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THE TWELFTH-CENTURY FRENCH « LIFE » OF SAINT MARY THE EGYPTIAN[1]

The evolution of a hagiographic legend crosses a critical literary threshold at the point of translation into the vernacular. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the commission to translate a Latin prose saint's life into French verse was often interpreted as a sweeping mandate for amplification and revision[2]. The poet sought, ideally, to heighten the expressive intensity and appeal of a given legend for a redefined audience; the task of poetic renewal, thus conceived, implied a complete reappraisal of the hagiographic mission.

The mid-twelfth century was clearly a propitious moment for such an enterprise. The monastic reformers, returning to the letter of the Benedictine rule, had radicalized the act of reading and in effect rediscovered the special pertinence of literary art to spirituality[3]. Perhaps at no time previously had poetry been so close

[1] I wish to acknowledge my debt to Peter Dembowski, whose critical edition, *La Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne: versions en ancien et en moyen français*, « Publications romanes et françaises », Genève-Paris, Droz, 1977, is the basis for this study.

[2] « La plupart des vies de saints en vers français traitent leur original latin avec une grande liberté: les auteurs, pour embellir et égayer la matière, se plaisent à décrire les lieux ou les instruments de l'action, à motiver les événements, à analyser les sentiments des personnages, à leur mettre dans la bouche des discours inventés, et se permettent même souvent de leur prêter des actions qu'ils ne trouvaient pas dans leur source ou de modifier gravement les circonstances. » (Gaston Paris, *La Vie de Saint Gilles*, S.A.T.F., Paris, 1881, p. xxxvii). The model-study of this process of fictionalization is undoubtedly that of Karl D. Uitti, *The Old French* Vie de Saint Alexis: *Paradigm, Legend, Meaning*, « Romance Philology », XX, 1966-67, pp. 263-295, reprinted in *Story, Myth and Celebration in Old French Narrative Poetry*, 1050-1200, Princeton, 1973.

[3] This development and its history are discussed in the writings of David Knowles and, most satisfyingly, by Jean Leclercq in *L'Amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu*, Paris, 1957; see also J. Leclercq, F. Vandenbroucke and Louis Bouyer, *Histoire de la Spiritualité Chrétienne*, II: *La Spiritualité du moyen âge*, Paris, 1961. Louise Gnädinger, *Eremitica* (« Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für romanische

to truth: for Bernard of Clairvaux, it is the beauty of the *Song of Songs* which most clearly bespeaks its divinity, its power to elicit an emotional response which may in turn be trusted to guide the understanding and the will:

... et iure hoc appellaverim « Canticum canticorum », quia ceterorum omnium ipsum est fructus. Istiusmodi canticum sola unctio docet, sola addiscit experientia. Experti recognoscant, inexperti inardescant desiderio, non tam cognoscendi quam experiendi. Non est strepitus oris, sed iubilus cordis; non sonus labiorum, sed motus gaudiorum; voluntatum, non vocum consonantia. Non auditur foris, nec enim in publico personat: sola quae cantat audit, et cui cantatur, id est sponsus et sponsa [4].

Bernard draws the reader into a close-woven texture of scriptural reminiscence and allusion, into the very immediacy of the Word: he summons us thus to « experience » the poem of poems, rhetoric itself, as an absolute intimacy with the divine.

Bernard's teaching and example produced a rich Cistercian harvest of sermons, treatises, and writings of every sort. Another important expression of the spiritual and literary climate was the upsurge in Marian devotion, to which Bernard indirectly contributed [5]. Hagiography could not fail to be affected in turn. Fresh impetus to a renewal of the genre was coming, moreover, from an entirely different source, from the poets and romancers whose sphere of influence was not the monastery but the court. Here was a newly sophisticated audience, evidently very much in want of edification:

Philologie », 130, Tübingen, 1972), analyzes the specific pertinence of the Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis* to the conversions of Peter Waldo and Christina of Markyate.

[4] « ... and rightly do I call it the ' Song of Songs ', for this one is the fruit of all the others. Only divine anointing can teach a song like this, and only direct experience can learn it; let the adept recognize it, and others burn with desire, not merely to know about it, but rather to experience it. For it is not a noise in the mouth, but a delight in the heart; not a sound on the lips, but a movement of joy; an accord of wills, not of voices. It is not heard at large nor in public: only she who sings hears it, and He to Whom it is sung, the bride and the bridegroom. » Sermo I: 11, *Sancti Bernardi Opera vol. I, Sermones super cantica canticorum, 1-35*, edited by J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot and H. M. Rochais, Rome, 1957.

[5] See Sr. Mary Vincentine Gripkey, *The Blessed Virgin as Mediatrix in the Latin and Old French Legend prior to the Fourteenth Century*, Washington, 1938.

a poet who was both imbued with the new spirituality and versed in vernacular eloquence might well perceive the challenge, and turn to translation of a saint's life in response[6].

It was evidently just such a poet who undertook at this time to render the *Life* of St. Mary the Egyptian into French metre, rhyme and rhetoric. The poem (*T*)[7] is a far-reaching renewal of an already venerable and popular legend. Originally attributed to Sophronios[8] (d. 638), the tale of the penitent courtesan had attained by the Carolingian period a standard form which survives today in a number of Latin prose redactions[9]; a short consideration of

[6] The attitude of Denis Piramus would appear to be pertinent:

Li rei, li prince e li curtur,
Cunte, barun e vavasur,
Aiment cuntes, chanceuns e fables
E bon diz qui sunt delitables;
Kar il hostent et gettent penser,
Doil, enui e travail de quer,
E si funt ires ublier,
E del quer hostent le penser.
Kant cil e vus, segnur trestuit,
Amez tel ovre e tel deduit,
Si vus volez entendre a mei,
Jeo vus dirrai, par dreite fei,
Un deduit qui mielz valt asez,
Ke ces altres ke tant amez;
E plus delitable a oïr,
Si purrez les almes garir
E les cors garanter de hunte.
Mult deit hum bien oïr tel cunte,
Hum deit mult mielz a sen entendre
Ke en folie le tens despendre...

