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Résumé de l'article

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Allegory and the Matter of Poetics: Dante as a Case Study in Giovanni Boccaccio's and Leonardo Bruni's Perspectives*

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The question of whether or not to read poetry through an allegorizing lens had significant implications in the Middle Ages. The identification of allegories in a poetical text was highlighted by early supporters of poetry as the primary means of legitimizing the craft; regardless of whether a poet quoted a pagan god or a mythological figure, the true challenge was to find the real meaning beneath the surface. This approach—one embraced by Giovanni Boccaccio—offered a wealth of samples to the earliest readers of Dante's Divine Comedy. *At the end of the fourteenth century, some humanists started to call into question the theological stance on which the allegorical interpretations were based. In order to promote the autonomous status of poetry, literati of the calibre of Leonardo Bruni maintained that allegory was a double-edged sword. Inspired by Plato's refusal of allegory, Bruni encouraged the reading of literary texts free from the restrictions of a theoretical superstructure. For proponents of these opposing tendencies, Dante represented a true case study, for he was both a theorist and a poet in his own right and could therefore nourish the reflections formulated by both camps.*

La question de savoir s'il fallait (ou pas) lire la poésie à travers une lentille allégorique était un enjeu d'importance au Moyen Âge. Les premiers partisans de la poésie avaient recours à l'identification des allégories dans un texte poétique comme principal moyen de légitimer cet art ; qu'un poète évoque un dieu païen ou une figure mythologique, le véritable défi consistait à trouver le sens profond auquel renvoyait cette référence. Cette approche, adoptée par Boccace, a offert de très nombreux exemples aux premiers lecteurs de la Divine Comédie *de Dante. Toutefois, à la fin du XIV^e^ siècle, certains humanistes ont commencé à remettre en question la perspective théologique sur laquelle reposaient ces interprétations allégoriques. Afin de promouvoir le statut autonome de la poésie, des lettrés de la trempe de Leonardo Bruni ont soutenu que l'allégorie était une arme à double tranchant. S'inspirant du refus de l'allégorie promulgué par Platon, Bruni encourageait une lecture des textes littéraires libérée des restrictions imposées par cette structure théorique. Pour les partisans de ces tendances opposées, Dante était un cas d'école : théoricien et lui-même poète, il pouvait nourrir les réflexions formulées par les deux camps.*

In medieval exegesis in general and in Dante Alighieri's thought in particular, allegory played a remarkable role. Through its lens, readers assessed not only literature, and especially poetry, but also the Holy Scriptures, whose

* This article stems from a paper that the author presented during the second international seminar on critical approaches to Dante: "'Contrapasso' and 'Allegoria'" (University of Toronto, 4–5 April 2017).

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interpretation, according to a famous passage in Dante's *Convivio* (2.1), required two more levels of reading: the moral and the anagogical. It is by examining the distinction between literary analysis and theology that this article will address some fundamental questions emerging from Dante and from his early readers: How autonomous can we consider literature and poetry to have been? How free were poets to write at the literal level? How cumbersome was allegorical reading? While answering these questions, I shall examine both Dante's works and the speculation of two illustrious authors who followed: Giovanni Boccaccio and Leonardo Bruni.

In the above-mentioned passage from the *Convivio*, where Dante explains how to read his own *canzoni*, he states that he will resort to the poets' way:

> Veramente li teologi questo senso [allegorico] prendono altrimenti che li poeti; ma però che mia intenzione è qui lo modo de li poeti seguitare, prendo lo senso allegorico secondo che per li poeti è usato.[1]
>
> (In truth, theologians take this [allegorical] sense differently than poets. However, because I intend to follow the poets' manner, I take the allegorical sense as used by poets.)[2]

