

# 'Margins toward the centre': Bernard Silvestris's (?) *In martianum* and the exegesis of *Natura*

Dr Jason M. Baxter  
WYOMING CATHOLIC COLLEGE

An eclectic, encyclopedic textbook written by an aging, ironic, pagan father for his son in late antiquity; an elegiac, moral struggle in which a Roman aristocrat in a deteriorating empire, tries to persuade himself that his suffering pales in the light of eternity; an epic poem, modelled on Homer with distinct Alexandrian influences, written to celebrate and give guidance to the 'civis princeps' in Rome's most promising hour: in the eyes of classicists these three texts (the *De nuptiis* of Martianus Capella; the *Consolatio* of Boethius; the *Aeneid* of Virgil), written in distinct genres, diverse cultures, varying linguistic styles, are very different indeed. But the modern scholar's desire to identify what makes an author characteristically distinct from another is directly at odds with the sort of questions a medieval scholar wished to ask. In contrast to the modern approach of treating intellectual traditions as blocks of discrete stages of growth, Christopher Baswell has described the medieval tendency to blur the distinction between the original text and later accretions. 'A study of medieval English Virgilianism through its manuscripts,' he writes, 'can help us suspend certain assumptions about textuality and its boundaries.' The 'unstable frontier' between books and text is 'suggested by the tendency among medieval translators to include not only the 'primary' text, but also parts of its surrounding commentaries.' Baswell points out that Chaucer's *Boece* 'unites Latin text and gloss, as well as French. This absorption of framing materials into the translation—the insistent centripetal movement of the margin toward the centre—suggests the extent to which textuality in the Middle Ages has vague and fluid limits, only beginning with the *auctor*'s words...'<sup>1</sup>

That there were porous boundaries between text and later interpretive activities was not due to sloppiness or accident, but was given, throughout the medieval era, theoretical grounding. Proclus, for instance, posited that there is a chain of authorities—a chain of philosophers and poets—who have all said more or

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<sup>1</sup> CHRISTOPHER BASWELL, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring The Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5-6.

less the same thing, and whose texts may cast light on one another.<sup>2</sup> For Proclus, this true mystical insight is fragile, and always being lost and recovered in history.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, within the true succession of philosophers, the same basic insight into the mysterious ground of reality can be recovered and further elaborated by later philosophers.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Proclus's near contemporary, Macrobius, did not feel the need to consider his sources strictly from a diachronic angle. All that has been said truly is the same. Macrobius felt entitled to interpret Cicero and Virgil as a new Plato and new Homer, Latin authors who renewed the tradition of *philosophia perennis*. This view too was based on the Neoplatonic belief that the wise possess a timeless spiritual insight, a quasi-mystical vision of ultimate reality, which is substantially the same. Their seeming differences are of no consequence because, at the deep level of understanding, they are in agreement.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, however, I wish to focus on a twelfth-century commentary on Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis* as a prime example of this medieval exegetical mentality. The commentary survives in only one manuscript, as Cambridge University Library Mm. 1.18. It has been attributed—correctly, I believe—to Bernard Silvestris of Tours, the author of the *Cosmographia*. In any case, the commentator knew Macrobius, and, like his predecessor, he sets forward an understanding of a chain of writers who all say basically the same thing:

[In this work of Martianus Capella] there is indeed imitation of an *auctor*, given that he emulates Virgil. Just as Aeneas in [Virgil] is led through the infernal regions to Anchises, accompanied by the Sybil, so too here is Mercury led through the regions of the world to Jove, with Virtue as his companion. It is also the case that in the *Consolatio* Boethius climbs through false goods to the highest good, with Philosophy as his guide. These three figures then basically express the same thing. Therefore, Martianus imitates Maro, and Boethius imitates Martianus. But you ask: for what reason do you take

