

1988

# The Thread of Ariadne: A Collection of Essays by the Faculty of the Cooperative Research Center in the Humanities Dominican College of San Rafael

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## Recommended Citation

Conlan, Sister M. Samuel O.P.; Umphrey, Priscilla Jackson; Maltman, Sister M. Nicholas; Green, Sister Barbara O.P.; Novak, Philip; Boitano, James J.; Ross, Leslie D.; Dougherty, Sister Patricia O.P.; Lockhart, Wood; and Savant, John, "The Thread of Ariadne: A Collection of Essays by the Faculty of the Cooperative Research Center in the Humanities Dominican College of San Rafael" (1988). *Faculty Authored Books and Book Contributions*. 98.

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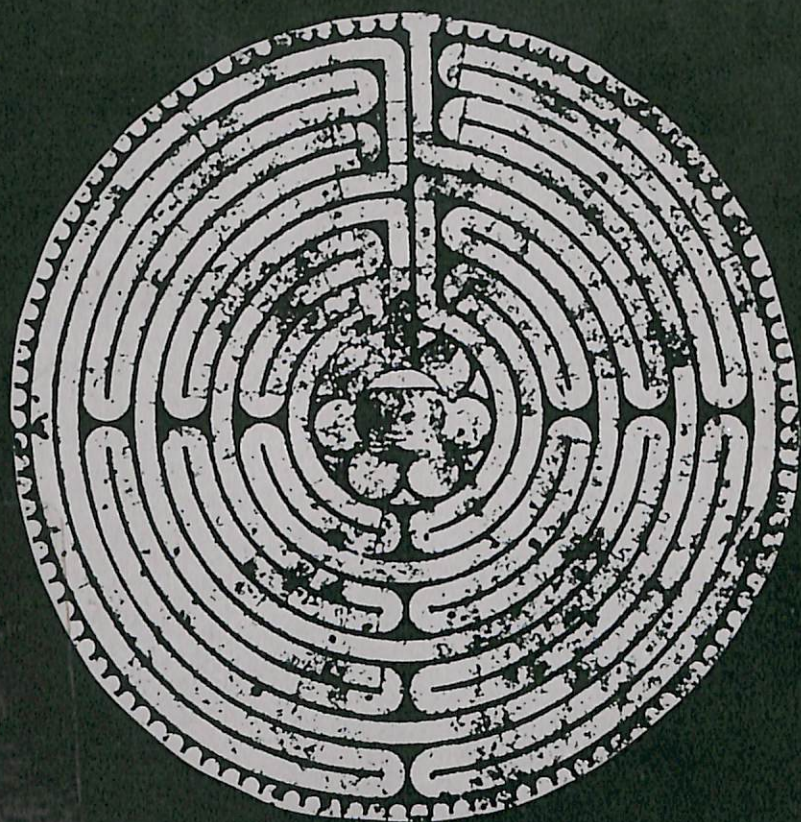
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of the Cooperative Research Center in the Humanities  
Dominican College of San Rafael*

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Coordinated by Priscilla J. Umphrey

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*A Collection of Essays  
By the Faculty of the Cooperative  
Research Center in the Humanities  
Dominican College*

Coordinated by Priscilla J. Umphrey

San Rafael, California  
1988

Q.E.D. PRESS  
Fort Bragg, California

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First Edition

Published by Q.E.D. Press, Fort Bragg, CA 95437

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Dominican College of San Rafael

1520 Grand Avenue, San Rafael, CA 94901

Library of Congress No. 88-30860

ISBN 0-936609-14-1

Book Production by Comp-Type, Inc., Fort Bragg, CA 95437

Printed in the U.S.A.

110884

***Sister M. Nicholas Maltman, O.P.***

1915-1986

*Scholar, Mentor, Friend*

## The Thread of Ariadne





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## Introduction

This volume is a *Festschrift* with a difference: a collection of essays written by colleagues to honor students—past, present, future—rather than an aged academic kindred spirit. The end-product of a “Great Conversation” which extended over two years (1985-1987), the volume contains ten essays by nine Dominican College faculty members.

Each essay has been developed in the context of inter-disciplinary discussions to which specialists in art history, history, literature, and philosophy contributed their knowledge and insights. Lest that statement suggest placid armchair soliloquies, let me quickly add that the discussions were frank and vigorous, and served to focus, refine, and sometimes change altogether the final topics of the essays.