(ll. 49-68, *La Vie de saint Edmund le rei*, edited by F. L. Ravenel, Philadelphia, 1906)

[7] Editions: Peter Dembowski, *op. cit.*; A. T. Baker, « Revue des Langues Romanes », LIX, 1916-17, pp. 145-401. The siglum *T* was conferred by Bernardine Bujila, Rutebeuf, *La Vie de sainte Marie l'égyptienne*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1949.

[8] *Acta Sanctorum*, Aprilis, I, Appendix, pp. xi-xviii. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus.* Series graeca LXXXVII, pars III, col. 3697-3725.

[9] These are principally: (*P*) Paul the Deacon of Naples, in Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series latina* (= *PL*), LXXXIII, col. 671-690; (*C*) *Bibliotheca Casinensis*, III, *Florilegium casinense*, pp. 226-235; (*M*) Boninus Mombritius, *Sanctuarium seu Vitae sanctorum*, reprinted Paris, 1910, II, pp. 134-143. Versions in Latin verse: (*F*) Flodoard of Rheims, *PL*, CXXXV, col. 541-548; (*H*) Hildebert of Lavardin, *Acta Sanctorum*, Aprilis, I, pp. 84-90 and *PL*, CLXXI, col. 1321-1340. K. Kunze, *Studien zur Legende der heiligen Maria Aegiptiaca im deutschen Sprachgebiet*, Berlin, 1969, devotes a comprehensive chapter to the Latin tradition.

this tradition will place the achievement of the twelfth-century poet in perspective. The ninth-century *Vita* by Paul the Deacon of Naples, elegant and widely read throughout the middle ages[10], will serve for our purposes as the point of departure.

The story according to Paul begins with a certain monk, Zosimas, who has been raised in a Palestinian monastery since childhood, and who has attained in his fifty-third year a virtual perfection in ascetic disciplines. Always occupied with work and prayer, he obeys all the rules and adds others of his own, while pupils come from near and far to benefit from his teaching. He has begun, however, to wonder if there could be any monk or hermit in the world worthier than he or competent to teach him anything new. To this perplexity a voice gives answer: « Zosimas, you have struggled zealously, but no man is perfect. There are other ways of salvation to be learned; go therefore to the monastery by the Jordan river ».

He journeys to this community, as instructed, and begs to be admitted therein, *aedificationis gratia.* The abbot admits him, remarking however that no man can edify another unless each attend to himself, with God's grace.

The house is indeed especially saintly. The principal feature of the observance is a lenten exodus into the desert, in which each monk betakes himself into solitude for forty days of penance. Zosimas goes out with the others, pursuing however his particular hope to find a hermit there who can teach him what he must learn. At length his prayer is answered: there appears to him a « shadow », a human form which at first he thinks a hallucination, but which is revealed to be a white-haired old lady, entirely nude, her body blackened by the sun. In the ardent conversation which follows, each beseeches the other's blessing; noting that she already knows his name and priestly condition, Zosimas recognizes in awe the signs of God's favor. At one point she is levitated several feet off the ground in prayer, and Zosimas is terrified at the sight, but she reproves him gently, declaring that she is indeed no spirit, but simply a woman and a sinner. Thereupon he entreats her to tell him her story:

... nec enim pro gloriatione aut ostentatione aliquid dicis, sed ut mihi satisfacias peccatori et indigno. Credo enim Deo, cui vivis, cum quo et conversaris, quoniam

[10] Roger Walker, in the introduction to his edition of the *Estoria de santa Maria egipçiaca* (Exeter, 1972), notes that « *P*, now the 'standard' Latin version, owing to its inclusion in Migne's *Patrologia*, was intended for a king and only became at all widely known after the invention of printing. » (p. ix). Kunze, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-181, yet lists a very large number of different manuscripts dating from the ninth through the fifteenth centuries.

ob hujuscemodi rem directus sum in hanc solitudinem ut ea quae circa te sunt Deus faciat manifesta [11].

With profuse apology, she obliges. Born in Egypt of good family she had run away from home at the age of twelve and established herself as a prostitute in Alexandria. There she remained for seventeen years, plying her trade more for pleasure than for money. One day, seeking new objects for her lust, she joined a boat full of pilgrims bound for Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. After a voyage during which she seduced everyone on board, she arrived safely in Jerusalem, and took up her trade. On the day of the feast, she put herself in the midst of a procession of pilgrims streaming into the church, but found herself repeatedly prevented from entering, thrown back from the door. In this moment, she began to take cognizance of her sin, and invoked the intercession of the Virgin Mary in a long prayer; the Virgin forgave her, allowed her to enter the church, and then directed her to go out into the wilderness, where she has remained for the last forty-seven years.

In response to further questions from Zosimas, she describes the hardships and temptations she has endured with the help of the Virgin. She then makes a prophecy: next year, at Lent, Zosimas will not be able to go out into the desert with the others; she directs him, however, to bring her Holy Communion on the evening of the Lord's Supper, by the Jordan river. With these words, she leaves him.

The following year it comes about as she had foretold: Zosimas is sick and obliged to remain in the monastery during Lent; on Holy Thursday, however, he takes bread and wine, and goes out to the bank of the Jordan. After an anguished wait, she appears, and walks across the water to receive Communion from him. At the conclusion of the mass, she prays to be at last delivered from this life; bidding Zosimas come to find her, alive or dead, the following year, she again departs.

