

Medieval Matters

by [James Como](#) (December 2020)



Great Malvern, Worcestershire, William Turner

People of the Middle Ages understood implicitly that the currents of our inner life, the very habitation of meaning, heavily influence the color of our outer life. (Maybe that's why they didn't whine.) In that light, this thought: over many decades (beginning well before my stint at Fordham University in the early seventies for a master's degree in Medieval English Literature) I have found many lineaments in the tapestry of medieval life and literature not only attractive but useful (along with the belief that there *is* a tapestry); these nourishments helped shape the world for me, moving from the inside out.

1.

Recalling the charms, terrifying marvels, and especially the convictions and promises of that world, I wonder: rather than the nihilism, solipsism, narcissism, and fraudulence that now have us in meaning deficit, might those medieval patterns of imagination that attracted me—freighted with their power to define and to *point* to something more and wholly other than the here and now—might those patterns in fact re-vitalize mechanisms of definition and vision; that is, resuscitate our collective *imagination*, which, according to C. S. Lewis, *is* the organ of meaning.

There is the travel literature, both actual and fanciful, but that is minor. What aren't minor are the intellectual giants—Thomas Aquinas, Abelard, Occam, St Catherine of Sienna and so many polymaths—who remain (but for the sciences and mathematics) largely unexcelled. Medieval cathedrals continue to inspire awe. (Not flippantly, I could easily include Dante as a cathedral). Mystical and devotional writing—the poetry of St. John of the Cross, Dame Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love*, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Hildegard's "Living Light," and van Ruysbroek's "Wayless Way" and "Teeming Desert" —can still overpower.

As are depictions (even in print) of the Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. These were the center of many medieval mystery, miracle and morality plays that touring companies brought to the countryside, for example the Wakefield cycle of mystery plays, with its *Second Shepherd's Play*. That ends with Mary telling the three shepherds, "The fader of heuen, God omnyotent, / That set all on seuen, is son has he sent . . . And now he is borne. / He kepe you from wo! / I shall pray him so. / Tell furth as ye go, / And myne on this morne." Like Dante they together could speak to the whole of the period.

But like all periods, this one had a prologue. The

Dark Ages (let's say the fourth through the eleventh centuries, A.D., what Curtius calls 'pre-Middle Ages' in his monumental *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages*) are no longer regarded as having been all that dark, nor should they be: it passed along too much intellectual capital, earlier from the Church Fathers, then from bishops, philosophers (there was hardly a work more influential than Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*), and from scholars, for example Isidore of Seville (d.636) and Alcuin (d.804, to many "the most learned man alive" and tutor to the illiterate Charlemagne). Further groundwork was laid by chapel schools and monasteries, those catalytic oases of the preservation and promulgation of knowledge: the bases of the universities-to-come. At first the richness of Anglo-Saxon literature would not figure in the mix, but its day would come.

Certainly 'within the orbit of the moon' (the region of 'mutability' as back then folks thought) the miseries of that next age—the Middle Ages proper—were rampant, from recurring plagues, to the discomfits and dangers of non-existent public health measures, to corporeal sufferings of all kinds, mostly unknown in our age of anti-inflammatories and -biotics, and . . . on and on. We can read all about those and many others in William Manchester's *A World Lit Only by Fire*, or the opposite in Regine Pernoud's *Oh, Those Terrible Middle Ages: Myths Debunked*. But beyond our sublunary precinct there is no quarrelling: out there (some would say *in* there) was permanence, music, and a gathering of sublime creatures moving as though in a dance. Moreover, folk believed that one day they themselves would arrive even beyond *that*. There was the hope that spoke to the inner life we actually live.

Here I'll discuss three other patterns that I find particularly attractive: 1/ training in the seven liberal arts, with an emphasis on rhetoric; 2/ the idea of a quest, with all the commitment and courage that such a search requires, particularly in questing for the Holy Grail; and 3/

what here I'll call the Idea of Correspondence, that is, the cosmos making sense, with influences running up, down and along the circuitry, all communicated by stories embodied best by allegory and sacramentalism (which C.S. Lewis calls opposites but which I call one coin). In merely surveying these three, mostly from ten thousand feet but sometimes at ground level, I hope to evoke some of the beguilement each offers.

2.

In her *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* (1937), intended as a high school text(!), Sister Miriam Joseph describes the trivium: grammar is the art of inventing and combining symbols to express thought (and for Cicero and others the interpretation of texts); logic is the art of clear thinking and the reasoning that issues from it; rhetoric is the art of adapting language to people and circumstances; in order these are the thing as symbolized, the thing as known, and the thing as communicated. (Dorothy L. Sayers put the need for the trivium most urgently in "The Lost Tools of Learning," 1948). Arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy are the quadrivium, and with a touch of esemplastic effort we can see in those both history and philosophy. (Some thinkers have formally added more *artes* to the four.)