These essays range in subject from a personal defense of piecemeal learning to instructions in how to read a specific stained-glass window above the north aisle of Chartres cathedral. In symbol and metaphor they range from seeing the world in a hazelnut to searching for wisdom in a computer. Geographically they range over Greece, the lands of the Old Testament, France, Ireland, England, the U.S.A. One way or another, all the essays are concerned with truth and the pursuit of truth; small wonder, since their authors are educators in the liberal arts tradition.

Implicitly or explicitly, the essays pose questions such as these: is a liberal arts curriculum meant to be primarily a storehouse or a workshop?

what is the appropriate relationship between student and teacher? how do our fundamental assumptions about human nature affect our relationships? do we tell the truth in words only? how do science and technology affect human observation in the search for truth? is truth another word for reality, and vice versa? how can we promote self-realization within a frame of social commitment?

The relationship between student and teacher meant to be served by this volume is that of companions on a journey. The book is a kind of *vade mecum*, each essay like an arch in Tennyson's "Ulysses," through which "Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades / Forever and forever when I move." The essays have been written in the spirit of "a place where the ultimate questions are honored as questions," and they rest on the basic assumption that learning can lead to the good life, *is* in some measure the good life.

Other responsibilities required me to absent myself from this group of colleagues just as the "Great Conversation" officially began. So it is both honor and pleasure for me to invite you now, on my colleagues' behalf, to pick up this book in the same spirit of discovery in which it was written; to trace in it the threads that lead us "back to the great storehouse of our cultural memory and to the mystery at the center"; to let it be for you a stimulus to your own great conversations.

Sister M. Samuel Conlan, O.P.  
Professor of English  
(on leave 1985-1988)

## **Note to our Students**

As Sister Samuel has noted in her introductory comments, these essays were written by a group of Dominican College faculty members for a very specific audience—Dominican College students. Throughout the process of discussing, writing, and editing this companion text for our courses in classical, medieval, and Renaissance studies, our aim, as we stated it in the proposal for undertaking this project, was “to produce a collection of integrative essays . . . which will serve the students . . . in the difficult task of seeing connections among disciplines; as models of good writing and critical analysis; and as springboards for discussion in the classroom.”

Since these essays were meant to serve as supplemental reading, we have, wherever possible, avoided repeating material that is the subject of classroom lectures and your primary texts. Since the essays are meant to stimulate discussion, we have striven to make them thought-provoking rather than comprehensive. We have, for the most part, been more interested in raising questions than in answering them—in arousing conjecture than in supplying information.

As even the most perfunctory skimming of these pages will show, we were also more concerned with exploring specific ideas which excited our curiosities and imaginations than with giving equal time to every era within our chosen time frame. We are well aware of the gaps—there is

much about Greece here, and little about Rome; much about the medieval and little about the Renaissance—and we hope someday to fill them. But if our choices seem whimsical or quixotic, remember that our approach to choosing topics for this volume was that of a student confronted with one of those frustratingly open-ended assignments: “write \_\_\_\_ number of pages about something we have studied this term.” These essays were conceived, to quote again from the proposal, “not with the goal of advancing the frontiers of knowledge in humanistic studies (though that may result) but with the purpose of doing better what the humanities are supposed to do: offering a synthesized, integrated education, which illuminates and supports subsequent education and life experience.”

We further determined that we wanted these essays to illustrate that one can write in a learned fashion without resorting to tortured academicism, and to use “distinctly individual” writing styles. This objective we embraced with delight, and you will find our distinctly individual voices piping out from every page of the volume. I would be extremely surprised, in fact, if someone acquainted with these writers could read more than a paragraph or two without identifying the author of any particular offering.

We also wanted to illustrate how one goes about what has come to be known as the “writing process,” and so, since 1985, we have been carrying our own and each other’s drafts, and revisions, and revisions of revisions, into the classroom to show our students that even those with academic titles do not find writing a simple task, and that an essay requiring research and critical thinking is not to be pounded out in one evening—or even in one grueling all-night session.

