

The Portrayals of the Universe in Medieval Literature

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Abstract

In this paper, the ways in which the Medieval views of the Universe are treated in the literature of the era are examined. As descriptions of journeys through the Cosmos show the complete view of the Universe this research is devoted specifically to these journeys. In some works such as Chaucer's Troilus and Crisevde, the journeys are a minor part of the work. In others, however, such as Dante's Divine Comedy the journey is the subject of the entire work, and the themes of Medieval cosmology are an integral part of it, so that understanding of the literature is enhanced by an understanding of the Medieval Universe.

Medieval authors sometimes portrayed their concepts of the Universe in their works. In this research, a brief description of the Medieval conception of the Universe and its importance to the literature of the era will be analysed. There will follow an examination of examples of descriptions of the Universe in journey literature, the moral, philosophical, and also religious messages to be found in these descriptions, and finally a brief discussion of the allegorical interpretation of a journey through the Universe with particular reference to Dante's paradise.

Medieval man saw the Universe as a geocentric system, that is, a system centered around the Earth. This conception of the Universe arose out of Greek culture, was systematized by Aristotle, and mathematically refined by Ptolemy. It was this cosmology rather than the Pythagorean heliocentric Cosmos, centred around the Sun, that survived most strongly in the Middle Ages.¹

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¹ Michael Anderson, *Medieval Culture in Europe*. M. et A. Livres, Paris, (1938), p.8.

The system was one of spheres. The Earth was believed to consist of four elements, with Earth in the centre, surrounded respectively by the spheres of water, air, and fire. Around the Earth, there were seven spheres, each containing the planet after which it was named. Moving outwards from the Earth, each sphere encompassed the previous one, these were the spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Around the sphere of Saturn, was the sphere of *Stellatum* (fixed stars). Beyond this was the *Primum Mobile*, ("the first Movable") and beyond this was what Aristotle called "neither place nor void nor time"², but what the Christians believed to be heaven, or God Himself.³

The idea was that the *Primum Mobile*, being the nearest sphere to God, was moved by its "love" for God, and then communicated this motion to the other spheres.⁴ But because each sphere "was further away from the *Primum Mobile* than the sphere around it; the nearer the sphere to the centre of Universe, Earth, the slower its motion."⁵

C.S. Lewis explains a more complicated version, in which he claims that the *Primum Mobile* was believed to move from east to west, completing a revolution every twenty - four hours, while the lower spheres moved in the opposite direction, west to east, at a much slower pace, completing one revolution every 36.000 years. But the motion of these spheres is retarded by the influence of the *Primum Mobile*, which forces them to move east to west, against their natural inclination. The result of this is that as the *Primum Mobile* has "more influence on the outermost sphere than each consecutive sphere inside it, the east-west motion of the *Stellatum* is faster than that of Saturn, which in turn, is faster than each sphere inside. Hence, the nearer the sphere to the Earth, the slower its motion."⁶

Medieval man also believed that in their revolutions, the spheres produced music. Each sphere produced a different note, the fastest sphere, the *Stellatum*, producing the highest, and the slowest, Mercury and Venus together, the lowest. This music of the spheres cannot ordinarily be heard by man on Earth, because his ears are "too mortal" to hear the divine music.⁷

² C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, (1979), p.96.

³ Anderson, p.9.

⁴ Lewis, p.113.

⁵ Anderson, p.10.

⁶ Lewis, p.102.

⁷ Anderson, p.9.

Finally, Medieval people believed that the Earth was in darkness when compared to the light in the Heavens: "God, Himself, is the source of light, and hence the light is brighter in each sphere as they progress away" from the Earth towards the *Primum Mobile*⁸ Later on, the Earth begins to be regarded as the lowest and the least divine of all spheres. The sublunary world, that is below the Moon, is subject to change and decay, whilst all above the Moon are holy, imperishable, and divine.⁹

This Ptolemaic Universe became well accepted in the Middle Ages, and philosophy and theology came to be based upon it. So much was it a part of the philosophy and religion of the time that suggestions of a contrary structure of the Universe were felt to be dangerous to religious beliefs. Theories that the spheres had an elliptical motion rather circular were resisted, as circular motion was held to be perfect motion, and therefore the only suitable movement for a God-created Universe.¹⁰ Similarly, when Copernicus wrote *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs* in 1543, claiming that the Universe was heliocentric, there was an outcry because churchmen felt that the theory destroyed the natural philosophy that had been built upon the geocentric Universe.¹¹

With the Medieval Universe being so much a part of the philosophy and the religion of the age, it is not surprising that it should also be a great part of Medieval literature. Perhaps it is also inevitable that literature, which deals with the theme of Medieval cosmology, should also be concerned with philosophy and theology.

