

## **The *Anticlaudianus* and the "Proper" Language of Theology**

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In Book V of the *Anticlaudianus* Prudence accompanied by Reason arrives at the summit of the world. Prudence has undertaken the journey from earth to heaven at the behest of Nature; what they seek is a soul from God for the new and perfectly good man they are fashioning. Alan spends Book V portraying the transition from earth to heaven. This section of the poem emphasizes the discontinuity between the two realms. The laws of nature are contradicted everywhere Prudence looks, and Prudence herself loses her ability to function properly; most important, and a mirror of these changes in the natural order, the language of the poem discards the rules of ordinary discourse.

What I would like to trace in this paper is the relationship of theology to the liberal arts and of proper to improper language portrayed by the poem at the juncture between heaven and earth. An examination of the events and language of the *Anticlaudianus* reveals that though, according to the poem, there is a definite place where the rules of language and the laws of nature no longer function, they cease to function in a way that it is possible to explicate. Language ceases to function "normally" because it is transcended and becomes a "higher" kind of language, and the laws of nature no longer function because Prudence finds herself in the presence of the source of those laws.

The portrayal of theological language in the *Anticlaudianus* is clearly indebted to Pseudo-Dionysius; it makes use of the Dionysian/neo-Platonic notion that God is the source of all the perfections attributed to creatures, and, like Dionysius, empha-

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sizes the deficiency that marks all divine predication. However, Alan's presentation of these Dionysian themes in the *Anticlaudianus* is different from their most well known use by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas can be read as minimizing the mystical and suprarational elements of the Dionysian view because of his emphasis on degrees of propriety of divine predication in his doctrine of analogy.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Alan's poem almost rejects the possibility of constructing any analogy between language as it applies to God and creatures, emphasizing the impropriety that marks all theological language when viewed from the perspective of the arts. Moreover, Aquinas's account of Pseudo-Dionysius' three levels of divine predication stresses the resolution of the tension between affirmative predication (e.g., "God is good") and negative predication (e.g., "God is not good as we are good") in a third moment-Predication by "supra-eminence" (e.g., "God is good without limit").<sup>2</sup> Alan's poem, however, refuses to resolve the tension and predicates contradictions of God, but it does not, I would argue, predicate non-sensical contradictions. In language Alan might find congenial, his is a theology of negative affirmation and affirmative negation.

We are prepared for this account of theology by the opening of Book V; it begins with important changes taking place in Phronesis herself, Reason, the road they travel, and Alan the poet. Prudence loses her normal composure, her usual sense of knowing what to do. This the substance of her being on earth, for what else is Prudence but the knowledge of what must be done to bring about a particular end? But here she "wavers" and becomes "perplexed."<sup>3</sup> In heaven she has a real fear that "she will be led astray by the confusion of directions," a complete reversal of her proper role (Bk. V, ll. 46-48). Reason also loses the power of her name. She cannot control the senses, the horses which draw their chariot. Alan writes of the "horses": "Reason cannot turn and rein upward. Balking they stand firm against the rein and refusing to bridle,

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fight their mistress and refuse to obey her order" (Bk. V, ll. 76-79). Reason's "normal" role is to guide the senses and the passions, but here she is powerless to do so. Finally, the road itself becomes a non-road; it is a road that no men or birds have followed, that gives no direction; "it is," according to the poem, placed entirely beyond the impact of

worldly things" (Bk V, ll. 48-50). Even the poet is no longer a writer but the "silent page" as "the language of earth yield[s] to and wait[s] on the language of heaven" (Bk. V, ll. 247, 271-72). For Alan to continue to be the vehicle of the representation is for the stutterer to utter words and for the dumb to speak, once again a contradiction in terms (Bk. V, ll. 301-4).

The laws of nature are also contradicted everywhere Prudence looks. Water and fire are placed side by side, but they neither contend nor intermingle with each other (Bk. V, ll. 311-12). They are "bound by a dissenting assent, a concordant discord, a hostile Peace, an unreliable alliance, a fictive bond of love, a deceptive friendship, a shadow covenant" (Bk. V, ll. 316-318). Prudence, although she attempts to understand what she sees, completely fails to come up with any explanation. She asks herself,

By the help of what trustworthy bond, by what peace-pact does the cold ally with the hot, the moving with the inactive here where there is no peace-mediator, where a bond is lacking that would unite extremes and, on the establishment of peace, would wipe out hostile contentions and quarrels? (Bk V, ll. 358-62)

Whatever "bond" unites opposites does not wipe out the differences but somehow holds contradictories together without a resolution which we can understand. Human language and reason cannot make sense of heaven, but express what Prudence sees in oxymora which mysteriously are not just figures of speech but really take place.