As observant readers, you will quickly notice that we have not been consistent, throughout the volume, in the matter of documentation. We felt it best for each author to remain faithful to the stylistic conventions of his or her own discipline; for instance, scholars of history turn to the latest edition of Turabian for advice about notes and bibliographies, while scholars of literature rely upon the most recent pronouncements of the Modern Language Association.

We chose the title of Sister Nicholas’s essay, “The Thread of Ariadne,” as the title for the volume as a whole because Ariadne’s thread, as it brings to mind the labyrinth, seems to us, in Sister’s words, “a positive figure” which exemplifies what learning and life are all about. “The path is convoluted but leads inevitably to the center. . . . It is a figure in which one finds one’s way.”

It is in that spirit of finding one’s way and in the spirit of collegiality and of delight in exploring each other’s special fields of study that we wrote these essays. Finding the path was not always easy, nor was following its convolutions, but the experience was gratifying, and we learned a great

deal from each other. We hope that you, after reading and discussing these essays, will be able to say the same.

Priscilla J. Umphrey  
Department of English  
1988





## The Thread of Ariadne

*Sister M. Nicholas Maltman, O.P.*

STUDENTS ARE FOREVER BEING TOLD: "Study, keep the mind on the page, organize." The truth is, however, that some of the more interesting adventures of the mind come about not through study or organized endeavor, but seemingly by chance. We move within a web of being. Coming at us from all directions are sounds, sights, sense data of every variety. And the mind, like some enigmatic fastidious spider, digests what it pleases, rejects much, ignores much. Curious. Why the mind lets one bit of information go, stores another deep away, allows another only a tentative stay on the periphery is a puzzle the solution to which I have not the answer. The mind is a mystery.

In that short novel, *Thésée*, written by André Gide in 1944, Daedalus talks to Theseus, who, bent on killing the minotaur, is about to enter the labyrinth. He gives this bit of advice concerning the thread of Ariadne: "This thread will be your link with the past. Go back to it. Go back to yourself. For nothing can begin from nothing, and it is from your past, and from what you are at this moment, that what you are going to be must spring."<sup>1</sup> The advice is sound. The real problem is not the literal labyrinth; the real problem is the complexity of the human mind at whose center sits the Self.

The *Thésée* is an autobiographical novel. Gide is looking for his true self and finds his way back to the past through the Greek myth of Theseus and the minotaur. He is doing what so many modern novelists, musicians and poets have done and are doing—he is looking for his past in the past of western culture. Ariadne's thread is not just one thread; it is any thread that leads us back to the great storehouse of our cultural memory, and to the mystery at the center.

Ariadne's thread, then, is a very versatile bit of magic. I would like to use it and the myth of Theseus and the minotaur to look at one path of learning, at one way by which knowledge gets into us. It might be called the piecemeal way of learning, and I would like to use the piecemeal way I came to a knowledge of the Theseus myth as an example—if not as an exemplum. Yes, it is perfectly proper to talk of one's self in an essay, to use "I." As one of my favorite graduate professors used to say, "If you mean I, say I." And I mean I. But the "I" could be anyone, any student with open eyes, who wants to see, wants to know.

I was not a particularly earnest student, but I loved a good story. Among the good stories were the myths of Greece. I came to them young, and that is a fine thing. Still, one can come to them at any time; now is not too late. My two favorite myths were that of the Argonauts and that of Theseus and the minotaur. The Argonauts, you remember, were the mariners who, led by Jason, sailed out in the ship *Argo* to find the golden fleece. Its appeal was the appeal of adventure. The Argonauts were our first space travelers; they invented the ship and sailed away beyond the boundaries of the known world. The Theseus story fascinated for other reasons; it was a story of sacrifice. Theseus offered his life to save the seven Athenian youths and the seven Athenian maidens from the minotaur. He had, of course, the lovely Ariadne, who offered him the golden thread by which he found his way into and out of the labyrinth. The story is filled with what scholars today call "fairy-tale motifs," bits of stories that keep recurring in tales of all ages: the quest, the helper, the thread, the fighting of a monster. Note that I have been using the words *myth* and *story* interchangeably. For to those who come to myths early, myths are merely fictions, marvelous stories belonging to ancient peoples. And, quite rightly. Whatever a myth is or is not, it is first of all a *mythos*—a story. I was, however, naive to think that a myth is no more than that.