In several works of Medieval literature there are "journey" sequences, in which a soul, or a ghost, or a person, journeys through the cosmos, and due to this privileged position is enabled to view the Universe at first hand. In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer dreams that an eagle approaches him and that he was "flowen fro the ground so hye/ That al the world, as to myn ye, / No more semed than a prikke"¹²

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10..

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.n.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.11.

¹² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Ed.. F.N.Robinson, Oxford University Press, Oxford, (1958), II, 11. 905-907. Hereafter, the references to Chaucer's works will be given in the text.

This is a situation that is quite common in Medieval literature. The usual way for a man to see the Universe was to travel through it to its highest point and from there to look down and survey the Cosmos. In these journeys the traveller would frequently encounter some sort of authoritative figure from whom he would learn some religious or secular doctrine. This theme will be dealt with later. Here, it might be useful to look at some examples of "journey" literature and see how descriptions of the Universe are treated in them.

In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, three verses near the end of the work are devoted to the experiences of Troilus' ghost after he is killed on the battlefield: "And whan that he was slayn in this manere,/His lighte goost ful blisfully is went/ Up to the holughnesse of the eighthe spere (*Troilus and Criseyde*, V, 11.1807-1809).

Chaucer's readers would be so familiar with the nine spheres of the heavens¹³ that they would recognize the eighth sphere as the sphere of fixed stars surrounding the seven spheres of erratic planets. From its position in the *Stellatum*, Troilus' ghost sees and hears: "The erratik sterres, herkenyng armonye/With sownes ful of hevenyssh melodie. (*Troilus and Criseyde*, V, 11. 1812-1813). Here, there is the music of the spheres and the movement of the planets. Chaucer does not need to explain the Cosmos, because it is so much part of the accepted culture of the Middle Ages.

Similarly, in *The Pharsalia: Dramatic Episodes of the Civil Wars*, Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (Lucan) tells of the death of Pompey, and how his great ghost leaves the grave and soars into the heavens:

Pompey basked for a while in the pure
light, admiring the busy planets and the
steadfast stars, and as he glanced below
him, saw what a thick veil of darkness
obscures our day.¹⁴

Again there is the acceptance of the readers' knowledge of the darkness of Earth compared with the light in the heavens, and of the movement of the planets compared with the fixedness of the stars in their sphere. It is the well - known Medieval Universe that Lucan is referring to.

¹³ Anderson, p.16.

¹⁴ M.A. Lucan, *Pharsalia: Dramatic Episodes of the Civil Wars*, Trans. R.Graves, Penguin Books, London, (1956), IX, p.197. Hereafter, the references to this work will be given in the text.

In Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Lady Philosophy speaks of the mind as with "wings on which to lift itself [the mind]"¹⁵ as if it were detached from the body and it travelled upwards from the Earth:

It mounts the air sublunary
And far behind the clouds it leaves;
It passes through the sphere of fire
Which from the ether heat receives,
Until it rises to the stars.

(*The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV, poem 1, p.117,11. 5-9)

Here, Boethius evokes the belief that the Earth is surrounded by the sphere of the Moon, which in turn is surrounded by the sphere of the Sun, and beyond that are the spheres of the erratic stars, i.e. the planets. He describes how the sun takes its heat from the ether, which lies between the sublunary world and the heavens.

Philosophy goes on to talk of the mind leaving the outer sphere, the *Primum Mobile* and reaching Heaven, where God dwells: "For here the King of kings holds sway,/The reins of all things holding tight" (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV, poem 1, p. 117, 11.19-20). Again, Boethius does not feel the need to describe the Cosmos in detail, for it is a Cosmos well - known to his readers.

However, this knowledge must come from somewhere, and some authors have used their works specifically for the purpose of describing the Universe. Cicero's *Republic* was written over a hundred years before Christ, but a particular passage of this work, *The Dream of Scipio*, was well - known in the Middle Ages, mainly due to *Macrobius' Commentary on The Dream of Scipio*, which was circulated during the Medieval era. In *The Dream of Scipio*, Cicero goes into great detail over the construction of the Universe and it is very likely that *The Dream* was one of the sources for Medieval cosmical knowledge.