When the Lenten season returns, Zosimas goes out as instructed and finally discovers her, stretched out upon the ground, at the place where he had originally met her. An inscription on the ground by her head tells him her name, Mary, and the date of her death. He proceeds with the office of the dead, burys her — with the help of a providential lion — and returns to tell her story to the monastery and the world.

The *Life* in this form is not at all lacking in literary interest. It is not primarily the story of how Mary became a saint: she ap-

[11] « Nor will you speak boastfully or for ostentation, but in order to satisfy me, unworthy sinner that I am. I believe in God, for whom you live and with whom you have been converted: for I was sent here into this solitude in order that God might make you and your circumstances manifest » (*PL*, LXXXIII, col. 679).

pears fully formed, her penance complete, attended by numerous unmistakeable miracles. Her life on earth, presented in her autobiographical narrative, remains clearly subsumed to her final, permanent and present identity. What the work is fundamentally *about* is not the process of her development but its result, her accomplished sainthood and the drama of its manifestation to the world at the moment of her « birth » to heaven and the calendar.

Zosimas, the « protagonist », provides for this event a psycholigical context. His search for edification, defined at first in narrowly specific terms, widens and deepens as he leaves one monastery for another, and then is obliged to venture altogether beyond well-codified cenobitic usages into the world of solitude. There he must attempt to cope with the unknown and unforeseen:

... vidit a parte dextra, ubi orabat, umbram quasi humani corporis apparentem; et primo quidem conturbatus est, ac contremuit, phantasium alicujus spiritus existimans se vidisse, signo autem crucis se muniens, et a se timorem projiciens (jam enim et orationis ejus finis instabat), convertens oculos, vidit aliquem in veritate properantem ad partem Occidentis. Mulier autem erat... [12]

This initial apparition is completely opaque; it is, however, God's will to reveal the « shadow » to Zosimas, whose task it is to interpret what he sees. Not accidentally, his intellectual and spiritual understanding prove adequate — « strenuus enim erat vir ille valde, et divinitatis dono prudentissimus » — and when he plunges into errors and terrors, Mary corrects him. He divines from the first that an extraordinary grace attends her; as the relationship develops, he comes to understand that he himself has been chosen to testify on her behalf, and that this mission contains the true object of his personal quest. By her perfect humility he is able finally to locate himself:

Vere non mentitur Deus, qui pollicitus est sibi similes esse eos qui semetipsos purificant. Gloria tibi, Christe Deus noster, qui ostendisti

[12] « He saw on his right, as he prayed, a shadow, apparently of a human body; and at first he was very frightened, thinking he saw a vision of some spirit. Then however he made the sign of the cross, cast out fear and concluded his prayer. Turning his eyes, he saw indeed a person hurrying westward: it was a woman... » (*Ibid*, col. 677).

mihi per ancillam tuam hanc, quantum mea consideratione inferior sum mensura verae perfectionis [13].

Mary is an old lady who has accomplished a heroic penance without reference to any institutionalized, clerical framework. Hers is a true *sancta simplicitas*, an utterly spontaneous humility nourished in forty-seven years of solitude. She does not style herself a « hermit », nor does she dispose of any other, self-conscious terminology. Significantly, she knows everything about Zosimas except what it is that he sees in her or is trying to learn: « Quid tibi visum est, abba, peccatricem videre mulierem? Quid quaeris a me videre aut discere....? » So unconventional is her appearance that he twice mistakes her for a hallucination: her sainthood, fundamentally asocial and therefore unrecognizable, freely inhabits the world of nature and of myth.

Zosimas, by contrast, belongs absolutely to the cenobitic community. He is a priest who has knowledge of letters and sacramental authority; incipient pride, a self-consciousness of his dignity, has provoked a summons to seek the « other way of salvation » which he finds in the example of Mary. His personal quest ultimately serves God's will to reveal and reconcile the saint to the church which will canonize her; this is the purpose to which his priestly role, with all its self-consciousness, befits him. For the priest and the saint, there occurs a confirmation of vocation and a double fulfillment of the providential design.

The traditional *Vita*, formulated in these terms, survived in many different redactions through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and found its place in the *Speculum Historiale* of Vincent of Beauvais and in the *Legenda Aurea*. In the meantime, the legend had become closely associated with twelfth-century Marian devotion: Honorius Augustodunensis narrates it as an exemplum in his sermon, « In Annunciatione Sanctae Mariae » [14]; it appears moreover in Latin collections of miracles of the Virgin attributed to

[13] « God indeed spoke the truth when he promised that those who purify themselves will become like Him; Glory to you, Christ our Lord, Who have shown me by this maiden how much in my own estimation I am inferior to the measure of true perfection » (*Ibid*, col. 687).

[14] *PL*, CLXXII, col. 906-908.

William of Malmesbury and Dominic of Evesham [15], and again in anglo-norman miracle collections of which the earliest is by Adgar [16]. These texts are neither autonomous nor authoritative. Their common character is that of a summary or abridgement of the *Vita*, « retold » by the narrator as an illustration of the power and mercy of the Virgin. Emphasis is placed upon the interaction between the Virgin Mary and her namesake; the role of Zosimas diminishes accordingly to that of an accessory, a witness with no particular history of his own, who makes his appearance only late in the story. Restructured to the praise of the Virgin, the narrative now begins with Mary of Egypt, who emerges henceforward as the true protagonist in her own saint's life [17].