By the time that I was a sophomore in high school, I had grown out of myths as well as of much else. The myths turned literary. I met them at the bottom of the page in footnotes—not the true myth but the desiccated bones of the myth. The note, perhaps, made clear some allusion in an ode of Keats or in a dramatic monologue of Eliot or explained the source of a plot in Chaucer or Shakespeare. I kept meeting Theseus as a pale shadow of his former self. There was Theseus of the "Knight's Tale" and Theseus of

*Midsummer Night's Dream*, but how little they resembled the swashbuckling hero of the old minotaur story. We got points, however, for knowing the myths, and, if called upon, I was pleased to elaborate on the footnote. The myths, then, persisted in the memory even though my interest in them had been quenched.

In college my interest in, at least, the Theseus myth revived. We read the *Phaedo* of Plato, that marvelous dialogue which revolves around the circumstances surrounding Socrates' death and which gives us Socrates' last conversation. The dialogue begins sometime after Socrates has been put to death. Echecrates had been away from Athens at the time and wants Phaedo to tell him the details of the last conversation. He says, "We were rather surprised to find that he did not die till so long after the trial. Why was that, Phaedo?" I give now Phaedo's reply and the ensuing dialogue:

Phaedo: It was an accident, Echecrates. The stern of the ship, which the Athenians sent to Delos, happened to have been crowned on the day before the trial.

Echecrates: And what is this ship?

Phaedo: It is the ship, as the Athenians say, in which Theseus took the seven youths and the seven maidens to Crete, and saved them from death, and himself was saved. The Athenians made a vow then to Apollo, the story goes, to send a sacred mission to Delos every year, if they should be saved; and from that time to this they have always sent it to the god, every year. They have a law to keep the city pure as soon as the mission begins, and not to execute any sentence of death until the ship has returned from Delos; and sometimes, when it is detained by contrary winds, that is a long while.<sup>2</sup>

Well, that passage startled me. Was the Theseus and minotaur story not a myth, not a fiction? I asked questions of the professor, but this was a philosophy class and his interests did not extend to minotaurs. All that I could learn was that the myth had been kept alive. But alive from when? Was Theseus a legendary rather than a mythic figure? I had begun to know that there was a difference. Still, I sensed something "fishy" about Phaedo's explanation. How could the ship that sailed out of the harbor of Athens on the day before Socrates' trial be the same ship that sailed with Theseus on his mission to Crete? King Minos, I had been led to believe, was a historical figure, a real person, who lived somewhere around 1300-1250 BC. We meet his grandson Idomeneus fighting the Trojans in Homer's *Iliad*. How could a ship have lasted from 1250 to 399, the date of Socrates' death? To give some credit to Phaedo, he does introduce his story of the ship with the words "as the Athenians say."

Had I looked into the whole of *Plutarch's Lives*, had I not read just the one or two excerpts assigned in Roman History a few days previously, I would have learned that Theseus was also one of Plutarch's heroes and that, furthermore, he too was skeptical about that Athenian ship. He attempts an explanation, and here it is:

The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel.<sup>3</sup>

A literate explanation, but as suspect as the Athenian ship.

It was not until a doctorate later that another piece of the Theseus story chanced my way. I was, then, myself teaching in a humanities program in which Greek literature, history, art history, and philosophy were taught in conjunction one with the other. It was my first year of college teaching, and I was busily doing some background reading in Greek history. In the process I came to Pisistratus, that great tyrant of sixth-century Athens (ca. 560-527 BC). An interesting figure, but what stunned me was the statement that Pisistratus had deliberately exploited the Athenian belief in myth and had raised Theseus from a minor local hero to a national symbol, that it had probably been Pisistratus who set up the whole pageantry of Theseus' ship and created the mission to Delos. Now, that was disillusioning—as so often truth at first discovery is. So, Henry VII in setting up King Arthur as his ancestor and Hitler in manipulating the Siegfried myth had a precedent in old Pisistratus.