In the following passage, Cicero's Scipio dreams of being taken on a journey through the Heavens by Africanus, his late grandfather. As they arrive in the

¹⁵ A. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Trans. V.E. Watts, Penguin Books, London, (1969), IV, p. 117. Hereafter, the references to this work will be given in the text.

sphere of fixed stars, Africanus describes the Universe. "All things are connected in nine circles, or rather spheres, of which the outermost which contains all the rest in celestial, and is itself the real Supreme God..."¹⁶ Here, Cicero is expressing the view that perhaps within the *Primum Mobile* lies God. Macrobius, in his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, writes that "when Cicero called the outermost sphere, ... the "Supreme God", he did not mean to imply the first cause and all-powerful God..."¹⁷ In fact, he probably did, but Macrobius subscribed to the theory that God lived beyond outer sphere. He writes of the *Primum Mobile*: "this sphere, the sky, is the creation of soul, and soul emanates from mind, and mind from God, who is totally Supreme" (*Macrobius' Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, I, XVII, 12). He believes that the *Primum Mobile* is not God, but something that was created by God, and that God is beyond this outer sphere. So he twists Cicero's words to make *The Dream of Scipio* fit in with his own ideas. He writes of Cicero: "... he called it "Supreme" with respect to the other spheres... he called it "God" because it is immortal and divine..." (*Macrobius' Commentary on The Dream of Scipio*, I, XVII, 12). This is an implausible explanation of Cicero's meaning, but Macrobius' theory is the one that was accepted in the Middle Ages. In most of the "journey" works, the *Primum Mobile* is subservient to God, not God Himself. Cicero's definition of God was like Plato's - an immortal unchanging being. For Cicero, a planet could be a God, because it does not change or corrupt.¹⁸

Another confusion that can be discerned from a reading of Scipio's *Dream* is that Cicero claims that the seven spheres below the *Stellatum*: "revolve in a contrary direction to that of the celestial sphere" (*Selections from the Ancient Works I The Dream of Scipio*, 4, 8). Macrobius agrees with him on this and goes into great detail about the zodiac in order to prove it (*Macrobius' Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, I, XVIII, 8-9). Anderson claims that the Medieval people believed that the spheres all moved in the same direction, because even though the planetary spheres had a natural inclination to move west to east, the *Primum Mobile* communicated its movement to them and hence forced them to

¹⁶ E.R. Bush (Ed., Trans), *Selections from the Ancient Works*. Humanities Press, London, (1978), 14, 3-5. Hereafter, the references to this work will be given in the text.

¹⁷ Macrobius, *Macrobius' Commentary on The Dream of Scipio*, Trans. W.H.Stahl, Columbia University Press, New York, (1952), I, XVII, 12. Hereafter, the references to this work will be given in the text.

¹⁸ Anderson, p.14.

move from east to west¹⁹ - this is a modification of the theory to fit the observed phenomena.

Cicero also sees the order of the planetary spheres as being different from the order that Aristotle, for instance, perceived. In *The Dream of Scipio*, Africanus lists the spheres in order from the *Stellatum* inwards as Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon (*Selections from the Ancient Works / The Dream of Scipio*, 4, 8-17). Dante and Boethius both list the spheres in this order, so it was obviously the prevalent theory, but Macrobius disagrees. He claims following the guidance of Aristotle, and of Plato, that the Sun inhabits the sphere directly above the Moon, not between the spheres of Venus and Mars. His justification for this is that the Moon is the only planet which "... has no light of its own, but borrows it from the Sun" (*Macrobius' Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, I, XIX, 8) and hence "necessarily lies beneath the source of its light" (*Macrobius' Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, I, XIX, 8). So, one can see that differences did exist over the details of the Universe. But the general picture of the Medieval Universe can be seen in all these works: it is the same geocentric system of spheres.

Cicero also describes, in great detail, the music of the spheres. He explains that the "onward rush and motion" of the spheres "produces various harmonies; for such mighty motion cannot be so swiftly carried on in silence" (*Selections from the Ancient Works / Dream of Scipio*, 5, 5-7) and he explains how the fastest, outer spheres produce the high notes whilst the slower, inner spheres produce the low. He also explains why Man on Earth cannot hear the heavenly music:

... so great is the sound of the whole Universe, turning at the highest speed, that the ears of man cannot catch it, just as you cannot look straight at the Sun, and as your sense of sight is over - powered by his beams.

(*Selections from the Ancient Works / Dream of Scipio*, 5, 23-26)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.23.

Man does not hear the music caused by the movements of the spheres because it is too great for the narrow range of human ears.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, while Dante is in paradise, he can hear the heavenly music: "the unwanted sound"²⁰ until he reaches the sphere of Saturn, at which point the music becomes too great for his ears so that, to Dante "in the reign of this wheel,/No strains of heavenly sympathy arise" (*Divine Comedy I Paradise*, XXI, 11. 58-59). This is an explanatory passage, like Cicero's, although there is some assumption that the reader would know what the music was and how it was made. Dante's *Paradise* is, like *The Dream of Scipio*, an example of "journey" literature that is used to describe the construction of the Universe. As *Paradise* will be discussed fully later, the examples from it will be pointed out then.