It remained, however, for the twelfth-century French poet to realize the implications of this important development, and to synthesize the Marian version of the legend with the authoritative *Vita*. The result was a *summa* of the tradition to date, in a poem (*T*) of stunning beauty. Its origins are mysterious: no one text, in Latin or in the vernacular, in prose or in verse, has been identified positively as its immediate source or model [18]; distinctive and innovative in character, the *T* poem offers its own composition as the best available account of its etiology.

[15] José Canal, *El Libro De Laudibus et miraculis sanctae Mariae de Guillermo de Malmesbury*, Rome, 1968 (second edition). Dominic of Evesham has been identified as the author of the miracle collection contained in the ms. Oxford, Balliol 240, published by H. Kjellman, *La Deuxième Collection anglo-normande des miracles de la sainte Vierge et son original latin*, Paris and Uppsala, 1922.

[16] Carl Neuhaus, *Adgars Marienlegenden nach der londoner Handschrift Egerton 612*, « Altfranzösische Bibliothek », IX, Heilbronn, 1886; Peter Dembowski, *op. cit.*

[17] Peter Dembowski, following Baker and others, distinguishes between « Zosimas-centered » and « Mary-centered » versions of the *Life*. The unpublished dissertation of Anne-Marie Sargent (University of Michigan, 1977) discusses the shift from the former to the latter, and analyzes in detail the Marian phase of this evolution.

[18] « On ne connaît aucune oeuvre, latine ou autre, qui ait pu servir de modèle direct à *T*, quoique l'hypothèse avancée par le deuxième éditeur du poème. Alfred Thomas Baker, selon laquelle le poète de *T* connaissait le texte latin *C* et le poème de Hildebert, ne peut être rejetée d'emblée » (Peter Dembowski, *op. cit.*, p. 16).

The saint's life has been transformed into a biography of the saint, set forth as a third-person narration in chronological order. Beginning with her childhood and youth, the *T* poem extends in uninterrupted sequence through her conversion and penitence, up to the moment of her meeting with Zosimas, who is introduced in a digression. The dialogues between the two then follow, according to tradition, but with only a summary reference to her now-redundant autobiographical confession, and the poem concludes with her death and burial.

Mary herself has come to the fore, and it is clearly her development — psychological and spiritual — which the poet intends to pursue. From this standpoint the traditional, first-person recital of her life had severe limitations:

> La vieille ermite ne peut vraiment s'attarder sur son ancienne beauté et sur sa vie de débauche. La perfection et la paix intérieure acquises au cours de 47 ans de vie au désert, aussi bien que son sentiment de honte très développé la rendent incapable d'insister sur les détails de sa vie de pécheresse, tandis que son humilité (sa vertu principale aux yeux de Zosime) l'empêche de « se vanter » des vertus postérieures à sa conversion [19].

The twelfth-century poet-narrator is not at all bound by the shame or modesty of his heroine, and so undertakes to explore the very areas of her experience which she herself was more or less constrained to pass over.

The description of Mary in the early, sinful phase of her life is thus freely amplified, and illuminated in all the colors of rhetoric. She is exclusively devoted to her own pleasure: « Molt fu esprise de luxure, / De nule autre rien n'avoit cure » (ll. 63-64). It is her own desire she accomplishes with all men available, regardless of scolding, scandal or even self-interest; traditionally disobedient to her parents, she is also pointedly indifferent, in the *T* poem, to their offer of a rich husband if she will but reform. Rather than listen to such practical suggestions, she flees « like a thief in the night », and takes up what amounts to her true calling as a courtesan in Alexandria.

[19] Peter Dembowski, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

There she devotes herself to pleasure in a manner which genuinely transcends cupidity. The traditional attitude to this, expressed by Mary herself, was a scarcely indulgent:

Alexandriam veni, et quomodo quidem virginitatem meam in primis violaverim, et qualiter indesinenter et insatiabiliter vitio libidinis subjugata jacuerim, erubesco considerare ... neque enim ab aliquibus dare volentibus aliquid accipiebam; hoc enim libidinis furore succensa considerabam, ut amplius ad me facerem currere, gratis implens stupri mei et sceleris desiderium [20].

In contrast to the abstract violence of Paul the Deacon, the French rhetorical cuisine seems to enhance the sin in all its savor:

Ele estoit blance conme flour,
Des jovenciaux avoit l'amor.
Tot i venoient au bordel
Par se biauté li jovenchel.
El les rechevoit volentiers,
Non seulement par lor deniers,
Mais por faire le sien deduit
Les avoit o soi toute nuit.
A sen delit iert ententive
De jor et de nuit le caitive.
(ll. 113-121)

Only a shadow of censure is to be seen in this vision of the heroine, who is as generous as she is beautiful. The poet delicately deplores her conduct with epithets such as « caitive » and « dolante », but then bedecks her with a sumptuous *descriptio* in the best courtly-romance manner:

Car a cel tens, en icel regne
Ne vit nus hom plus bele feme;
Ne onc contesse ne roïne
Nen ot el front plus bele crine.
Reondes avoit les oreilles,

[20] « I came to Alexandria, and the manner in which I first violated my virginity, how incessantly and insatiably I subjected myself to the vice of lust, I blush to consider ... nor did I accept anything from anyone who wished to give; on fire with libidinous fury, I thought thus to attract all the more lovers, and freely accomplished all my evil desires » (*PL*, LXXXIII, col. 680).

Mais blanches erent a merveilles,
Les iex cler et sosrians,
Les sorchix noirs et avenans,
Bouche petite par mesure
Et pie le regardeüre,
Le face tenre et coloree,
Com le rose qui sempre est nee, (*etcetera*)
(ll. 161-172)

Morally, of course, the city is much the worse for her presence. Her lovers fight among themselves, and blood runs in the streets (ll. 135-138), while she remains completely unmoved. Nonetheless she is beloved among the citizenry, and admired for her courteous speech and noble bearing; an emperor's son, we are assured, could have taken her with great honor to wife.