As all the commentators underlined, here Dante contrasts the poets' way with the theologians', because in the Holy Scriptures the literal level does not comprise, to use Dante's words, "una veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna" (*Conv.* 2.1: a truth hidden under a beautiful lie). The Bible is not a collection of moral fairy tales; its books offer various levels of reading, that is clear, but all of them, the literal included, are absolutely true. Poets and poems tell a different story. In their case, according to Dante's *Convivio*, the literal level is a "favola," to wit, a well-written piece of art, and the real meaning, the "truth," if any, must be sought below the surface. This does not imply that the literal sense is rejected; rather, it is believed to represent the precious shell of a deeper content. Dante exemplifies these assumptions through a close analysis of his *canzoni*, where every image in its detail corresponds to a hidden moral truth. Moving forward in his reflection and poetical production, Dante must have found this

1. *Conv.* 2.1.4. Future references to Dante's works may appear in parentheses in the main text.

2. All translations are mine.

view problematic, for various layers of interpretation are in fact at work in the supernatural journey of the *Divine Comedy*.

Spurred or rather provoked by *Convivio*'s way of interpreting sacred and profane texts, Dante scholars explored how his theoretical view of allegory functioned in his poem. To mention a few works—and among the most illustrious ones from the past century—Charles S. Singleton maintained that Dante employed in the *Divine Comedy* all the levels of allegory that in the *Convivio* he attributed only to the Holy Scriptures, therefore insisting on the historical pregnancy of the literal level.[3] Robert Hollander analyzed the partition of the allegorical interpretation, from a poetical, rhetorical, and theological perspective.[4] Aiming at conciliating allegory as the expression of a divine and superior sense and the literal level as the expression of the tangled human history, Giuseppe Mazzotta emphasized the importance of reading Dante's *Divine Comedy* while defying the ambiguities of language.[5] Based upon such inspirational works, modern Dante scholars shed new light on the traditional questions about the credibility of Dante's journey and its meaning for medieval and post-medieval readers.

In searching for the theoretical premise of the *Convivio*'s passage—that is, Dante's conception of poetry at large—one may resort to a later work by him, which is as unfinished as the *Convivio*: the Latin *De vulgari eloquentia*. The idea of poetry expressed in the vernacular treatise corresponds to the definition of poetry expressed in the Latin one: "[…] si poesim recte consideremus: que nichil aliud est quam fictio rethorica musicaque poita" (*De vulg. eloq.* 2.4.2: if we carefully examined poetry, which is nothing but a mere creation based on rhetoric and forged [*poita*] with a musical rhythm). By using the rare word *poita*, Dante reveals the etymology of poetry that he embraced: that is, through Uguccione's *Magnae derivationes*, the correct derivation from Greek ποιέω/*poieo*, or *poio* (*poire*) in medieval Latin, whose basic meaning was "to make" or "to produce," and, in a literary context, "to compose according to a poetical style"—for example, "to give a poetical form to a myth" or "to write poems for a god." The Latin verb usually adopted to translate *poieo* was *fingo*.[6] Yet *fingo* might introduce a negative connotation due to the idea of false simulation that

3. See Singleton.

4. See Hollander.

5. See Mazzotta.

6. See Schiaffini. On the implications of the Greek ποιέω, see Valesio.

it suggested. As Dante says, poetry is a *fictio,* something artificially built, and only under such a construction is it possible to locate an allegorically readable truth. For Dante, both as a critic and as a poet, the literal level is not sufficient; it is not the definitive step. The premise for the legitimacy of poetry is that the reader must go beyond it.