Although Plato, like Cicero was writing in the years before Christ, his works had great influence over the Medieval people, and his theories were partly accepted. In *The Vision of Er* in Book X of *The Republic*, Plato recounts the story of Er, a man who had died in battle but revived later to tell of his experiences in the world beyond. He, too, travelled into the heavens to obtain a privileged view of the Universe, and he sees it, not as a system of spheres, but as a system wherein eight "whorls"-that is, hallowed out half-spheres: "lying within one another, showing their rims as circles from above and forming the continuous back of a single whorl."²¹ So, one sees a surprising difference in the ideas expressed in ancient Greece and the ideas that actually survived into the Middle Ages.

Plato's aim in *The Republic* is, again, that of instruction. He wished to describe the Universe in detail to his readers. There is a division among these writers who use the journey motif in their works. Some use it to put across their teachings about the construction of the Universe and some just make momentary mention of aspects of the Universe that their readers would be expected to know about.

But, even in those works where the mention of the Universe is only momentary, descriptions of its construction are often allied to some sort of moral or didactic purpose. Frequently, the travellers through the Universe are escorted

²⁰ A.Dante, *The Divine Comedy: 3: Paradise*, Trans. D.L.Sayers and B.Reynolds, Penguin Books, London, (1962), I, p.82. Hereafter, the references to this work will be given in the text.

²¹ Plato, *The Republic*, Vol. 2, Trans. P.Shoney, William Heinemann Books, London, (1963), X, I, p.201. Hereafter, the references to this work will be given in the text.

on their travels by some sort of authoritative figure (Lady Philosophy in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*; Beatrice in Dante's *Paradise*; Africanus in Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*), who describe the order of the Universe to them and tell them what religious or philosophical moral is to be drawn from this order.

But even in those works without an obvious aim at teaching, morals can be discerned. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, Troilus' ghost looks down from the Heavens and sees:

This litel spot of erthe, that with the se
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wrecched world, and held al vanite
To respect of the pleyn felicite
That is in Hevene above;

{*Troilus and Criseyde*, V, II. 1815-1819}

Troilus' ghost sees how small and vain Earth is when compared to the Heavens; and it is a deliberate reminder, from Chaucer to the readers, of the insignificance and sinfulness of earthly life, when set beside the divine life for comparison. Chaucer has exploited the telling of this journey into the Heavens in order to make this moral point. Troilus' ghost laughed at those who were weeping over his death: "... al oure werk that foloweth so/The blynde lust, the which that may nat lasted And sholden al oure herte on heven caste" (*Troilus and Criseyde*, V, II. 1823-1825).

A similar theme can be seen in Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*. From his vantage point in heaven, Scipio looks down upon the Earth and notices its smallness: "Then the Earth appeared to me so small that I was ashamed of our empire which is, so to speak, but a point on its surface" (*Selections from the Ancient Works I Dream of Scipio*, 3, 46-47). Scipio realizes that the Roman empire of which he was so proud is, in fact, nothing more than an insignificant spot on the surface of a minute Earth. Cicero is emphasizing like Chaucer, the tiny size of the Earth compared to the Universe, hence its inferiority and unimportance.

But Scipio finds it hard to take his eyes away from the Earth, for which he is rebuked by Africanus, who reminds him of the short-lived state of earthly glory. Africanus compares the divine year, which he describes as the period of time it takes for the pattern of all the stars to complete one revolution so that they

return to their original positions in relation to each other, with the earthly year, which is one complete revolution by the Sun alone. This reinforces the idea of earthly insignificance, for what is a century to man is but a fraction of a divine year. Africanus asks: "... of how little value is that glory among men which can hardly last for a tiny part of a year?" (*Selections from the Ancient Works / Dream of Scipio*, 7, 23-24) and he advises Scipio to:

contemplate this resting place [i.e. heaven] and eternal home, and neither concern yourself with the talk of the common herd, nor place your hope in human rewards for your exploits...

(*Selections from the Ancient Works / Dream of Scipio*, 7, 25-27)

It appears that Chaucer repeats Cicero because Cicero's message also indicates that man must look for heaven not for earthly rewards. The instruction is not only to Scipio, but also to the readers, and it is an example of how stories of journeys through the Cosmos are used to convey a moral message or to teach the readers.

In Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, there is a similar moral message. This, of course, is a didactic work overall, for it teaches much about philosophy and the order of the Universe through the form of dialogue between the pupil, Boethius, and his teacher Lady Philosophy. It is a frequently used device and similar methods can be seen in *The Dream of Scipio* and in Dante's *Paradise* where the confused and ignorant pupil is guided and lectured by the superior teacher.

However, the first poem of Book IV of Boethius *Consolation of Philosophy* is of particular relevance to the subject of the Universe, and Lady Philosophy describes the journey of the mind towards heavens.

For I have swift and speedy wings
With which to mount the lofty skies,
And when thy mind has put them on
The Earth below it will despise:

(*The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV, poem 1, p.117,II.1-4)

Hence one can see the recurrence of the idea that once one has experienced the Heavens one will despise the Earth for its insignificance and sinfulness, and Lady Philosophy points out that once one has realized that one's home is heaven: "Dictators whom the people fear, / Will outcasts seem of home bereft" (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV, poem 1, p. 118, II. 29-30). This has particular relevance to Boethius because he has suffered at the hands of a dictator, but the message is that men on Earth are unimportant and from the vantage point of heaven one can see them in their true perspective, as souls who have not realized that their home and their hopes lie in heaven. Again, a journey through the Cosmos is being used to convey a moral teaching.

Other lessons can be taught by being integrated with descriptions of the Universe. In Plato's *Republic*, *The Vision of Er* is heavily weighted with didacticism. Er, in his journey through the heavens, witnesses the judgement of souls, with the sinful beings sent to hell and the righteous allowed to continue their journey to heaven. At a meeting of these souls:

... they told their stories to one another,
the one lamenting and wailing as they
recalled how many and how dreadful
things they had suffered... while those
from heaven related their delights and
visions of beauty beyond words.

(*Republic*, X, XII, p. 495)

This is an obvious warning to the readers of the perils of hell and delights of heaven, and there are direct messages in the words of the prophet who acts as Er's instructor and guide in this piece of "journey" literature. The prophet tells Er, that man must "... make a reasonable choice between the better and the worse life, with his eyes fixed on the nature of his soul" (*Republic*, X, XV, p.511). Plato, presumably, hoped to encourage his readers to take note of the fact that they would be rewarded for righteousness and punished for evil, and so to act accordingly.

The notion of rewards and its link with virtue is another topic that can be seen in works that deal with the construction of the Universe. For example, in *Pharsalia*, Lucan tells of Pompey's ghost travelling through the Universe and in his description, writes:

These frontier regions of air between the Earth and the Moon's orbit, ... are where the souls of heroes from all over the world, collected after death - such at least, as one fitted by the flame-like quality of their virtue to survive in the lower tracts of heaven among the eternal spheres.

(*Pharsalia*, IX, p.197)

Lucan is saying that heroes have their place in heaven, albeit only in the "lower tracts of heaven", but only if they are virtuous enough. It is another reminder that virtue is necessary to obtain the rewards of heaven in the after-life. The fact that Lucan feels that heroes deserve a place in heaven is a reflection of his own preferences. Cicero, too, seems to value heroes highly, for in *The Dream of Scipio*, he writes: "... for all who have saved, helped, or enlarged their country there is a particular place marked off in heaven" (*Selections from the Ancient Works I The Dream of Scipio*, 3, 2-4) and again Africanus tells Scipio: "The noblest tasks concern the well-being of your country: a soul busy and occupied in such matters will speed more swiftly to this resting place, its home [heaven]" (*Selections from the Ancient Works I The Dream of Scipio*, 9, 7-9).

To Cicero the most important virtue is helping one's own country. He adds some vices for which men will be punished:

... the souls of those who have given themselves up to the pleasures of the body, ... and ... have broken the laws of gods and men, when they have left their bodies fly around the Earth itself, and do not return to this place except after many ages of torment.

(*Selections from the Ancient Works I The Dream of Scipio*, 9, 12-17)

Here, again, is a warning to the reader of the punishments for the wicked, but Cicero's concentration on heroism and patriotism suggests that this treatise was not so much directed at the common folk as at people in a position to be heroic and patriotic.