It is on the voyage to Jerusalem that the poet gives freest expression to the full range of her talents. Her departure is an impulse, unexplained but similar to that which motivated her flight from home. Unconcerned with money, she has in fact none, and so with utter simplicity she offers her body to pay for her passage. Once aboard, she gives herself with wanton and gratuitous bounty:

Lors les conmence a acoler,
Aprés les prent a tastonner,
A tous sengles aloit gesir
Por chou que miex peüst plaisir.
Onc n'i ot tant un oscurdos
Fust jovenciax ou fust espous
Ki onc peüst prendre respit
Ke ne pecast o li le nuit.
Tant fust cointes de sen mestier
Ke tos les fist o soi pekier.
(ll. 297-306)

In Paul's redaction Mary wonders retrospectively how the sea sustained her lustful iniquity; in the *T* poem high and menacing waves actually arise, while we witness her lovemaking in the teeth of the gale. Unafraid and heedless as ever, she goes joyously from bed to bed to comfort the fearful:

Tous les peürex confortoit
Et a joer les envioit;

Car tant l'avoit diale esprise,
Toute nuit iert en chemise...
Por parfaire a tos ses delis
Aloit le nuit par tous les lis.
(ll. 313-320)

It was a marvel, the poet concludes, to see a single woman take on so great a crowd. The devil, indeed, is seeking to drown her, but God protects her for reasons of His own, and brings her safely to port.

Up to this point the *T* poem presents a lyrical celebration of beauty and sexuality such as few texts in Old French can match — and this in a saint's life. Comparison with Paul the Deacon throws into relief the conspicuous artistry of the French poet, who has amplified what he found in his sources, seeding description with concrete and evocative details, the better to dramatize as well as narrate his heroine's progress. This aesthetic success poses, of course, a significant critical challenge: the seductions of poetry have drawn us into a participation in Mary's sexuality, and we now find ourselves implicated in an utterly paradoxical *plaisir du texte.*

Has the poet merely vulgarized the saint's life and subverted its original truth? Rhetorical mannerisms worthy of a Marie de France suggest that hagiography has been well-nigh transformed into romance. It should be recognized, still, that unlike the typical romance narrator the poet in no way sentimentalizes his heroine's early life and times. Sexuality exists here on its own terms, for its own sake; no appeal to feelings of love is made to excuse or even interpret behavior which is seen as fundamentally uncharitable, and in this regard the poet's orthodoxy remains clear and unconfused throughout. Structurally, however, the poem partakes in the fundamental subjectivity of the romance genre: the saint has become a protagonist — « hero » rather than « heroine » — a personality unfolding through a series of adventures encountered in the course of her quest. The poet has abandoned the hieratic, allegorical characterization of the *Vita*; he does not merely present an object for veneration, but seeks rather to involve us in the full gamut of her spiritual life.

This exploration of sainthood from within depends upon an understanding of sin, which is its indispensable initial term. On this

point the prologue to the poem is completely explicit. We are reminded at the outset that « no sin is too heavy or too great for God to pardon »; sin, the poet continues, is the prerequisite to repentance, and was an integral part of even the lives of the apostles. The unforgiveable is not sin, indeed, but *sleep*:

> Por chou ne me puis merveiller
> D'un pecheor quant l'oi pechier,
> Mais de celui est granz merveille
> Qui tos tans dort et ne s'esveille
> Et en sen ort pechié s'endort
> Entreus que il vient a le mort.
> (ll. 33-38)

The poet's abiding concern is to *awaken* the life of the spirit; his intention is to render experience in its immediacy, and thereby to trace the act of veneration to is psychological roots.

It is a complex and sensitive moral understanding which is rendered in the concrete structures of the narrative. Biographical chronology leads us through the stages of her spiritual progress, through sin, conversion and penitence to the final accomplishment of her destiny. The poet dramatizes each phase, setting off each from the next, but maintains throughout a rigorous, underlying rhetorical unity. As this coherence becomes clearer we shall come to see that Mary's sin and Mary's penitence are mirror-images of each other: ultimately, the poem transcends its own sequence to give us two exactly contrasting portraits of her in the same format, perceived in the poetic simultaneity of a mystery.

In the immediate context, however, the principle of sequence prevails. The rich, vicarious experience of Mary's youth « prepares » us only to feel the full shock of her conversion: she becomes aware of having sinned to a horrendous degree, and feels suddenly, her complete estrangement from a God to whom she dares not appeal. Literally, physically excommunicated, excluded from the liturgy, she may turn only to a statue of the Virgin located on a corner outside the church. This geography realizes, of course, the Virgin's accessibility to the repentant sinner; hers is the power to heal the morally sick and reconcile the alienated. The enormity of Mary the Egyptian's dilemma, seemingly incapable of resolution, is what

calls forth the intercession of the Virgin and her dramatic entrance into the poem.

« Dame, dist ele, douce Mere,
Qui en ten cors portas ten Pere.
Sains Gabriel en fu messaiges,
Tu li respondis conme saige
Quant il te dist: ' Ave Marie,
De le grace Diu raemplie,
En ti prendra humanité
Li Fix au Roi de majesté '.
Quantque il dist, tu otrias
Et soie ancele te clamas.
(ll. 417-426)

Biblical reminiscence and evocation of familiar liturgy open the poem to the reader's own religious culture. The *Ave Maria* is fitted into French octosyllable and rhyme, located in the space and time of the story; that story, conversely, acquires by the same device a contemporary and « timeless » pertinence to the reader. The poet edifies by creating a text which is really *common* to the reader and to the heroine, a locus of identification and shared experience. Having drawn us into the dramatic confrontation with the Virgin, the poet now « cues » us to participate in a devotional act.

