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Author(s): James P. Holoka

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A NEOPLATONIC SIMILE IN VIDA'S *CHRISTIAD*  
(4.10-15)

JAMES P. HOLOKA

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THE fourth book of Vida's *Christiad* begins with a description of John the Apostle in ecstatic communion with God.

Verba diu premit: inde animo mortalia linquens
Paulatim, oblitusque hominem penetratia divum
Mente subit, coelum peragrans, fruiturque beato
Coelituum aspectu, omnipotentique aetheris aura,
Admissus superam despasci lumine lucem,
Inque Deo tota defixus mente moratur.

(*Chr.* 4.4-9) ¹

John is then compared to an eagle soaring toward the aether and gazing unflinchingly at the radiant Sun.

Qualis ubi alta petens terris aufertur ab imis
Alituum regina, vagas spatia per auras
Dat plausum gyro, atque in nubila conditur alis.
Aetherea jamque illa plaga levis instat, et acrem
Intendens aciem, criniti lumina Solis
Suspicit, obtutuque oculos fixa haeret acuto.

(4.10-15)

This comparison has a Neoplatonic background with which Vida may well have been familiar, chiefly from the work of the great *Quattrocento* allegorizer and Platonist, Cristoforo Landino.

Biblical exegesis in the Middle Ages had established the metaphorical association of St. John and the eagle on the authority of *Revelation* 4.7. (Cf. Dante's allusion in *Par.* 26.53 to "l'aguglia di

¹ Citations of Vida are from J. Cranwell, ed. & trans., *The Christiad*... (Cambridge, 1768).

Cristo.”) But the allegorical vitality of the symbol was greatly increased through the lucubrations of medieval zoologists. In a passage that was to be a source of very similar descriptions in many bestiaries, Isidore of Seville writes:

Aquila ab acumine oculorum vocata. Tanti enim contuitus esse dicitur, ut cum super maria immobili pinna feratur nec humanis pateat obtutibus, de tanta sublimitate pisciculos natate videat, ac tormenti instar descendens raptam praedam pinnis ad litus pertrahat. Nam et contra radium solis fertur obtutum non flectere; unde et pullos suos ungue suspensos radiis solis obicit, et quos viderit immobilem tenere aciem, ut dignos genere conservat; si quos vero infectere obtutum, quasi degeneres abicit. (*Origines* 12.7.10-11)²

This bit of lore became in later writers the occasion for didacticism: “Seek for the spiritual fountain of the Lord and lift up your mind’s eyes to God — who is the fount of justice.”³

Now in classical mythology the eagle was closely linked to Jupiter, particularly in the myth of Ganymede. Dante had used the story of the rape of the beautiful Trojan youth in a remarkable dream sequence taking place during the first night on Purgatory. The passage is in the immediate background of Vida’s simile.

Ne l’ora che comincia i tristi lai
 la rondinella presso a la mattina,
 forse a memoria de’ suo’ primi guai,
 e che la mente nostra, peregrina
 più da la carne e men da’ pensier presa,
 a le sue vision quasi è divina,
 in sogno mi pareva veder sospesa
 un’aguglia nel ciel con penne d’oro,
 con l’ali aperte e a calare intesa;
 ed esser mi pareva là dove fuoro
 abbandonati i suoi da Ganimede,
 quando fu ratto al sommo consistoro.
 (*Purg.* 9.13-24)⁴

² W. M. Lindsay, ed., *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911).

³ T. H. White, trans., *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts . . .* (New York, 1954), pp. 105-6; see also Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*, Univ. of North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, No. 33 (Chapel Hill, 1962), pp. 113-15.

⁴ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. & trans. Charles S. Singleton, vol. 2, part 1 (Princeton, 1973).

The story of Ganymede was familiar in the Middle Ages from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (10.155-61; cf. the allusion to Juno's enmity over "rapti Ganymedis honores" in *Aen.* 1.28), and in "Moralized" versions of that poet Ganymede was seen to prefigure St. John the Evangelist, and the eagle Christ—the divine Clarity illuminating for John the secrets of Heaven.⁵ Similarly, Landino, in his comment on *Purgatorio* 9.19 ff., argued as follows:

Ganymede, then, would signify the *mens humana*, beloved by Jupiter, that is: the Supreme Being. His companions would stand for the other faculties of the soul, to wit the vegetal and sensorial. Jupiter, realizing that the Mind is in the forest—that is, remote from mortal things, transports it to heaven by means of the eagle. Thus it leaves behind its companions—that is, the vegetative and sensitive soul; and being removed, or, as Plato says, divorced from the body, and forgetting corporeal things, it concentrates entirely on contemplating the secrets of Heaven.⁶

Whether it was this Neoplatonic spiritualization that made the ancient story of Olympian infatuation acceptable for allusion in the *Purgatorio* is debatable. But Dante is more tolerant than Vida of potentially indecorous imagery, both in similes and at large in his poetry. Though the myth of Ganymede itself had about it the respectability of derivation from so well-loved a poet as Ovid, for Vida—with his exquisitely refined sense of poetic and moral propriety—any suggestion of similarity between Christ and the incorrigibly promiscuous Jove would have been plangently discordant.

So we have instead the older, familiar representation of John as eagle. But the Neoplatonic resonances remain. In Dante, the mind wanders outside the body and the limitations of thought it imposes and aspires to nearly divine vision:

e che la mente nostra, peregrina
più da la carne e men da' pensier presa,
a le sue vision quasi è divina . . .

(*Purg.* 9.16-18)

⁵ See E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939; rpt. New York, 1962), p. 213.

⁶ Panofsky, p. 215 (with the Italian original).

So in Vida we find ecstasy (*Chr.* 4.4: “inde animo mortalia linquens”), free flight of the soul (4.6: “coelum peragrans”), and contemplation of divinity (4.9: “Inque Deo tota defixus mente moratur”). Also there is a similar emphasis on the distinctive attribute of the eagle—its ability to gaze intently on the Sun, though in Vida there is no “test” of an eaglet or other passenger, as there is in Isidore and, by implication, in Dante.

The final clue that Vida had in mind *Purgatorio* 9 (and Landino’s commentary thereon) is contained in the following lines:

Illum adeo tacitum interea mirantur in unum
 Versi omnes velut exanimem, somnoque gravatum,
 Et crebri excutiunt: demum sibi redditus ipse
 Cum gemitu

(*Chr.* 4.16-19)

John must be awakened from the *furor divinus* as from sleep. He has been on another, extraterrestrial, level of consciousness, just as the sleeping pilgrim in *Purgatorio* 9 had been.

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