The Universe is constructed in a moral plan in that it moves according as laws-man's laws are a reflection of the universal order.²² So, one can see the way in which moral teachings are allowed to creep into discussion on the construction of the Universe. Quite often, these descriptions of the cosmology are used specifically for the purpose of getting across philosophic or religious messages. But even deeper meanings can be seen in some types of "journey" literature as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Douglas Bush claims that Medieval man saw everything in the Universe, concrete or abstract, as related, directly or by analogy, to everything else. For example, the Earth with its rivers and grass is reflected in man with his veins and hair:²³

Because of this general belief in the divine unity of all creation, natural objects were seen not so much in themselves but as emblems or allegories of moral, religious and metaphysical truth.²⁴

Is this true? Was the entire Medieval conception of the Universe an allegory of the religious and philosophical ideas of the time? It has already been discussed that the scientific discoveries of the nature of the Universe were resisted because they were threatening the theology based upon the accepted structure. It has also been seen how the Earth being at the centre of the Universe reinforces its "baseness" compared to the rest of the planets. Can one go so far as to say that the geocentric Universe symbolizes, among other things, the religious belief that man is inferior to angels? It is true that descriptions of the Universe are rarely used without some link with moral and philosophical teachings. One cannot know whether Medieval people really believed in the literal structure of the Universe or whether they accepted it figuratively as a representation of these teachings. But it is true that allegorical meanings can be seen in many works that deal with the descriptions of the Universe.

Light is frequently used as a symbol of God. In many cases, the brightness of the light increases as the traveller moves further towards God, and Earth is the place most removed from and least influenced by God and is the darkest point of

²²Anderson, p.16.

²³*Ibid.*, p.17.

²⁴Douglas Bush, *Science and English Poetry*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, (1956), p.81.

the Universe. In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius calls God: "The lord of all things shining bright" (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV, poem 1, p. 117, 1.22) and talks of "the lightless Earth" (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV, poem 1, p. 118, 1.28). In *The Pharsalia*, Lucan says that "... our dark atmosphere impugns on the strong brightness of the heavens" (*Pharsalia*, X, p. 197) stressing the darkness of Earth compared with the light in the heavens. Lucan also writes: "Pompey basked for a while in the pure light... and as he glanced below him, saw what a thick veil of darkness obscures our day" (*Pharsalia*, IX, p. 197). Both Boethius and Lucan are using the common symbol of God as light. Because of this image there is a suggestion of revelation, of illumination. As man moves towards God he can see more clearly because he understands better.

In both Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* and Dante's *Paradise*, the Sun is designated as the place from which God's light shines on Man. Cicero says that the Sun is "... regulator of the other lights, the mind and guiding principle of the Universe, of such magnitude that he reveals all things with his light" (*Selections from the Ancient Works I The Dream of Scipio*, 4, 13-15). Here, Cicero sees the Sun as the "mind" of the Universe. It sends out its beams of light but symbolically those beams are mental illumination, through which man understands. The Sun "reveals all."

The same image is used in *The Paradise*. Dante's arrival in the sphere of the Sun is seen by Dorothy L. Sayers as a representation of the first stage in his journey towards ultimate faith.²⁶ If Dante's entire journey is seen as an allegory of his moral development, then the arrival at the sphere of the Sun symbolizes his intellectual conviction of the truth. In the sphere of the Sun, Dante feels: "Never was man's heart with such great eagerness / Devoutly moved to make his whole self over / To God, ..." (*Divine Comedy I Paradise*, X, II. 55-57). The Sun was seen to illuminate Dante's mind. One notes the emphasis on mind by both Dante and Cicero. The Sun was seen as the "mind" of the Universe by both. It is notable that in Dante the sphere of the Sun is the dwelling place of the philosophers and wise men, but this will be discussed fully later.

Another element of symbolism that is integral to "journey" literature is that of the journey itself. A journey through the Heavens, from Earth towards God, can be seen as some sort of representation of the journey of the mind or the soul

²⁵ Anderson, p.17.

²⁶ Sayers and Reynolds (Trans.), *Critical Notes*, p. 139.

to religious faith: the Beatific Vision. God is seen as the source for everything in the Universe. Can this symbolize the belief that every one should strive to reach God, and that their destination is faith?

In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius calls God: "My home, my source, my ending too" (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV, poem 1, p.118, 1.26) and says of the dictators on Earth that they are "... of home bereft" (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV, poem 1, p.118, 1.30). He means that they have not realized their true destination which should be towards God not towards earthly riches and glory. By describing the journey in physical terms Boethius can be seen to be symbolizing the spiritual belief that illumination is the ultimate aim.

But the most important example of journey-allegory must be Dante's *Paradise*. Dante writes of the work:

O you that follow in light cockle-shells
 For the songs sake, my ship that sails before,
 Coming her course and singing as she sails
 Turn back and seek the safety of the shore.

(*Divine Comedy I Paradise*, II, 11. 1-4)

Here he is telling those readers who are only looking for beautiful poetry to stop reading. But he has a different instruction for others: "But you, rare souls, that have reached up to seize/ Betimes the bread of angels, food for men/To live on here, whereof no surfeit is" (*Divine Comedy I Paradise*, II, 10-13). Those who have studied philosophy and theology (that is, the "bread of angels" and "food for man..." may read these subjects. This suggests more to the poem than just general poetry.