But what was Pisistratus' point? Why Theseus if he were, indeed, only a local hero? Why not Achilles or Ajax? The answer was there in the history books. It was just because Theseus was a local hero that he suited Pisistratus' purpose. The Athenians remembered him as an early king who had saved the seven youths and seven maidens from King Minos and who had brought fame and prosperity to Athens. It was this core that Pisistratus and his sons exploited for propaganda reasons. The Theseus we meet in Thucydides, the great Athenian historian of the Peloponnesian wars, is a Theseus who has been through the propaganda machine of Pisistratus. Theseus no longer sounds mythical or even legendary; he seems a fully fledged historical character:

In Theseus, however, they had a king of equal intelligence and power; and one of the chief features in his organization of the country was to

abolish the council-chambers and magistrates of the petty cities, and to merge them in the single council-chamber and town-hall of the present capital. Individuals might still enjoy their private property just as before, but they were henceforth compelled to have only one political centre, viz. Athens; which thus counted all the inhabitants of Attica among her citizens, so that when Theseus died he left a great state behind him.<sup>4</sup>

Pisistratus saw the need for a unified Athens; he established a policy to encourage that unity. Clearly, he saw Theseus as lending romance to that policy—thus, the propaganda. Perhaps, too, he had an eye on Athens' great rival, Sparta, who had long boasted of their great hero, Hercules. Certain it is that not until the late sixth century is there evidence of a flourishing Theseus cult; nor is it until the late sixth century that the Theseus story, now much elaborated, appears everywhere in Greek painting, sculpture, and drama.

In that first year of teaching the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, I looked for references to Theseus, but found few. Homer mentions him not more than three or four times. I then discovered that many scholars were suspicious of just those passages and suspected that they had been interpolated by Pisistratus to cover up Homer's neglect. Yet, there was one passage that was not suspect; and, although it was not a direct reference to Theseus, it did refer to Daedalus and Ariadne and Knossos—all elements in the earliest segment of the Theseus story. In describing Achilles' shield, Homer says,

And the renowned smith of the strong arms made elaborate on it a dancing floor, like that which once in the wide spaces of Knosos Daidalos built for Ariadne of the lovely tresses.<sup>5</sup>

A beautiful but puzzling passage. I pondered the problem of Theseus, Ariadne, the labyrinth, and the minotaur. I tried to conjure up the dancing floor. Was there a connection between the dancing floor and the labyrinth? Could the dancing floor have been the origin of the labyrinth? From that time on, my interest in Theseus subsided, and I turned my attention to labyrinths.

I learned from the art historians that one of the earliest depictions of Theseus occurs on the François vase, which was fashioned in the sixth century, a century later than Homer, a little earlier than Pisistratus. It shows, amongst much else, Theseus, Ariadne, and a dance procession. I found that interesting. I went to Plutarch, for I now knew that his was one of the fullest accounts of the Theseus story; it is, in fact, the first of the *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch parallels Theseus with Romulus. "It seemed to me," he writes, "that I must make the founder of lovely and famous Athens

the counterpart and parallel to the father of invincible and glorious Rome."<sup>6</sup> He gives a detailed account of Theseus; he has sifted, as a good historian should, through all the earlier accounts. Oddly enough, he gives short shrift to Theseus and the minotaur; probably, he took it for granted that the story was too well known to be repeated in detail. But here is what he writes about Theseus' return home from Crete:

On his voyage from Crete, Theseus put in at Delos, and having sacrificed to the god and dedicated in his temple the image of Aphrodite which he had received from Ariadne, he danced with his youths a dance which they say is still performed by the Delians, being an imitation of the circling passages in the Labyrinth, and consisting of certain rhythmic involutions and evolutions. This kind of dance, as Dicaearchus tells us, is called by the Delians The Crane, and Theseus danced it round the altar called Keraton. . . . (I: 45)

There once again was the dance. According to Plutarch, the labyrinth came before the dance; but might it not have been the other way around? Might not the dance have given rise to the labyrinth? Homer implies that everyone knows about the dance floor which Daedalus made in Knossos for Ariadne of the lovely tresses. But, what kind of dance? And what was the occasion for the dance?

I began this essay to make a point about learning, not so much to talk of Theseus and the labyrinth. The point is that we learn much in piecemeal fashion. While the mind is busy studying in a systematic fashion as students do, or should do, in school, the mind is inadvertently picking up stray bits of information. Starting out, we have no notion which bit of information will link to another bit nine months or ten years or thirty years down the road. Each student must start from wherever he or she is, from whatever little or much there is now in the storehouse of the mind. Otherwise, no bit of information is likely to link with another to form that Ariadne's thread that will lead to the mystery at the center or to the city of Jerusalem. There will be no unexpected adventures of the mind. In fact, Ariadne's thread did lead me to the city of Jerusalem.