We could complain, at this point, about the fact that Dante was not familiar enough with ancient Greek to grasp the original, neutral meaning of *poieo.* Yet if we consider what occurred after him, we will notice that Dante adhered more closely to the Greek than the next generation of humanists did. In this perspective, Boccaccio can be regarded as a noteworthy case. In many of his works,[7] and especially in two chapters of the *Genealogie deorum gentilium* (14.7–8), Boccaccio founded his idea of poetry on an etymology totally different from Dante's. According to Boccaccio, the Greek word for poets—not from the verb *poieo*, "to produce," but from the alleged noun *poetes,* "polite expression"—was linked to the habit of the ancients to formulate hymns to gods using a refined vocabulary and an exceptional style. In other words, poets were particularly talented creators who composed highly refined pieces inscribed in the sacred genre of literature. Such a reconstruction had already been elaborated (and with the same words in Latin) by Petrarch, who in a letter to his brother Gherardo, accompanying his first eclogue and its exegesis, made poetry derive from the pieces composed for pagan gods and written in a peculiar mode, with rare terms: a noble style not in line with common usage:

> […] visum est et verbis altisonis divinitatem placare et procul ab omni plebeio ac publico loquendi stilo sacras superis inferre blanditias, numeris insuper adhibitis quibus et amenitas inesset et tedia pelleruntur.[8]
>
> (they found it appropriate to calm gods and flatter them with noble words which were not in line with the popular and common style, moreover using rhythm to confer pleasure and ban boredom.)

Nevertheless, aside from the implications of such an aristocratic concept of poetry, both Dante's interpretation and the false etymology of Petrarch-Boccaccio

7. Boccaccio, *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, and *Esposizione letterale* 1, §§ 70–71. On the crucial importance of these passages, see Trovato, 281–82, and Bartuschat, 130.

8. Petrarca, 10.4.4.

produced the same conclusions: all of them connected poetry to a sacred dimension and considered poetical texts in terms of *figmenta* that were expressions of an allegorical core, a tendency that moreover represented a common practice in the schools of the day.[9]

If we recollect what Boccaccio wrote in his *Genealogie* to defend poetry, we will be led back to Dante: poets are not liars, not because their stories are true but because they hide some truth under their verses. In the fourteenth book of the *Genealogie*, a section that represents a powerful apology of poetry as a true and eternal science, Boccaccio aims at replying especially to the attacks of a specific group of critics: someone, he says, claims that poetry does not purport to convey any truth, and poems are simply an exercise in eloquence. Against this allegation, something we nowadays would call the mere aesthetic pleasure of literature, Boccaccio demands a high status for those poets who under the veil of fictitious stories hid a deeper meaning. As one instance, after Virgil and before Petrarch and himself, Boccaccio mentions Dante:

> Quis tam sui inscius, qui, advertens nostrum Dantem sacre theologie implicitos persepe nexus mira demonstratione solventem, non sentiat eum non solum phylosophum, sed theologum insignem fuisse? Et si hoc existimet, qua fultus ratione arbitrabitur eum bimembrem gryphem, currum in culmine severi montis trahentem, septem candelabris et totidem sociatum nynphis, cum reliqua triunphali pompa, ut ostenderet, quia rithimos fabulasque sciret componere?[10]
>
> (Who is so ignorant of himself that he does not realize that our Dante, who very often aimed at solving the tangled knots of sacred theology with extraordinary proof, was not only a philosopher but also an illustrious theologian? And if you consider this, based on which reason will you deem that the double-natured griffon dragging the chariot to the peak of a high mountain, together with seven candelabras and seven nymphs, and the other triumphal pomp [*Purgatorio* 29], serves to demonstrate only that he was able to compose rhymes and fables?)

9. For Dante, see Schiaffini; for humanist Coluccio Salutati, see his *De laboribus Herculis*, 16; for some instances of the use of allegory in early modern schools, see Grafton and Jardine, 113 and 118.

10. Boccaccio, *Genealogie* 14.10.

In Boccaccio's analysis, saving the poets and saving their works inevitably implied attributing to them a more-than-poetical aura and turning them into philosophers and/or theologians or historians (as in the case of the Latin poet Lucan), thus unintentionally reinforcing the argument of those who did not grant poetry the status of an autonomous discipline.[11]

Boccaccio's mastery of the Greek language was certainly superior to Dante's, although not perfect. It would take several generations of humanists in the fifteenth century before European scholars could read Greek without the aid of Latin translations or Byzantine lecturers. In fact, Boccaccio counted on scholar Leontius Pilatus, who was from Calabria,[12] a region that even nowadays boasts traces of Byzantine domination, especially in the liturgy. Nevertheless, Boccaccio had only a superficial knowledge of the language and did not own Greek dictionaries.

