

## ALAIN DE LILLE

To the best of modern scholarship it is believed that Alain de Lille was born sometime in the years 1116 or 1117, but this is just an estimate. Nor is his death determined with more certainty than the years 1202-03. Around the 1140s Alain attended first the School of Paris, then the School of Chartres, studying with the likes of Peter Abelard, Gilbert de Poitiers and Thierry de Chartres, as we are told by John of Salisbury. He lived and taught in Paris, then Montpellier, Southern France, and spent his last years in the monastery of Cîteaux, the mother abbey of the Cistercians. His stay among the Cistercians was one of the key moments in the life of the institution, and it marked the passing of the Platonic stream from Chartres, in its sunset phase, to the Cistercians.

The turning point leading to Alain's Cistercian experience is narrated in the form of a legend, which offers deep insight into this historical figure. At this important time in his life Alain was planning to deliver a sermon on the Trinity. Before the appointed time, he chanced upon a child who was spooning water out of the Seine into a hole. When asked what he was doing, the child answered that he wanted to empty the Seine into the hole. "But it will take you an eternity," retorted Alain, to which the child replied, "I will be done here long before you are finished with your explanation of the Trinity." Humbled by the experience, Alain reassessed his life and values, and decided to become the swineherd of Cîteaux.

Alain had entered the Cistercian order in which Platonism continued to live now that the sun had set over Chartres, and his presence among the Cistercians strengthened the order. Coincidentally, this was the time in which Chartres's heritage was cast in stone in its famous Gothic cathedral. A time was coming to an end, and Alain de Lille himself was aware of it. He was a last representative of a knowledge destined to fade in order to give way to the more intellectual pursuits of the Aristotelian-inspired Dominicans. Steiner reminds us that even the name by which Alain is remembered, Alanus ab Insulis, points to the island of Hibernia, and to a legacy of its past Mysteries.<sup>1</sup>

Alain de Lille had a considerable literary output, consisting mostly of philosophical/moral allegories, theological treatises and sermons. Because of his wide knowledge he was known as Doctor Universalis. His most well-known works are *De Planctu Naturae* (The Complaint of Nature) and *Anticlaudianus*; both of them could be called moral treatises, and both are written in Latin verse.

From his days in Paris, Alain had acquired a deep knowledge of Aristotelian dialectic. Hints of it are present in his writing *Summa Quoniam Homines* in which Alain indicates a stage of the future in which humanity will reach direct spiritual vision. He sees this as a science that is also perception of the truth of things; a science that includes an inner resonance and knowledge of the deeper causes. Here Alain strives towards Aristotelianism, and what can later derive from it: an intuitive knowledge that means union between the knower and the object being known. He calls this "theophania," something that resembles the way in which angels know. For Alain this stage was first realized in Mary.

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<sup>1</sup> Steiner, *Ancient Myths: Their Meaning and Connection with Evolution*, lecture of Dec 30, 1917.

In his most famous and quoted opus, the *Anticlaudianus*, he comes back to his previous assessment of dialectic and logic, showing what he sees as their limits, and distancing himself from Aristotle, whom he previously admired. He now gives his preference to Plato. Let us see how.

### Anticlaudianus

As in the *De Planctu Naturae*, the moral element weaves throughout the *Anticlaudianus*. Among the vices, continuous reference is made to homosexuality as the sin that for Alain de Lille most clearly exemplified going against Natura's union of the opposites. In fact, sexual imagery is used to the other extreme to exemplify the gifts of the Goddess Natura—witness these verses: “Her curved flanks, yielding to fit restraint, unite the upper and the lower parts of her body, the head and the feet. Who does not know that beneath these, other and better things lie hidden to which the quiet exterior serves but as an introduction.”<sup>2</sup> The greatest bliss is reached in the union of opposites. Sexual innuendo points to that within the limits of earthly language, both in the positive and in the negative.

Before turning to the journey at the heart of the *Anticlaudianus*, let us consider some key ideas which summarize much of Chartres neo-Platonism: first the role of Natura in the scheme of creation, then the contrast between logic/dialectic and rhetoric, which is echoed in the characterizations of Aristotle and Plato respectively.