The designation 'quadrivium' is first used by Boethius (d.524?) in the early sixth century. These seven arts are implicit in Martianus Capella (d.428, whose book has the loveliest of titles: *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology*). As subjects in a curriculum they stretch back as far as Plato and forward into the early twentieth century. Certainly all the arts, not least rhetoric, can be overdone. The Middle Ages overcooked rhetoric. But a knowledge of basic rhetorical principles makes for good argument, and good argument—systematic, directly expressed, *testable and tested*—gets us closer than platitudes and invective to the

truth of claims about the world embedded in *all* the arts. They *enlarge and direct* the inner life, *psychagogically*: they make us bigger on the inside than on the outside. Moreover, to quote Curtius, "the reception of antique rhetoric was a determining factor of artistic self-expression in the West for long after the close of the Middle Ages."

3.

Getting our minds around the notion of the quest will take some doing. Any quest is also a pursuit of truth, but usually not about worldly claims. Rather it is an adventure-filled search, not unlike that of a person seeking God (knowingly or not) and encountering hopeful signs, obstacles, menaces, despair, mysterious helpers who show up only to disappear, and evil-doing tormentors. No body of literature provides more of these than the Arthurian legendarium, rising in the twelfth century with all its "gourd of legend and fairy tale" (as Auerbach puts it in his magisterial *Mimesis*, 1946), and its inclusion of the quest for the holy grail. The pedigree is well worth noting.

From the Welsh *Mabinogion* (an oral tradition predating the 12th and 13th centuries), to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (early twelfth century), to Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut* (c1155, providing the first mention of the round table and of Excalibur), to Layamon's *Brut* (c.1190) –from one to the other the foundation is laid for Chretien de Troyes in his *Perceval, the Legend of the Grail* (late twelfth century). The medieval end of the line comes with Sir Thomas Malory (much more than a translator and transmitter), who in the fifteenth century gave us the best seller *Le Mort d'Arthur*.

Wace's work remains the most exciting. Arthur encounters a giant, who has dealt Arthur a blow that shatters his shield, making Arthur "marvellously wroth." Now he knows he must use guile, so he skips about, feinting, "till at the

end the king smote him so fiercely with Excalibur that the blade clove to his brain, and he fell." Layamon, though, is more faerie-influenced. "There Uther the king took Ygerne for queen. / Ygerne was with child but Uther the king, / All through Merlin's wiles, ere she was wedded. / The time came that was chosen; then was Arthur born. / As soon as he came on earth fays took him. / They enchanted the child with magic strong: / They gave him the might to be the best of knights; / They gave him another thing, that he should be a mighty king . . . They gave to that royal child right good virtues . . . / This the fays gave him, and thus the child thrived." Along the way is the quest for the Holy Grail.

Chretien's gives us innumerable yarns, many from the *Mabinogion*, which includes another lion (from "The Lady of the Fountain"): "the lion had enough firewood to last three nights . . . and lo, the lion coming towards him with a fine big roebuck. And he slipped it in front of Owein." Arthur himself is ubiquitous. So far, so mysterious: at first the Holy Grail is not definitely identified. It has within it a bleeding lance, it collects the blood from it, it provides food in abundance. Then along comes Malory, who in *Le Mort D'Arthur* dramatizes it. There Jesus himself rises from a holy vessel. "'This is,' said He, 'the holy dish wherein I ate the lamb on Sher-Thursday.'" Galahad, Percival and Bors must find it to heal the Maimed King, the very Fisher King beyond the Wasteland. "Then gave [Jesus] them His blessing and vanished away." So the nature of that grail had been ambiguous. Now it is *sacramental*, an object directly pointing to Christ.

Much earlier the grail had currency in pagan cults, as a source of the food of life; that is, as an object that does not *point* to anything but *is* mysterious in providing abundance. In her *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (1913), Jesse Weston reminds us that the Grail is many things with very many powers (of healing and fertility, for example, and at first not at all holy). Quoting, she records, "for of wood was it

not, nor of any kind of metal nor of stone was it wrought, neither of horn, nor of bone.”

The *Perlesvaus*, with Gawain, Lancelot, Arthur and Perlesvaus himself encountering ceaseless marvels and harrowing adventure, is fraught with allegorical *and* mystical meaning, as with the slaying of the knight's lion. But Weston emphasizes Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Her ritualistic theory of the tale's origins (she would go on to write the very influential *From Ritual to Romance*) depends heavily on Wolfram and retains some purchase, as does her conclusion: “[These are]the remains . . . of what must have been a great and enthralling body of literature [and] as the record of a determined effort to attain, on the lower plane, to a definite and personal knowledge of the Secret of Life. . . . to that intimate and personal contact with the Divine source of Life, in which, in the view of mystics of all ages, is to be found the sole Reality,” a vision which was diffuse.

4.

Our third (and final) medieval feature (a personal favorite) is the model of cosmic correspondences, which Lovejoy in *The Great Chain of Being* and Lewis in *The Discarded Image* (among others) make clear. There was order, but also influences rippling throughout. Bodily humors, emotions, heavenly bodies, earthly elements, the animal kingdom, plagues—nothing was exempt: each had its place and pointed to something beyond itself. Moreover, as St. Bonaventura (13th century) would teach all were at the “ubiquitous center.”