The Virgin here is mother of theological mysteries, summoned, conjured in a dazzling rhetoric of paradoxes, oppositions and juxtapositions. She carried her own father in her womb; her son was present at her own birth; the Father made from His daughter His own mother, and took from her humanity, while she never lost her virginity. What Mary of Egypt calls upon in the name of the Virgin is not merely a person but an incarnate formal principle, the universal reconciliation of contraries — nothing more and nothing less than poetry itself:

Il prist de toi humanité
K'onc ne perdis virginité;
il est ton fiz si rest tun pere,
tu es sa fille e res sa mere;
mut fu ço merveilluse chose
kant de l'espine issit la rose,
e de la rose issit le fruit
par ki diable fu destruit;

un nom avoms, ço est Marie,
mes mult diverse est nostre vie;
tu amas tut tens chastetez
e jo luxure e maveistez;
diable avoi(e)s a enemi
e jo li ai tut tens servi,
dont de la toue humilitez
ne nasqui femme en nul regnez;
je sui povre e orguilluse
e de men cors luxuriuse,
li nostre sire toi amad
e moi chaitive refusad,
mei refusad e amad toi,
dame, eiez (ui) merci de moi! [21]
(ll. 461-481)

The call is understood to be its own answer. In moral theology, forgiveness precedes penance; so also on a purely verbal level the juxtaposition of Mary and Mary is already a reconciliation. Of course, this has not yet « happened » in narrative time, and we realize that the final reunion will not take place until after the years of desert penitence. The poetry of her prayer yet transfigures the moment at which she finds herself and offers a visionary understanding of her experience as a whole. Formal rhetoric — the palpable shape and music of words — becomes here a manifestation of Grace.

« Je suis povre et orguilluse / Et de men cors luxuriuse »: this lapidary summation expresses already the self-knowledge of the contemplative, that perfect humility which will become the out-

[21] The text quoted is from ms. *C*, edited by A. T. Baker, *op. cit.* The Dembowski edition, based on ms. *A*, reads as follows:

Molt fu chou merveilleuse cose,
Et nequedent bien dire l'ose,
Que de l'espine issi li fruis
Por quoi deables fu destruis.
Un non avons, ce est Marie,
Molt est diverse nostre vie.
Tu amas tous tans caasté
Et jou luxure et ordeé.
Deable eüs a anemi,
Et je li ai tous tans servi.
Onc de le toie sainteé
Ne nasqui feme en cest regné.
(ll. 461-472)

standing character of Mary's sainthood. Here she castigates her own prideful poverty — her famous disdain for money — in contrast to the rich humility of the Virgin. Lust is likewise contrasted to love. Mary the Egyptian, Mary the irresistible has been rejected as a lover by God, who accepted Mary the Virgin. This intimately female comparison yet places their respective passions on the same plane. Instinctively, the reader accepts the association: we pray *through* the poetic text to *both* figures; in effect, the rhetoric of their opposition becomes a liturgy of communion.

Here as at many key points in the poem, rhetoric anticipates the development of the narrative, orchestrating readings which overflow the limitations of the specific context, often even contradicting information available at a given moment in time. Our initial perception of Mary the sinner was thus one of extraordinary beauty and charm, a vision enhanced if anything by the moral paradox of her life. The lyricism of her prayer conveys an equally paradoxical analogy or identification between Mary and the Virgin Mary absolutely opposed and finally one.

In like fashion, Mary's penitence is a realization of her sin. The pleasures of bed and table give place, literally, to the privations of hunger, thirst and exposure; corresponding passages emphasize that her conversion has turned her, as it were, inside out. The joyous quality of her youthful beauty has become internalized as happiness, and the poet repeatedly stresses the gaiety and serenity which attend her self-mortifications. Expiation, conversely, brings all that was *essentially* ugly, i.e., sinful, to the surface:

Coulor mua se bloie crine,
Blanche devint com une hermine.
Le bouce li fu atenvie
Et environ toute noirchie.
Et avoit tant noir le menton,
Conme s'il fust taint de carbon.
Atenevié furent li oel,
N'i avoit ore point d'orguel.
Se vos veïssiés les oreilles,
Molt par vos presist grans merveilles,
Car noire estoit et decrevee
Le blanche char toute muee.
Noire et muee ert le poitrine,

A escorce samblant d'espine,
N'avoit plus char en ses traians
Ne mais com il a en uns gans...
(ll. 629-644)

Item by item, this second *descriptio* of her minutely recalls the first. The same color scheme predominates — black and white — now reversed, as in a photographic negative. The same rhymes and metaphors serve again, only slightly transformed:

En som le col blanc com ermine
Li undoit le bloie crine.
(ll. 175-176)

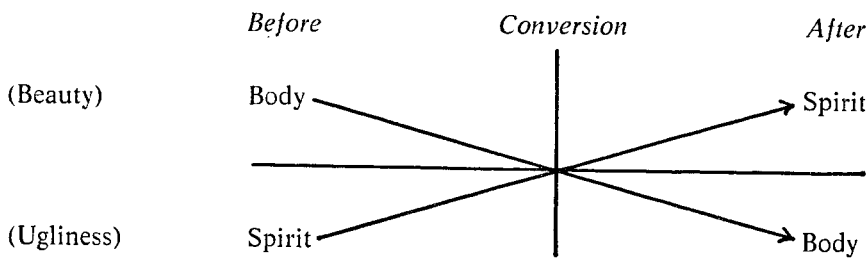
Coulor mua se bloie crine,
Blanche devint com une hermine.
(ll. 629-630)

Desous le goule, en le poitrine
Ert blanche conme flor d'espine.
(ll. 179-180)

Noire et muee ert le poitrine
A escorce samblant d'espine...
(ll. 641-642)

Very quickly the language becomes transparent and virtually ceases to be referential. The second *descriptio* describes *beauty* as much as does the first. Formal rhetoric belies the immediate « content » and expresses an inner or ultimate meaning. We are to understand the devastation of her body as a blossoming of her spirit, and the poet confirms that each time a thorn pierces her foot, a sin falls away from her: « por chou estoit molt lie / Quant ele soffroit le hasqie » (ll. 659-660).