### *Logic and “Paintings”*

God established the network of secondary causes, defined their domain and oriented their field of action, then gave autonomy to them and ceased intervening in it. Natura represents this system both in the physical and in the moral order. Thus all virtues spring from Natura. Among them are Concord, Laughter, Temperance, Reason, Decorum, Prudence, Piety, Sincerity, Nobility. Two key virtues are Reason and Prudence. Prudence is the only one to have also a Greek name, Phronesis.

Natura can perfect the human being in so far as he is of the earth. “The mortal body recognizes our [Natura's] anvil, calls for our artisans and our art; the birth of a soul demands other artisans.”<sup>3</sup> And further, “However, the hand of God himself will make good what the norm of Nature leaves below the standard of perfection. What nature makes, the divine Artist will perfect. The Divine creates from nothing. Nature makes mortal things from some material...”<sup>4</sup> In the *Complaint of Nature* we hear, “He is the Creator of my work, I am the work of the Creator; He works from nothing, I beg work from another; He works by His own divine will, I work under His name.”<sup>5</sup> This separation of tasks reappears clearly in the whole imagination that is the *Anticlaudianus*.

Logic appears in clear contrast to rhetoric, and the same is amplified when Alain de Lille describes the role of imaginations, which are at the center of his rhetoric power. This is what makes him an orator and theologian, not a philosopher in the same way as

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<sup>2</sup> Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus, or the Good and Perfect Man*, 57.

<sup>3</sup> Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 60.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> Alain de Lille, *The Complaint of Nature*, Douglas M Moffat translator, 29.

Thomas Aquinas.

In many places logic is given its due in Alain's master opus, but hardly ever without a touch of irony, as in the following, which compares the role of imaginations (paintings) and logic: "Thus this art's [painting] power subtly checks logic's arguments and triumphs over logic's sophisms [and Alain has nothing positive to say about Sophists]. Logic gives proof, painting creates; logic argues, painting brings to pass everything that can exist. Thus, both wish the false [illusory] to appear true but painting pursues this end more faithfully."<sup>6</sup>

In the quote above we can recognize both Alain's appreciation of and bias against logic. Tradition incorporates logic into the liberal arts; Alain has a split mind about her. In his description of logic, an antipathy creeps in that is not present with the others. Just hear the words: "...the face suffered here and there of a certain leanness. The leanness entrenches it and, entrenched by this leanness, it is deep hollowed, and dry skin is wed to fleshless bones. ... Her hair, struggling in a kind of dispute, twists its way far down and unruly strands indulge in a tasteless sprawl. No comb restrains it, no clamping buckle holds it fast, no scissors' bite cuts it short."<sup>7</sup> It is a description in striking contrast to the other six liberal arts, in which Alain uses only imagery of harmony. One can definitely sense that he struggles in coming to terms with her. Compare the above description with that of rhetoric, which is central to Alain's work and art: "The maiden in like manner traces many a flower on the axle and with fresh blooms makes the steel grow young again. Though steel [of the axle that logic builds for the chariot] is usually rigid with stiffness of cold and reminds one of deep Winter's frost, this steel knows no Winter, leaves behind its congenial cold, establishes its claim to the smiling joys of Spring and with its pattern of flowers sets before us a view of meadow."<sup>8</sup>

Logic is contrasted with the role of "paintings," or imaginations. The virtues are represented imaginatively as maidens, and their robes or garments carry paintings (imaginings). The constant reference to Greek mythology serves the same purpose; it speaks of esoteric content imaginatively. And about the nature of the imaginings present in the home of Natura (in particular one portraying "men's character") it is said, "Oh painting with your new wonders! What can have no real existence comes into being and painting, aping reality and diverting itself with a strange art, turns the shadows of things and changes lies to truth." And again, speaking about the limits that Reason reaches in the realm of the fixed stars, the poet comments: "What the tongue cannot tell the picture does: how language, since it fails to reach the essence of God, grows senseless when it tries to express things divine, loses its power of communicating and tries to take refuge in its old meaning."<sup>9</sup>