Moving forward in time, the first humanist to display a more accurate command of Greek was Leonardo Bruni. As the smartest pupil of Coluccio Salutati in Florence, Bruni lived in the same intellectual environment that aimed at preserving the heritage of Petrarch and Boccaccio. Yet, whereas Salutati had delved into the more spiritual side of Petrarchan humanism and had placed himself inside the exclusively Latin culture, Bruni was interested in the more literary aspects of the *Trecento* authors and remained open to their vernacular writings and not simply to their sacred and erudite production. Clearer proof of Bruni's approach is found in the two brief biographies of Dante and Petrarch that he composed by claiming to adhere to a more historical and less emotional perspective.[13] The *Vita di Dante* also contains an explicit allusion to the interpretation of poetry carried out by Petrarch and Boccaccio. Without naming them explicitly, Bruni alludes to them when he writes: "questi nostri moderni poeti non l'hanno bene intese; né è maraviglia, essendo ignari della lingua greca" (these modern poets of ours badly interpreted such things [the

11. Fiorentini maintains that Boccaccio's fluctuating view of Dante as an allegorical poet, and of *Divine Comedy* as a true (literal) poem, mirrors "the contraposition between that which is mutable and that which is immutable, between the contingent and the universal. […] everything which belongs to the letter becomes the immediate, and legitimate, vehicle for an immutable and eternal content—including, evidently, the vernacular as well" (Fiorentini, 29–30).

12. As studied by the seminal book of Pertusi. See also Fumagalli.

13. See Ianziti, 169–85, and Baldassarri, "Bruni dantista."

name and meaning of the word *poet*]; and this is not surprising because they were ignorant of Greek).[14] Bruni also states:

> Dico adunque che questo nome *poeta* è nome greco e tanto viene a dire quanto "facitore." […] Poeta è adunque colui che fa alcuna opera, cioè autore e componitore di quello che altri legge. […] *fare opere* non si dice se non in versi. E questo addiviene per eccellenza dello stile, perocché le sillabe e la misura ed il suono è solamente di chi dice in versi. […] Il nome del poeta significa eccellente ed ammirabile stile in versi, coperto e adombrato da leggiadria e alta finzione.[15]
>
> (I therefore maintain that this word *poet* is a Greek noun and is the equivalent of *composer*. […] A poet is therefore one who produces some work, that is the author and composer of what someone else reads. […] "to compose works" can be said only in verse. And this happens through excellence in terms of style, because syllables, rhythm, and sound pertain only to those who compose in verse. […] The name *poet* applies to one who displays an excellent and admirable style in verse covered and veiled in elegance and noble fiction.)

The latter definition seems to recall that of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, with the idea of poetry as a stylistic nexus of music, rhythm, and rhetoric. It also echoes the idea of the aristocratic origin of poetry in sacred hymns to pagan gods as stated by Petrarch and Boccaccio. Yet Bruni goes further. By emphasizing the stylistic and literary aspects of poetry, he guarantees for it a role closer to the literal level of reading.

While according to Boccaccio, poets produce fictitious stories under which the interpreter has to grasp the allegorical truth, Bruni leans towards the purely artistic delight of poetry. Contrary to the common opinion of the time and earlier, for Bruni poetry and philosophy (the latter being conceived as doctrine, and ultimately as theology at large) do not necessarily coincide and

14. Bruni, *Humanistisch-philosophische Schriften*, 60. On this passage and in general on Bruni's biographies, see Madrignani, 38–39, and Mansi, 255. According to Trovato, Bruni also had in mind his master, Salutati (Trovato, 281–82).

