake up and are astonished, and those that had lain hidden in dark places are bathed in the ray of unwonted life. These long lifeless books, once most dainty, but now become corrupt and loathsome, covered with litters of mice and pierced with the gnawings of the worms, and who were once ashes, given up to oblivion, seemed to have become habitations of the moth.
(p. 83)

For the educated elite, books were the animate repositories of the living past and the living God.⁶ The regard in which de Bury and others held books finds visual expression in the deluxe manuscripts and lavish codices of the Middle Ages. It took a room full of copyists, illustrators, and binders months with a herd of animal skins to produce a major codex. In the later Middle Ages, a large manuscript could cost more than a small house.⁷

In his affirmation of books, Richard includes “the fables of the poets”—what we would call literature. Jerome, Augustine,



Boethius, and Lactantius all referred to the inventions of poets, he observed, so in order to understand theological authors we must first understand the literary. Richard defends literature from the charge that fiction perpetrates a fraud on the reader by lying. This so-called lying is a “pious fraud...[for] the delicate Minerva [wisdom] secretly lurk[s]

6. In his fervor to collect neglected books (something akin the fervor of our Humane Society to take in stray animals), de Bury includes a vivid description of the abuses books suffer at the hands of careless readers along with a stern prohibition against such practices: “You may happen to see some headstrong youth lazily lounging over his studies, and when the winter’s frost is sharp, his nose running from the nipping cold drips down, nor does he think of wiping it with his pocket-handkerchief until he has bedewed the book before him with the ugly moisture....His nails are stuffed with fetid filth as black as jet, with which he marks any passage that pleases him. He distributes a multitude of straws, which he inserts to stick out in different places, so that the halm may remind him of what his memory cannot retain. These straws, because the book has no stomach to digest them, and no one takes them out, first distend the book from its wonted closing, and at length, being carelessly abandoned to oblivion, go to decay” (p. 157).

7. Detail from the Ellesmere manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* showing Chaucer’s Wife of Bath on horseback courtesy of the Huntington Library website, cited 24 September 2003, available: <http://www.huntington.org/LibraryDiv/ChaucerPict.html>.

beneath the mask of pleasure” (p. 125). Compared to the dryness of history and the rigor of philosophy, the pleasing face of literature draws students in, only to reward them with weightier lessons:

Let every man see that his own intentions are upright, and he may thus make of any subject, observing the limitations of virtue, a study acceptable to God. And if he have found profit in poetry, as the great Virgil relates that he had done in Ennius, he will not have done amiss. (p. 129)

De Bury’s statement of academic freedom answers all those who believe Christians should only study the Bible.

John of Salisbury, the twelfth-century student of Abelard, also thought a complete education included both Christian and non-Christian texts. His argument begins with the biblical account of Peter’s vision in which a voice from heaven instructs Peter that no animals are unfit for consumption (Acts 11). John interprets the passage as an allegory concerning clean and unclean books:

Just so in books there is something profitable for everybody provided, be it understood the reading is done with discrimination and that only is selected which is edifying to faith and morals. There is matter which is of profit to the stronger minds but is to be kept from the artless...there is that which it digests for character building or perfecting eloquence....There is scarcely a piece of writing in which something is not found either in meaning or expression that the discriminating reader will not reject.⁸

8. From book VII chapter X of John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*, available in *The Literature of Medieval England*, ed. D. W. Robertson (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), 265.

John concludes that training in both Christian and pagan literature is “very useful to those safe in the faith, for accurate reading on a wide range of subjects makes the scholar.”

Through “wide reading,” we attain to “true philosophy” which leads to “a knowledge of all things” and “fixes the proper limit of deeds, thoughts, and words” (VII.XI, p. 267).

Giovanni Boccaccio also offered a spiritual defense of poetry in his *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*. Boccaccio had been attacked for writing the *Decameron*, a compendium of 100 stories told by a group of Italian youths fleeing the plague. In the *Genealogy*, he asserts that the stories composed by poets are no less honorable than the syllogisms composed by philosophers:

I have time and time again proved that the meaning of fiction is far from superficial....Fiction is a form of discourse, which, under guise of invention, illustrates or proves an idea; and, as its superficial aspect is removed, the meaning of the author is clear.⁹

Aesop wrote moral fables, Virgil wrote epics embodying nobility, and Dante wrote the *Commedia* which “unties with amazingly skillful demonstration the hard knots of holy theology” (XIV.X, p. 279). And, of course, Christ “used this sort of fiction again and again in his parables” (XIV.IX, p. 277). To reject imaginative narratives, Boccaccio argues, is to reject “nearly the whole sacred body of the Old Testament” and much of the teaching of Jesus.