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<sup>2</sup> For the Greek text, see H. D. SAFFREY and L. G. WESTERINK, eds., *Proclus: Théologie platonicienne*, 6 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968-1997). For the English translation, see Proclus, *Platonic Theology*, trans. Thomas Taylor, Great Works of Philosophy Series (New York: Selene Books, 1995 [reprint of 1816 original]). For a more recent translation, with updated notes, see Proclus, *Teologia Platonica*, trans. Michele Abbate (Milan: Bompiani, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The vision of truth can return as it were into itself and [become] unapparent to many who professed to philosophize.' *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> '[T]his philosophy shone forth at first from him so venerably and arcanelly, as if established in sacred temples, and within their adyta, and being unknown to many who have entered into these holy places, in certain orderly periods of time, proceeded as much as was possible for it into light, through certain true priests, and who embraced a life corresponding to the tradition of such mystic concerns.' *Ibid.*, 2; Plato's true successors achieved a similar character as their leader: 'the Egyptian Plotinus, and those who received the theory from him, I mean Amelius and Porphyry, together with those in the third place who were produced like virile statues from these, viz.: Iamblichus and Theodorus, and any others, who after these, following this divine choir, have energized about the doctrine of Plato with a divinely inspired mind.' *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See P. COURCELLE, *Late Latin Writers*, 45.

Martianus as the imitator of Maro, rather than Maro as the imitator of Martianus? Because it is indeed certain that Martianus is posterior to Maro in time; it is [Maro], then, that [Martianus] will subsequently continue as the predecessor to him, along with other philosophers.

Auctoris vero imitatio est, quia Maronem emulatur. Sicut enim apud illum ducitur Eneas per inferos comite Sibilla usque ad Anchisem, ita et hic Mercurius per mundi regiones Virtute comite ad Iovem. Ita quoque et in libro *De Consolatione* scandit Boetius per falsa bona ad summum bonum duce Philosophia. Que quidem tres figure fere idem exprimunt. Imitatur ergo Martianus Maronem, Boetius Martianum. Set subicies: in quo deprehendis magis Martianum imitorem Maronis quam Maronem Martiani? In hoc equidem quia constans est Martianum Marone tempore posteriorem, quem iste cum aliis de se precessorem philosophis deinceps continuabit.<sup>6</sup>

According to Bernard, then, all three authors present the same basic philosophical program through their stories: that is, they teach how one can come to recognize the specious nature of visible reality and then proceed to perceive that invisible unity which underlies appearances. But Bernard also describes a historical process in which later authors intentionally imitate their predecessors. The phrase Bernard uses for Martianus is, 'to continue Virgil.' Boethius will later 'continue' what Martianus had done. For Bernard, 'continue' is a strong word. He uses the related 'continuus' to mean 'without interruption' (e.g., 'id est alternis temporibus, hieme scilicet et estate, que non sunt continua set alterna,' 67). The *auctores* within the chain of writers, then, 'continue' 'without interruption's the work of their predecessors. This complex of writers, though spread throughout history, preserves a unity of thought. Later authors, by adopting earlier writers as their model-authors, create re-presentations of their model texts, and thus their fresh literary works may be read as faithful 'unfoldings' or expositions of the deep structures hidden under the literary form of the original. Inversely, from Bernard's perspective, all that could be said—all that would be said in later marginalia—was already contained in the *archana* of the original.<sup>7</sup> The practical exegetical approach which follows Bernard's theoretical statement is that any earlier or later author in the chain can be used to gloss the *archana* of the chosen text. At the same time, Bernard also describes a historical

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<sup>6</sup> HAIJO JAN WESTRA, *The Commentary on Martianus Capella's De nuptiis philologiae et mercurii attributed to Bernardus Silvestris*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986), 47.