15. Bruni, *Humanistisch-philosophische Schriften*, 60–61.

should therefore be evaluated separately.[16] In a sense, Dante already had laid the foundations for such a distinction when in the *Convivio* he had applied a single layer of allegory to literature, and a multilayered allegorical form to the biblical books. Yet Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio had not excluded allegory completely; allegory was the strongest way to defend poetry and to legitimize its practice.

I maintain that Bruni's impatience with allegory in general might derive from a passage of Plato's *Phaedrus*, a dialogue that he partly translated in 1424. At the very beginning of the work, Socrates and his interlocutor are looking for a pleasant place to lie down and they run into the same location where according to the myth Boreas had kidnapped Oreithyia, daughter of King Erechtheus of Athens. At this point, Phaedrus asks Socrates if he considers that story plausible. Here is how the latter replies in Bruni's translation:

> Iam si non putarem, ut sapientes, absurdus non essem. Deinde rem commentans ventum Boree dicerem proximis e petris cum Farmacia ludentem Eretriam deiecisse atque ita mortuam *fingi* a Borea raptam, vel ex Ariopago; est enim et alia fama non ex hoc loco sed ex alio raptam fuisse. Ego autem, o Phedre, alioquin hec iocunda existimo, sed nimium anxii et exilis nec porro fortunati viri, si nichil ob aliud at ob hoc ipsum, quod ei necesse sit Centaurorum figuram interpretari itemque Chimere et confluit turba Gorgonum et Pegasorum et aliarum monstruosarum multitudo formarum; quas siquis non putans singulas illarum ad convenientem intellectionem velit traducere, rustica quadam sapientia fretus, nimium otio indigebit. Michi vero ad illa tempus nequaquam est. Causa vero est huius: quia nondum queo, secundum Delphicam litteram, me ipsum cognoscere.[17]
>
> (If I did not consider it that way, as wise people do, I would not sound ridiculous. Therefore, commenting on the myth, I would say that the wind Boreas made Oreithyia fall down from the nearby rocks while she

16. For this new evaluation of poetry, later validated by Poggio Bracciolini, see Madrignani, 38–39, Fubini, *L'Umanesimo italiano*, 92–93, and Fubini, "Premesse trecentesche."

17. Plato, *Phaedrus* 229c-e. Owing to the lack of an edition, the Latin text cited here and below is based on the following manuscripts, all of which are found in the Vatican Library: Regin. lat. 1321, Urb. lat. 1314, Vat. lat. 8611, and Vat. lat. 3348.

> was playing with Pharmacea, and so, once she died, they imagined that she was kidnapped by Boreas—from there or from Ares' hill; there is in fact another version that she was kidnapped not from this place but from the other one. Yet, Phaedrus, I evaluate such interpretations as pleasing, but they are suitable for a very tormented, weak, and even unlucky man, above all because he needs to interpret the image of Centauri as well as of the Chimaera and then the crowd of Gorgons and of Pegasi and the mob of the other horrific forms. And if someone who does not believe in them wished to translate every image, one by one, into an appropriate interpretation, counting on a sort of rustic wisdom, he would need a lot of free time. But I do not have time at all for such things. And the reason is this: according to the oracle of Delphi, I am not yet able to know myself.)

With a few exceptions that can be justified also according to the conditions of the original Greek manuscript at his disposal, Bruni's translation grasps the gist of the position of Socrates/Plato: myths are fascinating and pleasing (*iocunda*), but their interpretation demands too much time and effort, whether critics use either a rationalistic approach, as in Socrates' example (Boreas, or wind), or a more traditional form of allegory (the various monsters meaning something else).[18] And if Plato had read Dante, he would probably have had Socrates speak against all the monstrous creatures in the *Divine Comedy* that need an allegorical explanation. It is worthy of note that Bruni used the verb *fingo* to convey the creation of the myth of Boreas, a verb that had polemic implications if we recall that it rendered in Latin the Greek ποιέω and more often than not with negative connotations for the person who practised it (the poet as liar).