What is said about logic continues in Alain's appreciation of Aristotle. Here again the contrast is still present, though it finds some higher degree of resolution: "Aristotle, the disturber of words, is here [in the painting of logic]; he disturbs many of us by his turbulence and rejoices that he is obscure. He treats logic in such a way that he gives the impression of not having treated it..."<sup>(24)</sup> And the superiority of Plato is finally expressed: "In that mural [one portraying "men's character" in Natura's home] Aristotle prepares

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<sup>6</sup> Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 90.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

arms for the logician and presents his school of logic, but Plato's profound mind has a more inspired vision of the secrets of heaven and earth and he tries to search the mind of God."<sup>10</sup>

### *The Journey*

The *Anticlaudianus* is expressed in the form of a journey from earth to heaven conducted with the goal of fashioning the "new man." It starts with the building of the chariot that will carry the poet to the realm of the fixed stars and beyond.

The seven liberal arts fashion the chariot for the journey; Prudence/Phronesis coordinates the work. Once the chariot is ready, Reason, "reminded and instructed by mistress Natura," presents Phronesis with horses. These are the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. About hearing, Alain says that he is "inferior to the first [sight] and rates lower in appearance," but also "superior to the others, and first among them by his quality of beauty."<sup>11</sup> Here, and later in the poem, is a reference to the superiority of the power of inspiration, which comes through the sense of hearing, over that of Reason, which sees.

Now the chariot is fashioned by the seven liberal arts, represented as maidens, and it can start its journey. The *trivium* builds the chariot itself; the *quadrivium* shapes the four wheels. The travelers first move through the "regions of Air." Here they meet "an Angel, barred from the hall of the heavenly kingdom, dethroned from his seat, broken by his vaunting, cast down by his pride, ruined by his envy, pays for his sin by exile and for his guilt by suffering,"<sup>12</sup> a clear reference to Lucifer.

In a second step the chariot moves through the regions of Ether, "the higher realm where brightness [light] and fire hold sway." In this region Prudence can hear a sort of lower music of the spheres (the sound of the celestial harp). This is in fact the region of the Moon. This is followed by the region of the Sun, and the other planets follow. Mars is described as a region of strife. The sixth region, that of Jupiter, stands in stark contrast to Mars and is compared to the "happiness of unending spring."<sup>13</sup> The chariot proceeds to the seventh region, that of Saturn, again in sharp contrast to Jupiter: "There winter is feverish. ... Here grief groans, tears, discord, terror, sadness, wanness, mourning, injustice hold sway."<sup>14</sup>

Beyond Saturn, the eighth stage of the journey leads to the realm of the fixed stars, and the higher spiritual world. Here the constellations of the zodiac are named and "Phronesis' eye enjoys this view of the heavens which her sight cannot penetrate; she misses the familiar matter and is stunned by the wonder of so much light."<sup>15</sup> However, she is perplexed, and her spirit falters, not managing to find a fixed point of reference. The reader may remember that Alain had sought to dazzle with the intellect, and, legend has it, a child had derided him along the banks of the Seine, before he turned back to the simple and modest life of the Cistercians. This is also borne out by the rest of Alain's comments in relation to what leads a man to understand what lies in this region: "Not

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<sup>10</sup> Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 95.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 134.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 138.

nobility of lineage, not the charm of beauty, ...not unrestrained temerity leads thither but virtue of soul, constancy of mind, nobility attained not by birth but cultivated in the heart, interior beauty, a host of virtues, *rule of life, poverty in worldly goods, contempt of position*” (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup> In the last one or two lines Alain seems to speak of what happened to him in turning to the Cistercian life.