<sup>7</sup> For Bernard, *archanum* is a secret reality, invisible to superficial observation and discoverable only by means of careful investigation. There are *archana* of the human mind, in nature, as well as 'heavenly' realities which are 'occulta' only because, being ontologically prior to the realm of senses, they resist the lower faculties of the human mind: 'Nudus quia tunc potissimum fit manifestum mentis archanum,' 76; 'Set hoc loco quedam nostre nature ammiranda archana ingerunt se tractanda,' 85; 'Theorica vero, id est contemplativa vita, est suspendium animi a terrenis coniunctum archanorum nature investigatione,' 151; '*Penita*: Archanas naturas. *Permeare*: Contemplari, id est per phisicam. *Etherios recessus*: Celestia archana, per theologiam scilicet, invisibiles scilicet substantias,' 175.

component at work in this process. The deep centre of the earlier text unfolds in the writings of later *auctores* who have chosen to emulate earlier *auctores*.

This then is the theoretical complement to Baswell's observation of the practical reality of the porous texts of the Middle Ages. If, as Baswell asserts, marginalia could move centripetally toward the centre of the 'original text,' this is because the insights produced by later authors were deemed to have moved centrifugally out of the centre of the original through time. We have then a kind of methodology exactly opposite to ours: earlier authors become more clear in later authors, as opposed to later authors being made more clear in light of their sources. Later endeavors can be read as further unfolding what was originally present on the deep level of the ancient texts.

What is remarkable and most relevant to our interests at this conference is that CUL Mm.1.18 presents a *visual* correlation to this exegetical mentality. Consistent with the new twelfth-century format of full-length commentaries, bits of Martianus's text appear embedded within longer blocks of the explicator's commentary. Each of the lemmata, beginning with the first words of Martianus's text, 'Tu quem psallentem, etc,' are neatly underlined. After this first citation of Martianus, we find almost a full column of commentary before we come to the next underlined portion. Thus, on the visual level, the text of Martianus is presented as a coiled spring, whose elastic potential energy unwinds, or unfolds, and stretches out into Bernard's comments. One can imagine the inverse procedure, as well, of Bernard's comments being 'folded' back up into the text; that is, if a reader, after having studied Bernard's gloss, returned to the continuously running text of Martianus, now uninterrupted by inserted commentary, he must have had the sensation that the text before him was taut, ready to unfold at a touch. Or, if I may change the metaphor from mechanics, the text was like a saturated sponge, containing much more than what is visible on the surface. The reader would know that if he probed the text, it would exude its superabundance of meaning, into *marginalia* as it were.

Before analyzing this mentality with reference to a particular passage, however, I would like to devote a few words to historicizing the vocabulary the commentator uses to describe his exegetical activity. Bernard does not use the term 'marginalia' to describe his work as a commentator. He rather refers to his exegetical activity as 'explicatio,' or, literally, unfolding.<sup>8</sup> For example, when Martianus promises that he will explain his words to his son, using the word 'explicabo,' Bernard adds the gloss: 'that is, I will give the tangle of ignorance without its fold' (*id est extra plicam nodum ignorantie dabo*, 90). The commentator's job, then, is to simplify the text, unfolding it so that its parts are clear. In a similar vein, the commentator also describes his exegetical work as the making of 'distinctiones' and delimiting the text into individual parts:

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<sup>8</sup> The fourth section of his commentary, for example, is entitled, 'explicatio didascalica primae orationis ad filium.'

A philosophical book, then, is like a mirror, in which the faces of almost all of the disciplines abound. For this reason, there is almost no discipline which the reader will be totally unversed in. Let each be able to grasp the distinctions of this work. Let the reader then mark off into individual sections what part is a theological treatise, or treatise on physics or mathematics, or which is ethics, either moral, familiar, or civic.

Est ergo quasi quoddam speculum liber philosophicus, in quo omnium vultus pene disciplinarum redundant. Unde nulla fere est disciplina cuius ex toto expers lector fuerit. Omnis possit capere huius operis distinctiones. Sit ergo lectoris quis tractatus theologicus, phisicus vel mathematicus, quis denique ethicus vel moralis, familiaris vel civilis, in singulis distinctionibus determinare. (82-83).