The « chiasmic » form of Mary's penitential experience thus reproduces the form of her experience of sin. Clearly we are called upon to make the comparison and to perceive the juxtapositions of body and spirit, before and after her conversion, as a whole, balanced structure. One tends indeed (however apologetically) to schematize:



Set off against the static poem-in-simultaneity is its sequential development in narrative time. The coherence of Mary's literary personality emerges over a course of growth and evolution. Her subjectivity as a sinner had been described in mainly negative terms: heedlessness of her parents, disdain for money, indifference to suffering, fearlessness of death, etc. Reiteration of the adjectives, « caitive », « dolante », « maleüree », had conveyed the poet-moralist's judgment of her conduct and also indicated her own feelings of unhappiness (cf. the English ' wretch ', and ' wretched '). Conversion, death to the pleasures of the flesh, is the birth of an emotional self-awareness, a quickening of the inner life. Mortification of the body brings with it an experience of joy; beauty, external to her youth, now blossoms into psychological reality: « se vie ert tote esperitel » (l. 100).

With this phrase, which marks the midpoint of the *T* poem, the narrator leaves Mary in the wilderness and turns to introduce the character of Zosimas. Much is here omitted: the aging monk has no special, prior history or personal dilemma; he is described simply as one among the brethren at the abbey of St. John, « al cief de le forest » (l. 703). Zosimas in the *T* poem will remain entirely subordinate to Mary, and even the 120-line *digressio* devoted to him and his abbey, functions within Mary's life as an articulation of the passing of time. When the two meet, Mary's years of penitence are over, and we discover, with Zosimas, the accomplished saint.

In the *T* poem as in the *Vita*, Zosimas first sees Mary as a « shadow »: « Un umbre vit son essient / Qui estoit ou d'ome ou de feme, / Mais ele estoit de l'Egyptiene... » (ll. 824-826). We, however, do not see her through his eyes. The familiar account of their meeting transmitted by Paul the Deacon and his colleagues has here been very distinctively oriented by all that has preceded it; as God reveals the saint to Zosimas, we rediscover the familiar protagonist of the *T* poem:

> Dex l'avoit illuec amenee
> Ne voloit plus que fust celee;
> Descouvrir voloit le tresor
> Qui ert plus precieus que or.
> (ll. 827-830)

This image is particularly haunting. It was as « treasure » that she had offered her body to pay for her passage on the ship: « O moi je n'ai argent ne or, / Tot poés veïr mon tresor » (ll. 275-276). In her prayer to the Virgin, the same metaphor designated Christ: « Virge, tu portas le tresor / Qui plus vaut que argent ou or » (ll. 479-480, cf. ll. 727-728). Now she herself is the treasure revealed:

Quant il ot s'orison fenie
Le figure vit de Marie;
De Marie vit le figure,
Apertement sans couverture.
Environ li estoit se crine,
Tant blance conme flor d'espine.
Li blanc cavel et li delgiés
Li avaloient dusc'as piés;
El n'avoit altre vestement,
Quant ce li soslevoit le vent,
Dessous paroit le char bruslee
Del soleil et de le gelee.
(ll. 837-848)

This brief *descriptio* evokes, of course, the others quoted above; especially in the image of the hawthorn flower, the portraits of Mary the sinner and Mary the penitent resolve into one.

Much, indeed, is made of her nudity, concealed and revealed by the play of the wind. The underlying eroticism of the poem is still very manifest in this striking image, in her becoming physical modesty and in her flight from Zosimas' view: « Ne li os torner me faiture, / Car jo sui nue creature » (ll. 869-870). This charming language bespeaks not merely or strictly humility, but rather also the very delicate self-consciousness which she will express again when she reassures the frightened Zosimas: « Keles! dist ele, Zosimas, / Biax, ciers peres, por quoi dotas? / Por quoi dotas por une feme? » (ll. 993-995).

Mary's nudity — reminiscent of her former life — comes now to signify her submission to the will of God, in Whom she has been « hidden », and Who now wills to reveal her to the world. This she understands — « El ne se volra mais celer » (l. 873) — and

when Zosimas requests her to tell him her life story, she responds accordingly:

— Sire, che li respont Marie,
Je ne le te celerai mie,
Quant tu nue m'as esgardee,
Ja me vie ne t'iert celee.
(ll. 1013-1016)

Following her confession, there develops between Mary and Zosimas a personal relationship, one in which charity takes on something of the character and language of « courtly love ». Gently she refuses his request to remain with her; he must rather return to his monastery and tell no one of her existence: « Se Dex m'a a toi demoustree, / Par toi volrai estre celee » (ll. 1045-1046). He must protect the humility of the saint with the secrecy of a lover. The following year, he will emerge on the day of the Lord's supper to bring her communion; in the mean time, she must leave him, and his eyes follow her as she disappears into the desert. The holy one becomes for him a sort of *amor de lonh*, whom he awaits, at the appointed *rendez-vous*, in a state of extreme anxiety:

Illuec quida trover Marie,
Mais encore n'i estoit mie.
Crient de le rien que plus covoite
Que ses peciés li ait toloite,
Ou qu'el i eüst ja esté
Et qu'il eüst trop demoré,
De l'atendre soit anuie
Et por ce s'en fust repairie.
« Diex, dist il, Rois de majesté,
Ne me laissier ci esgaré,
Lai moi veïr encor le feme
Qui n'a sen per en tot le regne.
(ll. 1129-1140)

In order to reach him on the opposite bank of the Jordan, she walks across the water — and then falls to his feet, « molt cremuse de ses pechiés », in what amounts to a true miracle of humility. Together the priest and the saint celebrate the mass. Responding liturgically to one another, they prepare her way to heaven and articulate her re-integration within the church which

will canonize her. Their communion is also, clearly, a consummation in more personal terms, and the poet expresses by implication the extraordinary tenderness of the scene:

As piés li fait affliction,
Requiert lui se beneïchon.
Li sains (=Zosimas) l'en aïe a lever,
De pitié conmenche a plorer...

Quant de le tere s'est drechie,
Par vraie amistié l'a baisie.
Ele li quiert le Credo Dé
Qu'il li die por l'amor Dé,
Et il li dist molt belement
Et le Patrenostre ensement;
Le dame respont apres lui,
Molt s'entregardent ambedui.
(ll. 1173-1188)

The mass concludes with Mary's *Nunc dimittis*, her prayer for deliverance from this life and her confident hope for paradise: « Fait de t'ancele a ton plesir, / Car or volroie jou morir » (ll. 1227-1228). Mary has become an *ancilla Domini* like the Virgin herself, whom she will now rejoin.

In an hour she is transported many leagues to the place where Zosimas first met her; and there she gives up the spirit. According to the tradition, it remains for Zosimas to return the following year and bury her. Again his journey has the character of a quest for the beloved, in a state of anxious longing and « molt merveillex desirrer » (l. 1342). He seek « le feme / Qui n'a sen per en tot le regne » (ll. 1353-1354), and he prays:

Lai moi veïr le cors m'amie,
Car je quit que ele est fenie.
S'ele vesquist si com je croi
Ele fust ja venue a moi.
Ja esgaré ne me laissast,
Si com je crois, ens en cest gast.
(ll. 1357-1362)

The possibility becomes clearly manifest here that Mary might

intercede for him and guide his search in the wilderness; Mary effectively will lead him to Mary, and answer his prayer.

What Zosimas finds with the body of his lady is a renewed injunction to seek her, through prayer and penitence, through conscious participation in her mode of life. Resolved to follow her example, he returns to the abbey of St. John and tells her story to the assembled monks. Here the poet touches the root of the hagiographic tradition:

Li moine oent trestos ses dis,
A Diu en rendent il merchis.
Li abés pleure tenrrement
Et li autre moine ensement.
N'i ot nul, n'amendast se vie
Por les miracles de Marie.
Nos meïsmes nos amendon
Qui plus grant mestier en avon,
Et deprions ceste Marie
Dont nos avons oi le vie...
(ll. 1517-1526)

The *oremus* which concludes the poem defines its edifying purpose. Guided by a rhetoric of vernacular romance, we have been led to identify with the protagonist and to follow in narrative succession the stages of her quest. The coherence of the poem, on the other hand, has obliged us to perceive her history in simultaneity, as a unity and, ultimately, as a mystery. The mission of the poet-translator was in no wise to explain or resolve the transcendent self-contradiction that is Mary the Egyptian: he rather presents to the audience an emotional confrontation, an experience in immediacy, to be followed by an intuitive response in action.

From such a poetic enterprise the inspiration of Bernard of Clairvaux cannot have been far removed:

In ephitalamio hoc non verba pensanda sunt, sed affectus. Cur ita, nisi quod amor sanctus, quem totius huius voluminis unam constat esse materiam, non verbo sit aestimandus aut lingua, sed opere et veritate? Amor ubique loquitur; et si quis horum quae leguntur cupit notitiam adipisci, amet. Alioquin frustra ad audiendum legendumve amoris carmen, qui non amat, accedit: quoniam omnino non potest capere ignitum eloquium frigidum pectus. Quomodo enim graece loquentem non intelligit qui graece non novit, nec latine loquentem qui latinus non est,

et ita de ceteris, sic lingua amoris ei qui non amat barbara erit, erit sicut aes sonans aut cymbalum tinniens [22].

For the French poet also, the meaning of words is inseparable from feeling. He has indeed rendered the *Life* of Mary the Egyptian into vernacular poetry; in Bernard's more radical terms, he has « translated » the saint's life into the barbarous language of love [23].

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[22] « In this marriage song it is not the words which are to be pondered but the feeling. How so, were it not for the fact that holy love, the one subject of this volume, is not to be measured in words or language, but rather in action and in truth? Love speaks everywhere: he who would understand what he reads must, then, love. In vain would one who does not love attempt to hear or read the poem of love; a cold heart could not grasp this fiery eloquence. Just as one who does not know Greek cannot understand it spoken, and neither can one who is not Latin understand Latin speech (and so, likewise, with other tongues), so also the language of love will sound barbarous to an unloving ear, like the sounding of a trumpet or a clanging cymbal » (Sermo 79: 1, *op. cit.*, vol. II, Rome, 1958).

[23] Since this article went to press there as appeared a study by Brigitte Cazelles, *Modèle ou mirage*: Marie l'Egyptienne, « French Review », LIII: 1, 1979, pp. 13-22.