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Alan extends this same kind of language to Theology, who appears to guide Prudence toward God. Theology, according to the poem, is filled with an intoxication which Alan claims is more correctly called "complete sobriety." (Bk. V, l. 172) Her garment is covered with a design which mirrors her Project:

Here a fine needle has traced the secrets of God and the depths of the divine mind and with form informs the formless, localizes the boundless, reveals the hidden, gives limit to the unlimited, brings the invisible into view (Bk. V, ll. 115-18).

Thus Alan represents the project of theology as paradoxical, as expressible only in oxymorons. Theology must always perform the impossible; she cannot circumscribe God within language, but language is the medium by which she and the poet are constrained.

It is not clear just what Alan's allegorical presentation of Theology in the *Anticlaudianus* corresponds to doctrinally. Is it the purely philosophical study of the nature of God? Is it a study of God based on revelation, what the twelfth century would know as "*Sacra pagina*"? Is it Dionysian symbolic or mystical theology?<sup>4</sup> The imagery of the poem suggests that the theology presented here is a combination of all these. Alan repeats the imagery used in Boethius's description of Lady Philosophy; she carries a book in her left hand, representing both Scripture and the "book" of nature, and a sceptre in her left hand, representing authority (Bk. V, ll. 104-8). Unlike secular theology, she is crowned with a diadem showing her royal heritage, her source in divine rather than merely human wisdom.<sup>5</sup> Further, Book V ends with a description of Mary, the Virgin Mother, and Christ, the God-man, showing that the "theology" portrayed in the poem is not purely philosophical, but includes what is known through revelation.

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What is of interest to me is that in the *Anticlaudianus* Alan presents theology as a discipline which contradicts and transcends the rules of the other disciplines. Even the elements of revelation mentioned, Christ and Mary, are described in the same paradoxical language which marks the whole of Book V. According to the poem, Mary is the one in whom the two names, mother and maiden, "are no longer at variance but eschewing contention, offer each other the Kiss of Peace" (Bk. V, ll. 475-77). Christ is described as both the Virgin's Father and Son, he who "became sick to heal the sick, poor to bring aid to the poor, died to bring with his own hands the gift of life to the dead..." (Bk. V, 518, 522-25). Hence, whether what is being said about God is found exclusively in revelation or not, the *Anticlaudianus* does not distinguish between different levels of theological discourse--those corresponding to the faculties of *Intellectus* and *Intelligentia*--as Alan does in other contexts.<sup>6</sup> Instead, by omitting such distinctions Alan here emphasizes the "otherness" of all theological discourse--the tremendous gap which separates the natural from the divine and, hence,

the disciplines based on nature, the arts, and that based on the divine, theology.

Winthrop Wetherbee sums up Alan's view of human language and reason when confronted with the divine as follows:

Alan explains the inability of the figural and philosophical resources of the human mind to express divine truth, and describes how theology, rejecting any attempt to impose a specious continuity to ultimate reality, abandons reason and analogy altogether and uses words in a new, wholly mystical way.<sup>7</sup>

For Alan to "impose any specious continuity" between divine and human truth, to make human language function as it does on the natural level when it turns to the divine, would be to claim too much for his own powers as poet and for theology as well, but,

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more important, it would be to misrepresent the divine as too "like" the human.

However, Wetherbee might be said to overstate his explanation of Alan in two ways. First, Alan does not put forth this representation of the divine realm as mysticism but as theology. The language of paradox and oxymoron is a description of the divine nature as depicted on *Theology's* robes; it is not representation, however imperfect, of immediate union with God. This language represents the role of theology, an enterprise linked to the arts because it is a discipline which has rules and is expressed in language, albeit in language that confounds the laws of the other arts. Second, Alan gives, in an oblique way, a sense of the way in which human reason is not contradicted but fulfilled in this new realm, in which human language, though from an earthly perspective it is used improperly, is here used most properly.