9. Giovanni Boccaccio, *On the Genealogy of the Gods*, available in D. W. Robertson, ed., *The Literature of Medieval England* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), XIV.X, p. 277.

At the other pole of medieval textuality, authors in the mystical tradition considered knowledge of the numinous beyond the purview of books. The fourteenth-century *The Cloud of Unknowing* targeted arguments like those of Richard de Bury, John of Salisbury, and Giovanni Boccaccio as it warned against attempting to approach God through the intellect. The anonymous author counseled readers to abandon human reason in favor of direct mystical experience:

So for the love of God be careful and don't put any great strain on your mind or imagination. For I tell you truthfully, you cannot achieve [knowledge of God] by any such strain, so leave your intellectual and your imaginative skills strictly alone.¹⁰

Books clearly have no role in the cloud of unknowing described by late medieval mystics. In the darkness of ignorance where we discover God, there is no light by which to read.

A twelfth-century allegorical epic by Alain de Lille explores the transcendence of God. In the *Anticlaudianus*, a character named Phronesis journeys from Earth to Heaven through the Ptolemaic universe. Because her chariot is constructed by the seven liberal arts, her voyage has implications for medieval textuality. The vehicle of human knowledge carries her reliably through the spheres of the seven planets, but as she approaches her heavenly destination, Phronesis' horses stumble and her chariot breaks down. Confidence turns to stupefaction as Phronesis finds her reason powerless and her words insufficient.

10. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in *The Medieval Reader*, ed. Norman F. Cantor (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 304.

Lady Theology comes to Phronesis' aid, but her spectacular appearance only bewilders the dazed pilgrim. Theology wears a glittering diadem and a garment made of gold and silver. In her right hand she carries a book, presumably the Scriptures, and her garment displays divine mysteries:

What the tongue cannot tell the picture does: how language, since it fails to reach the essence of God, grows senseless when it tries to express things divine, loses its power of communicating and tries to take refuge in its old meaning. Sounds die into silence, scarce able to lisp, and words stop quarreling about their connotation; how God himself embraces in himself the names of all things which are not repugnant to His Nature; however he conceives everything by means of a trope and by way of a figure and assumes the unadulterated name without the object.¹¹

Through the images on Theology's garment, Alain conveys the ineffability of God on several levels. First, the images depict the inability of human language to comprehend divine truths. Second, this human inability constitutes that which "the tongue cannot tell"—in other words, the fact that human language cannot express divine truths cannot itself be expressed in human language. On a third level, Alain's text does not attempt to describe the image which tells what language cannot. For the reader of Alain's text, the images on Theology's garment are beyond comprehension. How can one conceive of an image conveying the unspeakable fact that divine truths are unspeakable?

11. References to the *Anticlaudianus* are from Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, Trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1973), V.115-127, p. 141.

Analogous to Phronesis's journey is Dante's heavenly pilgrimage in the *Commedia*. Having come to himself lost in a dark wood, Dante is granted a tour of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Near the end of his voyage, as he approaches the same threshold where Phronesis' chariot failed, Dante confesses himself at a loss. His vision of the Trinity and the Incarnate Christ surpasses his ability as a poet. Though charged with reporting his experience on earth, Dante's memory fails to record what he saw, and his speech balks at expressing mysteries he cannot remember. Dante assembles a famous series of evaporating images to suggest the ineffability of his experience—a dream recalled but not remembered, words written in melting snow, and the wind-blown prophecies of the Sibyl.