Aside from the myth in question, and from Plato's condemnation of traditional myths and poets in general, what is at play here from Bruni's point of view is the interpretative approach. Allegory cannot work as a passkey to opening difficult locks. If we, perhaps too daringly, transfer this argument from the simple myth to its literary counterpart, we will come to the same results. In Bruni's (but not in Plato's) view, poetry is autonomous, and those who wish to judge it must do so accordingly: arming themselves with patience, intellectual resources, and time. The alternative would be the one offered by Socrates in

18. On this pivotal passage, a text that only apparently contradicts Plato's usage of cosmogonic (and slightly allegorical) myths in his own works, see Tulli.

the case of Oreithyia's myth: that is, simply ignoring it. For if one wishes to confront it, one must be well equipped.

To be precise, we may remember that this cultural awareness of the implications of the allegorical method was a gradual conquest. Even in ancient Greece, allegorical hermeneutics applied to Homeric poems date back to the sixth century BCE and to literary critic Theagenes of Rhegium. The manuscript scholia and other minor works (such as Heraclitus's *Homeric Questions*[19]) that made use of allegory in fact supported the legitimacy of poetry. In brief, two fronts fought against each other as in a true battle, or rather in a true trial with poetical texts as their witnesses: those in favour of allegory (and poetry) and those against both of them (such as Plato). Bruni himself shows an ambiguous position about the use of allegory, praising or blaming it according to the needs of his argumentations but also—I maintain—based upon his close reading of Plato's dialogues. It must not be by chance that after translating, although only partly, the *Phaedrus*, Bruni observed his literary predecessors and works from a new perspective. As James Hankins stressed, in the political treatise *De militia* (1421), Bruni mocks the use of allegory to interpret costumes and habits of society (in that particular case, gold in the knights' uniforms):[20] for any image expressed by the author, there will always be an interpreter who boasts of having found a deeper meaning for it. On the contrary, and on a level closer to our discourse, in his early *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum* Bruni resorts to allegory in order to justify the white hair of Cato in the *Purgatorio*, who in reality died at the age of 48 (i.e., not old enough to show a white beard): Cato's mind and soul, he says, were "super white [that is wise] even in his young body,"[21] and it is the soul, not the body, that goes into the Other World. Moreover, in the pedagogical treatise *De studiis et litteris*, a work written by Bruni in the 1420s, the author while defending poetry seems to authorize the use of allegory: "When poets mention the affairs of Apollo and Daphne, or Volcano and Venus, they deal with fictitious happenings (*fictas res*) and they convey a meaning which does not coincide with what they actually wrote (*aliud pro alio*)." Here the topic of allegory is combined with another exquisitely aesthetic one: poets write "ad delectationem hominum" (so as to please people),

19. See Pontani's introduction of Eraclito, *Questioni omeriche*, 26–32.

20. Hankins, 70.

21. Bruni, *Dialogi* 74.9.

and some "idiots are often mistaken when they take what poets said as if it were true and not fictitious."[22] In an epistle, Bruni even names himself as "an Epicurean in literature, someone who aims at pleasure (*voluptas*) and vividness (*festivitas*)."[23] In all these passages again we have the two opposite poles of the discussion in favour of or against allegory: is it a real key to reading texts and thus interpreting as poetic licence what otherwise would appear to be an error, or is it a mere weapon to draw against "conservative" critics?[24]

The discussion on the origin and legitimacy of poetry is interwoven with the antinomy that Bruni expresses in his *Vita di Dante*. Bruni postulates two kinds of poetry, one based on divine inspiration—we could say genius according to the romanticist connotation of it—with the examples of the shepherds Orpheus and Hesiod and of Saint Francis, and one based on a refined technique acquired by practice, as in the case of Dante. This tormented discussion was certainly present in Platonic reflection, too, as the following passage from *Phaedrus*, again in Bruni's translation, demonstrates:

> Tertia vero a Musis occupatio et furor, sortita simplicem et insuperabilem animam, suscitans illam atque exagitans per carmina et aliam poesim, milia antiquorum opera exornans posteros instruit; qui vero absque furore Musarum poeticas ad fores accedit, sperans quasi arte quadam poetam se bonum evasurum, inanis ipse atque eius poesis: pre illa que ex furore est, hec que ex prudentia disperditur.[25]
>
> (The third kind of possession and frenzy that comes from the Muses and befalls a simple and untouchable soul awakens and spurs it through verses and other poems, instructs posterity by praising thousands of works of the ancients. But they who reach the gates of poetry without the Muses' frenzy, although they hope to end up being good poets by relying on some

22. Bruni, *Humanistisch-philosophische Schriften*, 17–18.

23. Bruni, *Epistolarum libri VIII* 4.10: "me profecto Epicureum litterarum factum esse scito; voluptatem in illis, festivitatemque consector."

24. Bruni's apparently contradictory usage of allegory is very similar to the ancient Greeks' attitude towards myths as delineated by Veyne's celebrated essay *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* If Greek learned men brought into question the reality of creatures like those mentioned in Plato's *Phaedrus*, they were also willing to confirm their existence to prove that they shared what everyone believed in.

25. Plato, *Phaedrus* 245a.

> sort of technique, they and their poetry will be petty: their poetry coming from practical mastery will be displaced by poetry coming from frenzy.)

Bruni is more generous than Plato with the category of poets who belonged to the second group, since he included Dante in it. It must be stressed, however, that such an explicit antinomy is part of the very name of "poet" and of its etymology. Its connection with the verb ποιέω, as Bruni confirms, seems to be more appropriate for a manual and technical discipline due to the most common usage of that verb for material products, which did not connote any moral judgment in the original Greek. The irrational frenzy on the other hand represented an exceptional expression of divine inspiration—as Plato himself explained more carefully in his *Ion* in connection with rhapsodes. Bruni accepts the distinction and legitimizes both categories as expressions that are different but valuable *per se* from their respective points of view. Here, as in his earlier *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum*, Bruni emphasizes Dante's doctrine, encyclopaedic knowledge, and noble expertise in various subjects, but he refrains from depicting him as a poet inspired by God or, which is almost the same, as a trueborn "theologian"—as the famous epitaph by Giovanni del Virgilio, quoted by Boccaccio in his *Trattatello*, had defined Dante.[26]

Behind the definition of Dante-as-theologian, there is a cluster of implications worth examining. First, to medieval ears "theology" was not a mere subject as we perceive it nowadays—for instance, when we name the corresponding faculty. "Theology" could mean both the Holy Scriptures and the revelation of the Christian message over the centuries. Second, because of the supposed origin of the first poets within a religious context, the words "poet" and "theologian" ended up being a tautology, yet with a caveat: Boccaccio dwells in particular on the allegories that both the Bible and the pagan poets developed at the level of words (allegory *in verbis*). Boccaccio avoids discussing a deeper sort of allegory (*in factis*), and he does not mention at all the interpretation of the New Testament in light of the Old, and vice versa. For Boccaccio, then, similarities between pagan poems and biblical books do exist but only in terms of metaphors, images, and metrics. In his *Genealogie*, for instance, he never allegorizes a pagan myth as an earlier source of religious truth but only for its

26. On the crucial connection between poets and theologians in Boccaccio, see Gilson and Frasso; for the anthropological implications of Boccaccio's view, see Canetti.

moral or cosmological implications, according to what Boccaccio used to call "moral theology."