For Bernard, the activity of the commentator is the inverse of that of the *auctor*. If the astute reader must be able to ‘grasp distinctions’ (*capere...distinctiones*) and ‘delimit’ (*determinare*) tracts of text, the *auctor* has the opposite task of uniting these disparate elements. Bernard defines *poesis* as ‘the science of enclosing illustrious and grave speech in meter’ (*scientia claudens in metro orationem gravem et illustrem*’, 81). Elsewhere Bernard refers to figurative writing as that which “wraps truths in obscurity”, which is to say it encloses divine matters in the coverings [of fiction] (“involvens vera obscuris” id est divina integumentis claudens.’ 46). And similarly, the *auctor* is said to enclose in figural representation a deep intuitive vision or understanding of reality (cp. ‘*claudens intellectum*,’ 45). The *auctor* brings together linguistic *elementa* into a whole and balanced literary cosmos. Bernard uses the same terms to describe the linguistic arts that he uses for describing how ‘providence’ or ‘universal music’ binds the physical elements into a cosmos. Grammar unites raw sounds into meaningful speech utterances (*sicut prima iungebat voces in oratione [...]*, 80); Dialectic ‘joins the utterances of grammar into an argument’ (*orationes a prima iungit eas in argumentatione*’, 80); rhetoric takes up these arguments and joins them into an oration, before poetry finally takes up such ‘*oratio grav[is] et illustr[is]*’ and encloses it in the numbers of meter. Bernard describes, then, how the writer builds up his linguistic elements into an increasingly complex cosmos of words (the word he uses is ‘*contextus*’, or interweaving of sounds and words, 80). He uses the same terminology for describing the joining-activity of the world soul or providence. The Boethian Concordia, for example, is said to join, bind, or marry in harmony the physical *elementa* of the cosmos in ‘*complexum sacrum*’ (67).<sup>9</sup>

Thus, both the human *auctor* and the divine mind which orders the cosmos (the ‘*o qui perpetua mundum ratione gubernas*’ of Boethius’s famous metrum, III.9) bind their respective *elementa* by numbers and create, not just mixtures, but true unities (see 64-65). It is significant therefore that Bernard uses ‘*complexus*’ to describe

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<sup>9</sup> ‘*Tu (Concordia) ligas (id est claudis) elementa vicibus... Et tu (Concordia) maritas mundum (id est iungis mundana agentia et patientia, scilicet animantia)*’, 67.

the delicate and providential balance of the world's variety as seen in the physical cosmos. 'Complexus', from the past participle of *complector*, is the 'sacer amplexus', or the harmonious 'enfolding' or 'binding' of the elements effected by Divine Wisdom.<sup>10</sup> 'Complexus', then, belongs to a semantic network of terms which counterbalances the unfolding, *explicatio*, of the commentator. In sum, the author is likened to 'providence' which combines single elements into a whole; the commentator goes backwards, breaking down the whole into *singula*.<sup>11</sup>

These constellations of related terms help us appreciate a deeper component of Bernard's commentary, whose originality might otherwise remain obscured. At an important moment in the fifth section of the commentary, Bernard uses a commonplace about the world's likeness to a book. At that same point, he also paraphrases, at times quoting word for word, a lengthy portion from Hugh of St. Victor's *De tribus diebus*. Bernard, repeating the words of Hugh and the sentiment of many others, affirms that the world is like a 'sensible book,' written by God so that the creator may make himself known through his creation. Following Hugh, Bernard suggest that the Trinity makes itself manifest through cosmic order: 'the immensity of the world is the sign of divine power; the beauty of the world is a sign of divine wisdom; and the usefulness of the world is a sign of divine goodness' (*Inmensitas enim mundi nota est divine potentie, pulcritudo mundi divine sapientie, utilitas mundi divine bonitatis*, 109). Each of the terms in this trinity can be further subdivided. For example, 'the immensity of the world is subdivided into multitude and magnitude. See how the [world's] multitude clearly figures forth power: look at the stars of the heaven, the sand on the sea, the dust of the earth, the drops of water, the feathers of birds, the scales of fish, the hairs of animals, the grass of the fields, and the fruit and leaves of the trees. The individual creatures (*singula*) are not only innumerable, but the kinds of creatures are also innumerable' (*Inmensitas mundi dividitur in multitudinem et magnitudinem. Vide quomodo multitudo significat potentiam: intueri stellas celi, harenam maris, terre pulverem pluvie guttas, avium pennas, piscium squamas, animalium pilos, camporum gramina, arborum fructus et folia. Non tantum innumerabilia sunt singula, set etiam innumerabilia genera*', 109). For Bernard and Hugh, then, the world is teeming with kinds of creations as well as a plurality of individual things. The important word used here is *singula*, a word, as we have seen, which is also used in reference to the commentator's supposed task of making 'distinctiones'.