Apollo and the Muses, representatives of human poetry unaided by Christian revelation, cannot avail Dante during his first glimpses of Christ and the Virgin. The lofty subject transcends Dante's familiar avenues of invocation and signification, and the poet declares himself beaten in Canto XXIII:

Though all those tongues which Polyhymnia and her sisters have nourished with their sweetest milk should sound now to aid me, it would not come to a thousandth part of the truth, in singing the holy smile and how it lit up the holy aspect; and so, picturing Paradise, the sacred poem must make a leap like one that finds his path cut off. (XXIII.55-63)¹²

[Se mo sonasser tutte quelle lingue
che Polimnìa con le suore fero
del latte lor dolcissimo più pingue,

12. References to Dante's *Commedia* are from the edition of John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939, rpt. 1961).

per aiutarmi, al millesmo del vero
 non si verrà, cantando il santo riso
 e quanto il santo aspetto facea mero;
 e così, figurando il Paradiso,
 convien saltar lo sacrato poema,
 come chi trova suo cammin riciso.]

Augustine warns in *On Christian Doctrine* that to say that God is ineffable is still to say that God is something, and that cannot be if he is ineffable, so one should rather pass over in silence.¹³ Tempting as this approach to Dante's poem is, the metrics and structure of the passage simply do not bear it out. No *terza* contains the gap which should signify Paradise—Dante has filled them all out with words. The poem thus contradicts itself in addition to failing to depict Heaven; it merely states the word "leap" ["saltar"] rather than doing it and thus remains wholly bound up in the contradictions of mortal language.

Dante and Alain's views on God's ineffability derive in part from patristic and medieval treatises on the Trinity. Human grammar and rhetoric simply cannot grapple with a God who is both three and one, yet Christian theologians felt compelled to write at length on the subject. In book two of his treatise on the Trinity, Saint Hilary writes that God transcends the farthest reaches of language: "Words will fail you, but His being will not be circumscribed...Reason, therefore, cannot cope with Him...God is invisible, ineffable, infinite" (II.6) ["Sermo in eo deficiet, non natura claudetur...Ita regionem intellegentiae excedit...Deus inuisibilis ineffabilis infinitus, ad quem et eloquendum

13. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

sermo sileat”].¹⁴ At best, words can hint at our meaning, sketch our thoughts, but, Hilary writes, “speech is powerless to tell us what God is, words cannot express the reality” (II.7) [“naturae sermo succumbit et rem ut est uerba non explicant”]. The role of words, Hilary concludes, is to express their inability to express God: “Let us confess by our silence that words cannot describe Him; let sense admit that it is foiled in the attempt to apprehend and reason in the effort to define” (II.7) [“Deficit ergo in nuncupatione confessio, et quidquid illud sermonum aptabitur, Deum ut est quantusque est non loquetur”]. Because God is infinite, he is immune to definition.¹⁵

Reading the works of Richard de Bury, John of Salisbury, Boethius, Giovanni Boccaccio, Alain de Lille, Dante Alighieri, St. Hilary, and Augustine, I have developed a perspective on my discipline much like that represented by Harvard’s first seal. On the one hand, I believe that a liberal arts education is key to a richly productive life. I hold with Arthur F. Holmes that “the educated Christian exercises critical judgment and manifests the ability to interpret and to evaluate information, particularly in the light of the Christian revelation.”¹⁶ Where do such judgment and ability come from? More than any other experience, reading books trains us “to see things in relationship, to organize ideas into an ordered whole, to be systematic, to work toward a unified meaning” (20). I agree with Richard de Bury that a person of upright heart may “make of any subject... a study acceptable to God.” With Horace and the great classical rhetoricians I affirm that

14. References to St. Hilary are from *St. Hilary of Poitiers: Select Works*, Trans. E. W. Watson, L. Pullan (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899).

15. The English word ‘define,’ like its Latin source *definio*, means to delimit or establish the boundaries of a subject.

effective rhetoric both instructs and entertains. Like Boccaccio, I have devoted my career to stories, for in our culture's great narratives reside both lasting pleasure and sustaining wisdom.

On the other hand, my ears are open to the voices of the mystical tradition. With the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, I find our earth-bound language insufficient to describe the Alpha and the Omega. Our words are shaped by human experiences and accrete their meanings through human usage. "Awesome" is colored by the Grand Canyon, last night's Cub's game, the pop tart we ate for breakfast—all comparisons that pale ridiculously next to Almighty God. I hold with Paul and the author of Isaiah that "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2). I believe in the dark glass of Christian epistemology. As a literature professor, I guide others along the pilgrim paths of narrative wisdom. But, like Dante and Alain, I believe that at the end of the pilgrimage of this life, literature and learning will fall away, and another guide, our Personal Savior, will show us the way.

16. Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 5.