As Dante moves towards God his understanding and love strengthen. In the beginning he is in complete confusion, his understanding is poor. Beatrice tells him that he has dull wit and false imagination (*Divine Comedy I Paradise*, I, 11.88-90) and when he is enlightened, he thinks: "... my first bewilderment despatched / By these few smiling words, was more perplexed / Now, by a new one which I promptly hatched (*Divine Comedy I Paradise*, I, 11. 94-96). And each time he enters a new sphere, he is faced with more problems. He asks questions, Beatrice gives him answers and each time he is progressing towards a

deeper understanding of theology. As it was seen, in the sphere of the Sun he feels an overwhelming impulse to "make his whole self / O'er to God" (*Divine Comedy I Paradise*, X, 1.7). There is a definite impression of Dante's increasing understanding, and this can be seen as part of his development towards illumination.

This growth of understanding can easily be seen as an allegorical representation of spiritual development. Whether it symbolizes Dante's own development as he actually experienced it, or is a general representation of anybody's spiritual development, it is difficult to say. For example, in the last Canto of *The Paradise*, Dante experiences a vision of God and of the truth: "For now my sight, clear and yet clearer grown, / Pierced through the ray of that exalted light, / Wherein, as in itself, the truth is known" (*Divine Comedy / Paradise*, XXXIII, 11. 52-54). Dante describes the vision in realistic detail. He compares it to a dream, waking from which, the dreamer feels: "It's passion yet imprinted on the heart/Although all else is cancelled from the mind" (*Divine Comedy I Paradise*, XXXIII, 11.58-60). Dante still feels the "passion" that the vision conjured up in him although he cannot remember exactly what he saw. This is such a realistic description that one wonders if Dante actually experienced such a vision himself. Or is this just a representation of every persons' moment of vision, the moment in which everything becomes clear to them and they trust implicitly in the existence of God? Either way, this vision experienced by the traveller through the Universe must be a symbol of divine revelation and of the end of the journey towards God.

It might be useful, now, to look at the allegory of the *Paradise* in more detail. As it was discussed before, the way of Dante's journey through the Heavens can be seen as an allegory of spiritual development. Furthermore, in each sphere that Dante passes, he encounters souls who display different faults and virtues. These souls are, perhaps, the representations of different stages in this spiritual development.

For example, the sphere of the Moon is inhabited by the souls of those who were inconstant to their vows on Earth. Therefore, the first stage is still flawed by inconstancy. One of the souls, Piccarda tells Dante: "This lot which seems but a lowly house, / Is given to us because we did withal / Neglect and partly fulfil our vows (*Divine Comedy I Paradise*, III, 11. 55-57). Piccarda herself describes how she entered a convent, but was forced to marry by her brother and hence broke her vows. Her fault was weak will and inconstancy to religious vows.

The next sphere, Mercury, is inhabited by the souls of those men who were great leaders on Earth:

Virtuous souls this little star began,
 Who busied in good actions, sought the praise
 And honour that should live on after them;
 And when desire would scale these heights and strays
 Thus from the path, true love must rise
 To its objective with less lively rays

(Divine Comedy/Paradise, VI, 11.112-117)

These souls are guilty of pride, and pursuit of earthly glory. Anderson points out that Mercury is so near the Sun that it is often not seen from Earth, and that allegorically this is appropriate to the souls in Mercury, for their glory is completely overshadowed by the glory of God which, is transmitted through the Sun.²⁷ The use of the God as light image is portrayed once again.

The same process is carried on through each sphere. Each one represents faults and virtues by presenting souls who share these attributes. Venus represents passion and lust in the shape of extravagant lovers. The Sun is inhabited by great philosophers and wise men such as Solomon, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Boethius. This links with the idea of the Sun as the symbol of intellectual illumination, for these are men whose speciality is the mind, especially its enlightenment. Mars displays the souls of warriors who died for their beliefs. In the sphere of Jupiter, the souls of the Just spell out the sentence "love justice, ye that judge the Earth" (*Divine Comedy/ Paradise, VI, 1.130*) showing Jupiter as the representative of justice. The sphere of Saturn displays to Dante the souls of great thinkers.

The progression from soldiers to men of justice, to philosophers signifies the progression in virtue that Dante perceived. To him spiritual contemplation is the highest stage on the journey towards God. Having passed through this stage, Dante arrives at the sphere of fixed stars from which he can look down at the whole Universe below him: "So with my vision I kept on travelling/ The seven planets till this globe I saw / Where at I smiled it seemed so poor a thing (*Divine*

Anderson, p. 18.