It is important to note that Bernard is motivated to borrow Hugh's lengthy portrait of the world's plurality because he sees it as intimated in the use of a single word in his source text. In the opening words of the *fabula* of *De nuptiis*, Martianus

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<sup>10</sup> One way to understand the term '*complexus*', the commentator tells us, is as 'sacred embrace' or 'divine wisdom', 'which enfolds/embraces all things through governing them' ('*si vero talis: foves complexu illa nexa, erit complexus sacer Sapientia divina, que omnia gubernando complectitur*', 61).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly enough, in the philosophy of the *Cosmographia*'s dedicatee, this is the word used for cosmic unfolding. *Explicare* is used in the same in Martianus Capella commentary.

playfully describes how humans may ask Hera to intercede on their behalf, even when Zeus is angry. In that passage, our pagan author rather innocuously says that Jupiter will sometimes cancel an earlier decree, even if he had already ‘with dispatch passed a sentence and the hand of the Parcae are waiting to carry out his order’ (‘et quicquid ille exprompta sententia, Parcarum pugillo asservante, dictaverit, delentum suadae coniugis amplexibus iussuque remove’, 5, Stahl’s translation; or, more literally, ‘And whatever [Jupiter], having spoken his mind, would say, while the fist of the Fates assents’, 3.5-6). Bernard seizes—and we recall his own words, that the *lector* must be able to *capere distinctiones*—on the word *pugillus*. Bernard’s interpretive leap at this point is extraordinary. He glosses ‘pugillus’ as the totality of the sensible world, or, in his phrase, ‘mundus sensibilis’. But how can you take the word ‘fist’ as ‘sensibilis mundus’? Bernard makes a comment which reveals his extended chain of reasoning of the meaning of ‘pugillo asservante’: ‘[...] for this reason it is written that he holds the world by the hand. Listen to the prophet: “Who,” he says, “has measured the waters with his fist, and weighted the heavens with his palm? [...]”’ ([...] ideo scribitur quod teneat mundum pugno. Audi prophetam: “Quis,” inquit, “mensus est pugillo aquas et celos palma ponderavit?”’, 109). Bernard continues with the passage we have already commented upon: ‘That divinity is indeed written into the world, know this: this world is a sensible book which has divinity written into it. Individual creatures are letters and reveal some aspect of divinity. For the immensity of the world reveals divine power. The beauty of the world divine wisdom. The utility of the world divine goodness.’ (‘Quod vero in mundo scribatur divinitas, sic accipe: mundus hic sensibilis liber quidam est habens in se divinitatem scriptam. Singule vero creature littere sunt et note alicuius quod in divinitate est. Inmensitas enim mundi not est divine potentie. pulcritudo mundi divine sapientie. utilitas mundi divine bonitatis’, 109). As we can see, Martianus’s use of the word ‘pugillus’ in the context of the fates, who are ready and waiting to record Zeus’s decrees, reminds Bernard of a biblical passage in Isaiah, which describes the creator as holding the waters, heavens, earth, mountains, and hills in his hand. For Bernard, the writing of the fates is, after all, taken as ‘dispositio dei’, the plan of God ‘ab eterno’ for the world’s order, and this predetermined plan is of course what is being captured through the biblical metaphor of holding the world in hand. But the biblical microcatalogue then reminds Bernard of the passage in Hugh of St. Victor’s *De tribus diebus*, perhaps because Hugh quotes the same verse from Isaiah. The lengthy quotation from Hugh then follows upon the single word in Martianus, *pugillus*. But as the single word unfolds into paragraph after paragraph of text, at the same time, this *explicatio* is rendered visible by a diagram which grows out of the text and into the literal margins. The technique of the *explicator* parallels the centrifugal unfolding of the physical world from *dispositio dei* to the order and varied cosmos. Creation and exegesis are mirror images.