On the basis of the equivalence between theologians and Christian poets, Prudentius or Juvencus might have been taken as the best examples. But how could Dante fit into such a classification? He labelled his own work as "poema sacro," but in fact it contained some unorthodox views, and early in its reception it was censored and prohibited. All the fourteenth-century commentators who celebrated Dante as "divine poet" in their introductions (*accessus*) were then embarrassed to draw the corresponding conclusions: that the real author was the Holy Spirit, and that the text had to be interpreted not only at the literal and allegorical level but—like the Holy Scriptures—at the moral and anagogical as well, i.e., not simply a truth hidden behind a veil of fiction but rather a truth within another truth. In the above-mentioned fourteenth book of the *Genealogie*, Boccaccio makes a clear distinction between the poetical books of the Bible, written in verses by authors inspired by God, and the pagan poets, who composed "with the strength of their mind (and that is why they are called *vates, a vi mentis).*"[27] How does Boccaccio overcome the contradiction in the case of Dante, an author who by the very fact of not having written his masterpiece in Latin, the language of grammar and rhetoric, was deemed to have violated all canonical schemes? He considers the poem a "libro poliseno" (polysemous book) and affirms that, while the literal level may please the least talented and the unrefined ("quelli di minor sentimento"; "i rozi"), the allegorical one is reserved for noble men and lofty intellects ("i gran valenti uomini"; "gli ingegni più sublimi").[28]

Bruni did not address this question directly, but in his biography of Dante he shows a certain degree of intolerance toward the approach his predecessor Boccaccio adopted. Boccaccio's biography of Dante, Bruni writes,

> tutta d'amore e di sospiri e di cocenti lagrime è piena, come se l'uomo nascesse in questo mondo solamente per ritrovarsi in quelle dieci giornate amorose, le quali da donne innamorate e da giovani leggiadri raccontate furono nelle *Cento Novelle*.[29]

27. Boccaccio, *Genealogie* 14.8.12.

28. Boccaccio, *Esposizione allegorica*, 1.

29. Bruni, *Humanistisch-philosophische Schriften*, 51.

> (was stuffed with love, sighs and stinging tears, as if human beings were born on earth only to live in those ten amorous Days that were recounted by loving women and handsome young men in his *Decameron*.)

In a word, Boccaccio was neither historically accurate nor morally impartial, and presented Dante as a literary character of his *Decameron*. Bruni—at least this is what he claimed—did not dwell on the daily or personal details of Dante's life but drew a more detached picture. We could term it a more *literal* picture. Indeed, in his statements Bruni displays a more mature awareness of how a literary and political figure of the likes of Dante had to be treated by his successors: not as a mawkish lover, or someone who circulated personal details in his writings, but as a man of lofty moral stature. Here, Bruni gives Boccaccio a lesson in historiography that appears to reflect our previous argument. As Boccaccio wrote in the allegorical exegesis of canto 1 of the *Divine Comedy*, the literal method is also the historical one ("litterale, o vero istoriale"), while allegory includes every meaning that goes further, and makes literature understandable and valid to readers of any age. The historical way to portray Dante is precisely the counterpart of Bruni's invitation not to overload literary texts with allegorical interpretation. Texts—as much as life itself—must be interpreted and read for what they are, not for what they supposedly hide.

Through the various nuances of their respective views, Boccaccio's and Bruni's readings of poetry and of Dante demonstrate how slippery was the application of allegory. If in sacred texts before Dante it was clear how to use allegory and to what extent, the *Divine Comedy* (as much as the Homeric poems) forced its readers to tackle the tangled knot of literature and theology. Moreover, the literary novelty of the *Divine Comedy*—its language and its popular success—added further elements to the discussion; therefore, Renaissance critics, firmly but occasionally at the beginning, suggested abandoning the category of allegory so as to preserve the autonomy of fictional texts.

Modern aesthetics was to promote a different reading of poems, and we no longer have to address the question of whether or not Dante visited the Other World in person or whether the *Divine Comedy* is morally questionable. At the same time, we still need to resolve the difficult issues raised by early readers of Dante, whether they were inspired by his theoretical writings or by new reflections. Between the first and the second generation of scholars who

lived after Dante, however, it became clear how powerful allegory was as a critical category even for those who tried to abandon it in theory.

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