Alan tells us that theology is intoxicated in a way that is really sobriety, but he gives us some hint as to how this "drunken sobriety" comes about. Theology's intoxication is of a peculiar kind; Alan tells us, "it does not cause the mind to fall below its natural powers, rather it raises it to a more noble level..." (Bk. V, ll. 172-74). Thus while contradiction is not resolved, here the contradiction is a result of a transcendence of normal, natural conditions rather than of a fall below them or an irrational and random upheaval of nature.

The difference and the link between "falling below" and "being raised above" nature is illustrated in the poem by the description of Fortune, on the one hand, and God on the other. In Book VIII Fortune is depicted by a series of contradictions; her rest is described as flight, her permanence as change (Bk. VIII, ll. 15-16). "For her," Alan explains, "reasoned procedure is to be without reason, reliability is to be reliably unreliable, devotion is to be devotedly undevoted" (Bk. V, ll. 128-32). On the other hand, God is described as "directing all things without movement," "lasting without

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time," "abiding without abode," and "measureless without measure" (Bk. V, ll. 128-132). While the language used to describe both defies logic and nature, there is, I think, an important difference between them. Alan's account of Fortune tries to express what falls below reason and regularity, chance itself; his account of God attempts to express that which is above reason and law, God. In other words, Fortune breaks the rules of nature and God transcends them; hence, the poem uses language of Fortune which describes the impossible and irrational; that used of God is metaphorical, signifying that which is beyond the possibilities of nature and human understanding.<sup>8</sup>

While Fortune is unintelligible, some sense can be made of the paradoxes that are true of God, for God is not only beyond language and reason, but is the source of all predication, just as the "forms" for Plato are that in virtue of which anything can be said to be what it is. God is not, according to the poem, "unjust justice" (a contradiction of the type attributed to Fortune) but "just without justice" (Bk. V, l. 128). Created things are "properly" called just in virtue of participating in justice; however, God is the unparticipated, who is not just in virtue of justice, who is not living because of some participation in life; he is "strong without strength, powerful without force" (Bk. V, l. 129). Hence, God turns the normal justification for the application of names on its head because He is not an object who possesses certain qualities; He is these qualities substantially. According to the poem,

[God] is called strong not only by appellation but his is existing strength itself reposing in eternal strength. He alone is rightly powerful who, being absolute power, can alone do all things, from whom the power of the powerful comes (Bk. V, ll. 141-44).

Thus God is for Alan the "unadulterated name without

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the object," and from God's point of view we are tropes, and our proper language is "improper" (Bk V, ll. 126-27). Alan implies that there is a "higher" kind of propriety at work when God is called strong or powerful rather than an impropriety. In a certain sense words find their proper home when used of God; they come back to their origin, reach their true end.

What is most remarkable about the *Anticlaudianus's* account of theological language is not its Platonism, but rather the way that Platonism is expressed. Alan's poem not only faces but exploits the paradoxes inherent in Platonic "realism"; he emphasizes the fact the source of all perfections contradicts the normal rules of predication. He locates the metaphysical and linguistic paradox in God--without trying to rationalize it in terms of the rules which guide reason in the arts. For Alan the usefulness of the human disciplines (and their rules for the correct use of language) lies in their ability to carry us from earthly things to the threshold of theology; beyond that their function is to show us negatively what lies beyond their normal scope.<sup>9</sup>

This view of the poem's account of theology, its language, and relationship to the arts accounts for the radical change in language that takes place in Books V and VI. James Sheridan remarks in the introduction to his English translation of the poem that the early books are characterized by what he calls the "stylized manipulation of words" and "types of ornament that are the stock-in-trade of so many writers of his day."<sup>10</sup> Sheridan sees Alan's use of literary conventions in the early books as a flaw of the poem, overcome only in the later books, but I think Alan's conformity to convention is just as conscious as his break with it. For Alan, when dealing with the natural world, the arts are our proper guide and their rules are normative; when we move beyond nature, transcending their rules is equally obligatory.