The model is all over the poets, from *The Romance of the Rose* (13th century: highly secular, the rose being female sexuality), to Dante, on to *Everyman*, *Piers Plowman*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gawain endures much hardship to pursue a ferocious green giant, only to discover that his prey is actually a prince named Bercilak. Once within his mysterious castle Gawain, resisting temptation, is not killed,

but, for *feeling* that temptation, is wounded: an inevitable correspondence.

Surely not “the best of all possible worlds” here and now, the dynamic hierarchy of connectedness provided a cosmos, from the Emyrean to us, that was that emblem (though pale), as folks then believed, of what awaited them. It explains allegory. By figuring forth both internal and supernatural elements, this method bore witness to the dynamic ripples that connect outer to inner. Moreover, it was interpretive as well as dramatic and narrative. Beryl Smalley has drawn out this hermeneutic function in her *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (1964). The form also underlay love poetry deriving from royal courts, as Lewis demonstrates in *The Allegory of Love*, by which he means romantic love—no, not quite biblical. Still, both poets and people saw the correspondence, the *fit*.

That fit is described in Denis de Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World* (1940). He elevates allegory to downright mysticism (a feature deserving of more attention than I can give it here). Meister Eckhart (d.1328?) and St. John of the Cross in his *The dark Night of the Soul* (d.1591, late, to be sure, but he *is* Spanish, as Curtius reminds us) are of the type. Their mystical objective is union with God. Or is it ‘communion’? At the end of one of his sermons Meister Eckhart tells us that when “the soul escapes from its nature, its being and its life, and is born into the Divinity, no distinction remains but this: the Divinity is still God, and the soul is still a soul.” Of course, our very own Dark Age will have none of it. Yet, as a transcendence of sheer rationality by way of purgation, illumination, and unity with God (as St. Bonaventure has mapped out for us) the mystical experience *uses* the Dark Night, as we could but mostly do not.

5.

The sheer variety of genres beyond allegory is

astonishing: debates between the unlikeliest of concepts or creatures, devotional irruptions and instruction, speeches by inanimate objects ("The Dream of the Rood" remains heart-breaking), beast fables, marvels of all kinds, and the dream vision! (*Everyman* [c.1500] provides a stock character that lives on.) Chaucer knew the sprawling age better than anyone has known any age, and summed up that outer world supremely; his exuberant invention is unsurpassable. But in one mode he is matched.

No dream-vision sustains its beguilement better, I think, nor more purposefully and seamlessly, than William Langland's *The Vision Concerning Piers Plowman* (late fourteenth century). Conscience, Dowell, Dobetter, Dobest, Wit; Heaven and Hell as towers (one elevated, the other not); social satire, Sin and human weakness; and Piers himself (not the dreamer but a plowman whose task is to get people closer to Heaven) –these are the elements of this alliterative poem divided into 'steps' that include a number of dreams within dreams. The verse is at once exquisitely fluent and irresistibly engaging, combining concrete imagery with lessons: personal, social, and theological. It never fails to bring the reader into the vision.

"In a summer season, when soft was the sun," the dreamer begins, as he wanders the Malvern Hills, "There befell me a marvel of magic, methought. / I was weary" and he falls asleep. Between a handsome tower on a hilltop and a "dungeon-keep" he sees "A fair field full of folk," and there he wanders among "all manner of men, the mean and the high." He partakes of both divine and worldly history, meets Christ and witnesses the harrowing of Hell, which is emptied of "patriarchs and prophets" who sing "*Ecce Agnus Dei!*" Finally, just before the end, we learn that "Lucifer could not look, the light so blinded him, / And those whom Our Lord loved He led into His light."

Here, then, are final thoughts, including my own ‘application’ (as there must be in any decent sermon). We mistakenly take for granted that life works from the outside in, the world influencing our inner lives: depressing, frightening, enlivening, exciting, intimidating, tempting, and providing a simulacrum of meaning (thus our over-investment in ideologies, politics, social media, fashion . . .). But as Daniel J. Mahoney concludes in his *The idol of Our Age*:

By formalizing, restricting, relaxing and refusing his allegiance to Him Who Is, man has set himself at war (a war waged on innumerable fronts) with Being as such, and condemned himself to seek satisfaction in the dissolution and reduction of all Substantiality and Nobility.

So what we need are not bio-pics of celebrities and athletes, or super-hero pseudo-mythologies, or horror tales that pretend to conviction, or more woke college curricula. What we need is to grow our own *cultural* oases, new monasteries for a dark age. (A start would be the reading of great modern myths and mysticism, such as Lewis’s *Perelandra*, especially its magnificent Canticle of the Great Dance, near the very end). Such images, stories, and rhythms incarnate a transcendent belief, nourishing an inner world by pointing to and shaping the outer world and the next one, too.

Medieval man knew that, and that there are more boundaries than those on a map, and that they are permeable. “The vision of this world,” wrote Carolly Erickson in *The Medieval Vision*, is “linked to the vision of the next,” ours being a “graphic model conceived as embracing the geographical locus of unseen truths.” Or, put differently, this world is haunted by Heaven. Without that connectedness we are indeed hollow—and all else a footnote.

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