Despite Bernard’s extensive debt to Hugh, his appropriation of this passage from *De tribus diebus* differs in at least one significant way: Bernard sees this world of plurality as unfolding in historical time. While it is true that both authors use the familiar *topos* of the world as book, Bernard inscribes Hugh’s description of the

plurality of the world within the context of Martianus's use of 'writing' as metaphor for the providential action of the fates. Bernard glosses the writing of Martianus's Parcae as the actualization in historical time of what God had disposed *ab eterno*: 'He "declared," that is, when he disposed from eternity: the Parcae write this when they bring temporal events into act' (*Dictavit enim quando ab eterno disposuit: hoc Parcae scribunt quando eventus temporales in actum ducunt*, 108). Later in the commentary, Bernard further clarifies this actualization in time of the divine mind, by explicitly referring to the providential operation of the Holy Spirit: 'The ancient philosophers said this about the world's soul: just as the world's great, corporeal body is that from which all other bodies come forth and to which they return, so is its soul a sort of great spirit from which all souls taken their beginning and in which they have their return. This soul is truly nothing other than the divine spirit which both creates the world and governs it, as both the prophets and philosophers affirm' (*De anima mundi veteres sensere (?) philosophi quod, sicut mundanum corpus magnum est a quo omnia corpora prodeunt et in quod reducuntur, ita eius anima magnus quidam spiritus est a quo omnes animae ortum et in quem regressum habent. Hec quidem anima non nisi divinus spiritus qui et mundum creat et creatum gubernat, ut astruunt tam prophete quam philosophi*, 205). This historical dimension of the unfolding of the divine mind is foreign to Hugh.

We have a picture, then, of a world which is written by God in order to reveal God. The Holy Spirit brings bodies and souls forth from the world's body and the world soul, copying out into physical creatures the plan recorded—disposed—from eternity in the divine mind. The deep plan, the *dispositio ab eterno* of the divine mind, is realized in history through the *divinus spiritus*, and, once realized, is seen to figure forth *divinitas* (109). The cosmos undergoes a centripetal motion, from the invisible depths of the divine mind into the *singula* of creatures throughout time; its deep meaning unfolds—is made visible and evident—in the margins of historical time. At the same time, Bernard uses the term 'singula' to refer both to the individual creations which instantiate the writing of the Parcae in time, and to individual comments made by a commentator. Bernard's use of the old metaphor of the world as book can be seen with fresh eyes: it is a book with a deep centre—*archanum*; time is a kind a writing process, in which the World Soul brings forth creaturely souls as writing 'creatures' as 'lettere singule' (109). And, as we have seen, the metaphor draws a parallel to Bernard's own exegetical activity of *explicatio*, a reading-activity as a movement of the *divina* or *obscura* or *archana* from the deep level of the text into the *singula* of his comments and *distinctiones*.

In conclusion, Bernard's belief that there is a secret unity between *auctores*, as well as that they, in some sense, explicate the deep meaning of those that have come before him, seems to be related to his 'exegesis' of the world. His natural philosophy, what he is prepared to notice about the universe as peculiar, and specifically how he believes it reveals its maker, seems closely related, if not dependent, on his view of centuries of marginalia as flowing from the deep centre of the ancients.