In pointing out our lack of understanding of

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both Fortune and God, of both that which falls below and that which rises above reason, Alan draws the reader's attention to the fine line that, from our point of view, separates irrationality from superrationality, babble from language which obeys the rules of a higher propriety. Thus though Alan gives some hint as to how the gap between what is known by reason and believed in faith, between the liberal arts and theology, might be overcome, his rhetorical emphasis is on leaving the differences unresolved and the abyss which separates the two uncrossed. Alan purposely, I think, refrains from making any distinctions which would lessen the distance between the natural and divine orders or which would mitigate the proximity between unreason and supra-rationality in our present state of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> The only "solution" that is offered by the *Anticlaudianus* is that the normally "improper" language of theology, its tropes and paradoxes, is somehow "proper" to its subject. Insofar as Alan neither gives priority to the proper language of the arts nor the improper language of theology, his poem constitutes a unique defense of figurative language. Alan's claim is that from different perspectives "proper" and "improper" language are both "proper."

I began this paper by contrasting Alan's approach to theological language in the *Anticlaudianus* to that of Thomas Aquinas. Though the comparison is incomplete and, to a certain extent, unfair to Aquinas, it is still instructive. Even given that Alan's representation of theology and its language is poetic (which certainly accounts for some of the contrast I have been arguing for), in a sense, Alan still can be seen as stressing something different from an approach like Aquinas's through the doctrine of analogy. Aquinas wants the rationality of theology to stand out; Alan, the way that it is beyond rationality. There is a tendency to locate the kind of language Alan attributes to theology outside of theology in mysticism or poetry. Alan, in seeing theology's language as the language of oxymoron,

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points out that theology has closer ties to mysticism and poetry than someone like Aquinas might want to admit.

However, I would still like to end by saying that the difference between a more rationalistic account of theology and Alan's is a rhetorical one, and finally represents two sides of the same coin. Things named metaphorically are both unlike and like their improper names. The doctrine of analogy concentrates on the likeness between God and his improper names, but to see how the subject is "like" its predicate, one must also see how it is "unlike" it. All language and especially theological language is a "transference," a *translatio*. Alan's view of theology reminds us that to see how metaphor works, we must see how it fails. Paradoxically (as one might expect), Alan claims both more and less than someone like Aquinas. Alan, in exploiting the reality of paradox in theology, seems to narrow the range of what language can "properly" do, but ends by widening its possibilities in pointing toward its chance to become so much more than it is "naturally" or "properly."

Notes

1. See for example Aquinas's *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*, q. 2, a. 11 and *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 6.
2. Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae De Potencia*, q. 7, a. 5, ad 2.
3. Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, James J. Sheridan, trans. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1973), Bk. V. ll. 44-46. Hereafter

references to the *Anticlaudianus* will be made in the text by the book and line numbers. Direct quotations are from Sheridan's translation and have been correlated with the book and line numbers from the *Anticlaudianus*, R. Bossuat, ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1955).

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4. On the relationship between the different meanings of "theology" in the twelfth century and Alan's use of the term, see Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, "Alain de Lille et la 'Theologia,'" in *L'Homme devant Dieu, Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac*, vol. 2 (Aubier: Editions Montaigne, 1964), pp. 111-28.
5. D'Alverny, p. 120.
6. For a division of theology in these terms, see Alan's *Quoniam Homines*, P. Glorieux, ed., in *Archives d'Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age*, vol. 20 (1953), p. 121 and d'Alverny, p. 115.
7. Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 216.
8. The companion to the *Anticlaudianus*, *De Planctu Naturae*, repeats this same theme; in *De Planctu*, however, Alan opposes the "proper" language of the arts with defective and ungrammatical language. In my view, in the *Anticlaudianus* the description of Fortune in contradictory terms holds the same place as the barbarisms and solecisms described in *De Planctu*; both Fortune and ungrammatical language are seen as that which "falls below" the rules of nature and language and are linked, paradoxically, to that which rises above these norms.
9. Cf. G. R. Evans, *Alan of Lille: The Frontiers of Theology in the Later Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 47.
10. James J. Sheridan, in the introduction to his translation of the *Anticlaudianus*, p. 36.
11. The theme of the disarray into which the rules of the seven liberal arts are thrown in the face of the Incarnation is repeated in Alan's poem, *Rhythmus de Incarnatione et septem artibus*. For a new edition of this poem, see d'Alverny, pp. 126-28.