Bit by bit the labyrinth had begun to fascinate; it began to draw me into its center. Through the years I had been not so much gathering information as storing whichever piece of the Theseus story came my way. Each portion of the story joined with what had gone before; only gradually had I begun to sense a mystery. The mind, of course, likes mystery, but at the same time it craves consistency. It wants each particle of data to fit neatly into a chain of thought that leads somewhere. It is just when things do not connect, when there seems to be a link missing, that the mind grows most active. It insists on knowing.

Clearly, there was, in my mind, a link missing between the dancing floor at Knossos and the labyrinth. Was the dancing floor which Daedalus built for Ariadne one thing and the labyrinth that Ariadne knew another? Homer lived some six hundred years after Minos. He expects everyone to know about the famous dancing floor; he says nothing about the labyrinth. I was no longer willing to wait until some new piece of information floated my way. Some active investigation was called for. I turned to the historians, archaeologists, and comparative mythologists. As Ezra Pound says, "You can't expect to be carried up Mt. Helicon in an easy chair."

Here is the gist of what I found. First, some hard information about mazes and labyrinths. Irrespective of what you might find in the dictionary, a maze is one thing and a labyrinth another. They are not the same. A maze or, as the Germans say, an *irrgarten* or "error garden" is a building or garden which offers many entrances to the seeker, but which leads one into blind alleys and into error, into losing one's way. It is a negative figure. In contrast, a labyrinth provides only one entrance. There are no choices; the path is convoluted but leads inevitably to the center. The principle of the labyrinth is to get as much linear movement as possible within the circle, square, or octagon. And, to return out of the labyrinth, one must turn oneself around 180 degrees and go out the same way one went in. It is a positive figure. It is a figure in which one finds one's way.<sup>7</sup>

The maze as a place probably goes back to ancient Egypt where it developed out of the desire to hide the mummy of the Pharaoh and its possessions from robbers and intruders. Pliny, in his *Natural History*, claims that Daedalus adapted his design for the labyrinth from the famous Egyptian labyrinth of King Petesuchis or King Tithoes. Commenting on Daedalus' adaptation of this labyrinth, Pliny writes:

. . . he reproduced only a hundredth part of it containing passages that wind, advance and retreat in a bewilderingly intricate manner. It is not just a narrow strip of ground comprising many miles of 'walks' or 'rides,' such as we see exemplified in our tessellated floors or in the ceremonial game played by our boys in the Campus Martius, but doors are let into the walls at frequent intervals to suggest deceptively the way ahead and to force the visitor to go back upon the very same tracks that he has already followed in his wanderings.<sup>8</sup>

Note, that Pliny is, in fact, distinguishing the maze as found in Egypt from the figure patterned on the tessellated Roman floors and in the ceremonial game played by the Roman boys in the Campus Martius. Note, too, that he takes it for granted that Daedalus' creation was a maze. There Pliny is certainly wrong, as was the tradition which he was following, as is the tradition which has been handed down to us in the so-called myth of

Theseus and the minotaur.

True, our present association of the word *labyrinth* with maze undoubtedly stems from the story of Theseus and the minotaur. Theseus needed the thread of Ariadne to find his way into the center and out again. Quite surely, in the story as we have it, Theseus did enter a maze of some variety. So Plutarch understood the story, and so he recorded it for posterity. Already in Plato's day, the word *labyrinth* was used as a literary metaphor to describe a situation which is difficult, obscure, tortuous, entangled. In Plato's dialogue, *Euthydemus*, Socrates speaking to Crito says: "At last we came to the kingly art [the art of politics], and enquired whether that gave and caused happiness, and then we got into a labyrinth, and when we thought we were at the end, came out again at the beginning, having still to seek as much as ever."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Plato in identifying labyrinth with maze is in error. According to those whose business it is to know about such things, the identification of labyrinth as maze derives from innumerable misunderstandings.