When the travelers try to move into the realm of the fixed stars, obstacles arise. First of all, the horses cannot move further; they refuse to draw the chariot. The senses cannot go any further, and Reason cannot rein them in. Phronesis herself is torn by conflicting feelings. A maiden approaches her; it is Theology. She describes how this realm lies far beyond the reach of reason, and expresses it thus: “He [God] is the just without justice, living without life, beginning without beginning, end without end, measureless without measure...”<sup>17</sup>

Past the realm of the fixed stars the chariot enters the sphere of the Trinity. And here Phronesis meets with Noys (Nous), “Queen of the pole, goddess of heaven, daughter of the Master above...” Phronesis addresses in prayerful petition the queen of the pole, who asks her to leave the chariot and horses behind under the protection of Reason. If they were to attempt to go further “...Reason would falter and the chariot reel.”<sup>18</sup> At this point lies an important change of consciousness of which Alain speaks thus: “But abandoning things petty, I now pluck a mightier chord and laying aside entirely the role of poet [rhetoric], I appropriate a new speaking part, that of the prophet.” And at the same time he adds, “I will be the pen in this poem, not the scribe or the author.”<sup>19</sup> He is in effect telling us that we are in the realm of Inspiration. This confirms that Alain has received inspiration and speaks from experience as to why what he knows as reason cannot apprehend reality in this realm.

A very important step is taken here. Phronesis can continue to ride on the second horse, which can bear her aloft. This is the horse of hearing, for whose importance the poet has previously prepared us.<sup>20</sup> Now Phronesis is exposed to the highest secrets of creation, and “establishes [them] by deductions made on the spot,” another reference to Inspiration.

Now Phronesis beholds the hierarchies, which are briefly described according to tradition. Further she is introduced to the Christ, to the realm of the saints, and to the Virgin Mary. In the Mystery of the virgin birth the mind again faces a challenge to understanding. Where Reason fails, Phronesis now calls on Faith to her aid. We are told that Faith comes before Reason; Faith anticipates and Reason can obey the dogmas of Faith and follow her, and later transfer the insights of Faith into writing.

In spite of the help she is receiving, Phronesis falls into a kind of lethargy. This cannot be compared to ordinary sleep, for it resembles an extinction of consciousness “which darkens life’s light and deadens the vital element to a greater extent than ordinary sleep but less than death...” Phronesis is given a draught “prepared by heavenly hands.”<sup>21</sup> She revives, regains consciousness and overcomes the fear that gripped her mind. Faith

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 146.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 159.

presents Phronesis a mirror, “equipped with images. In this mirror is reflected everything which the fiery region encompasses.”<sup>22</sup> The mirror attenuates the fiery light and prevents it from burning her eyes.

Phronesis now stands in front of the Virgin Mary and beholds the Mystery of the virgin birth. Here once more Alain illustrates the dilemma of Logic (and Reason), which cannot reconcile virginity and motherhood. This only Faith can resolve. And, while Phronesis tries to understand, Faith reminds her of the futility of the attempt because here are at work higher laws that transcend earthly, or even lower spiritual laws.

The crowning effort of the journey is the creation of the New Man. The heaven/earth contrast is very apparent in Alain’s description of this crowning achievement: “Through his soul let him dwell in heaven, through his body on earth,” a typical Platonic dualism.<sup>23</sup>

Alain de Lille’s most celebrated opus highlighted the Platonic nature of the School of Chartres. The whole work is a moral allegory, and we are reminded of it through the constant reference to the virtues. Rhetoric is emphasized at the expense of logic; in fact the whole work is a testament to the power of rhetoric. Though reason is given its due, it is ultimately contrasted with “...virtue of soul, constancy of mind, nobility attained not by birth but cultivated in the heart, interior beauty, a host of virtues, rule of life, poverty in worldly goods, contempt of position.” And reason must give way to faith in the last stages of the journey. Likewise the goal of the journey is a moral goal, the attainment of the New Man, not the perfecting of a philosophy.

Rhetoric is explicitly and recurrently contrasted to logic, hearing to sight. Though recognized as one of the seven maidens, logic may be considered a poor sister to the others. And the attention to hearing is key in the passage from reason to inspiration that alone can guide the soul to the higher spiritual realms. Finally, this is rendered all the more explicit in the alleged superiority of Plato over Aristotle. In Alain’s life this pull between the two philosophers lived with alternating fates within his biography, though finally the balance tilted towards Plato. All of this is very understandable given the soul makeup of the people of the School of Chartres, in whom the cosmic intelligence survived the longest, whereas everywhere around it had given way to the earthly intelligence.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 160

<sup>23</sup> Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 160.