Comedy, XXII, 11. 133-135). One notices the emphasis on the small size of the Earth. In the allegory of *The Paradise* it is only after passing through a period of spiritual contemplation that man can see the world in its true proportions. The allegory is a closely worked out and detailed exposition of the development of the mind as it moves towards a position of faith.

When in the sphere of the Moon, Dante asks, as the author, why the souls appear to him in this sphere; he believed, as the persona, that the souls of the blessed all lived among the stars, as Plato taught. Beatrice explains: "They are shown thee here, not that they here reside,/... their Heavenly mansion/Being least exalted, is thus signified" (*Divine Comedy/Paradise*, IV, 11. 37-39). The souls do in fact live among the stars, but they are being presented to Dante in the spheres in order to signify their less exalted state compared to these souls living in the spheres above them. By arranging the souls in different spheres their hierarchy is indicated. Beatrice goes on to say: "This way of speech best suits your apprehension,/Which knows but to receive reports from sense/And fit them for the intellect's action" (*Divine Comedy/Paradise*, IV, 11.40-42). Dante believes that he now understands things better, but Beatrice tells him that if he can perceive things for the sake of knowledge, they will be presented to him in such a way that his understanding will be broadened. This is a description of allegory: showing something abstract in physical form. It must be significant in a work such as *The Paradise* is. Dorothy L. Sayers says

Dante intends the reader to understand the literal meaning and the imagery of the *Divine Comedy* in the same way. Using means similar to those of scripture and religious art, Dante renders Paradise intelligible in terms of sense, imagination, and intellect.²⁸

The passages in which Beatrice describes the methods she is using to allow Dante, the persona, to understand can be seen as a direct reference to the methods Dante, the author, is using to allow his readers to understand. Dante draws the comparison between this type of allegory and the symbolism of religious art and scripture. Beatrice also talks about Plato's *Timaeus*. She claims that in this work Plato was speaking symbolically rather than literally. She says: "Yet he may not have meant to be guided/By the word's surface sense" (*Divine*

²⁸ Sayers and Reynolds (Trans.), *Critical Notes*, p.87.

Comedy/Paradise, IV, 11. 55-56). She thinks that men may have interpreted the work wrongly because they look its meaning literally rather than in a figurative context. To use a passage like this is a work that is so obviously open to allegorical interpretation must be a deliberate stressing of the similarity on Dante's part. Hence, one sees the inevitability of interpreting *The Paradise* in an allegorical manner.

In Medieval literature some descriptions of the Universe can be interpreted allegorically. The simple belief that each sphere was higher than the previous can be seen as a representation of the ascending divinity of the spheres as they come nearer to God. But, this does not mean that the literal interpretation of these descriptions was believed to be merely a physical representation of some intangible concept. The Medieval people actually believed that the Universe was in the form of spheres around the Earth. Even though they might see the allegorical meanings behind the Universe, they still trusted the Ptolemaic structure.

In conclusion, the ways in which descriptions of the Universe are treated have shown that the most comprehensive of them are to be found in those works where a soul, ghost, or person, travels through the Universe, often accompanied by a guide who serves as teacher to the traveller, and he in his travels is enabled to view the structure of the Cosmos.

The ways in which the theme of the Universe in "journey" literature can be read have already been discussed; firstly, simply as straight-forward descriptions, or in some cases mere references to the Cosmos where detailed description is felt to be unnecessary. Secondly, as an introduction to certain lessons in theology and philosophy, and finally as allegorical representations of theological and philosophical beliefs.

One can see from this that the theme of the Universe was popular in Medieval literature and that it was used for several layers of meaning. It cannot be denied that the Medieval conception of the Universe was highly important to many aspects of the thought of the era and therefore it was inevitable that it should play such a role in the literature of the Middle Ages.

Öz

Ortaçağ Edebiyatında Evren Tasvirleri

Bu yayında devrin edebiyatında Ortaçağ evreninin işlenme tarzları araştırılmaktadır. Evrene yapılan seyahatlerin tasvirleri, evrene tam bir bakış açısı sergilediğinden araştırma özellikle bu seyahatlere adanmıştır. Bazı yapıtlarda, sözgelimi, Chaucer'in Troilus and Crisevde'sinde, seyahatler eserde ikinci derecede bir rol alırlar. Dante'nin Divine Comedy'si gibi diğer eserlerde ise seyahat, tüm yapıtın konusudur ve Ortaçağ evrenbiliminin temaları eserin ayrılmaz bir parçasıdır ve böylelikle edebiyatın anlamı, Ortaçağ evrenini anlamakla artar.

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