First, the word *labyrinth* is generally thought to come from the Lydian word *labrys* meaning double axe. Now, the double axe appears often in Knossos as a cult symbol: it was the symbolic weapon of Minoan divinity. The palace was called the house of the labrys or house of the double axe. The palace became known as *labyrinthos*.<sup>10</sup> It was both the dwelling of the king and the dwelling of the priestess-goddess. It was a sacred place—a sanctuary—as well as the center of the kingdom's business.

Before we go further, it should be said that scholars are still in dispute over the chronology of the Minos/Theseus story. Did Theseus fight the Cretan bull before or after the 1480/70 eruption of Santorini, when the waves from the great back-wash devastated Crete and its many cities? That is the question. But, whether one opts for the *before* or the *after*, there still remain incongruous elements, historical inaccuracies.<sup>11</sup> It is well to remember that we are dealing with legend, with a few facts that have been transmuted through centuries of imaginative storytelling. And, even if we accept the suggestion that King Minos of the legend was the Mycenaean ruler of Knossos following the eruption of Santorini, that still leaves some five hundred to six hundred years of storytelling between Theseus and the first references to him in literature and art. In short, we are not on the solidest historical grounds in whatever we might say of him.

However, archeologists have over the last one hundred years been hard at work. Sir Arthur Evans in the early nineteen hundreds excavated the Palace of Minos and endeavored to reconstruct it. He quite disproved the old notion that the Palace which occupies the traditional seat of Minos was itself labyrinthine in nature.<sup>12</sup> He did, however, himself entertain the idea that any mainland Greek coming to Crete and first beholding the Palace of Minos would have, like any country cousin, been literally amazed at what



he saw. The vast complex of room after room, corridors, terraces, stairways, cellars, courtyards might well have seemed a maze. Hence, perhaps, the association of maze with King Minos's Palace, the *labyrinthos*.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars, however, consider it more likely that the idea of maze appeared only after Knossos had been finally destroyed, somewhere around 1350.<sup>14</sup> Nothing would have remained of the vast complex that had been the Palace except the stone foundation with its half-walls and rubble, the whole appearing not unlike a maze. The latest scholar, Hermann Kern, says bluntly that the labyrinth as building existed no more than did the minotaur.<sup>15</sup> But that is to jump ahead of my story.

Now, to return to King Minos and the Greek connection. It is likely that King Minos, a powerful sea king, did exact tribute of young men and women of Athens. And, if King Minos was, as recent investigation seems to show, not a Cretan but a Mycenaean or Achaean, then there is more than one Greek connection.<sup>16</sup> Remember that Homer's Agamemnon comes from Mycenae, that Homer never speaks of Greeks, but of Hellenes or Achaeans. Beneath modern Athens are the remains of an ancient Mycenaean or Achaean fortress. It is not improbable that Theseus, a minor Achaean prince, did accompany hostages to Crete and somehow saved them through the help of the priestess whose name was Ariadne or Ariadne-Aphrodite or Ariadne-Demeter. The historical kernel of the story was undoubtedly embellished by later travelers to Crete who saw in the west entrance hall frescoes representing bull rodeos, processions of youths and maidens, and in the north portico a fresco which depicts two young men and a woman leaping over the back of a bull. The bulls, the youths and maidens, the maze-like ruins of the palace, with perhaps some memory of the bull cult as central to Minoan worship, would have been sufficient to generate the story of Theseus and the minotaur. Too, the palace was perhaps still known as the *labyrinthos* though its original meaning would have been long forgotten.

It is a curious fact that in the fourth century BC, Knossos, fallen on less heroic times, looked back to its legendary past and issued a series of coins bearing on one side a circular figure and on the other side the minotaur. The circular figure on the coin is not a maze but a true labyrinth.<sup>17</sup> This Cretan labyrinth, whatever its source, became the model for the Roman mosaic labyrinths. The entrance path proceeds inward a short space, then turns right and goes almost full circle; then back in the opposite direction and so through a series of full circuits to the center.<sup>18</sup> There are seven circuits—some say to commemorate the seven youths and the seven maidens.

Was there then once a true labyrinth in ancient Knossos, quite apart from the fabled maze? And, if so, what exactly was its purpose? Yes, says Károly Kerényi, there was in Knossos a true labyrinth. Kerényi is a Greek

scholar much interested in myth; in 1942 he suggested that the Cretan labyrinth began as a ground plan for the chain dance.<sup>19</sup> The chain dance was apparently a part of the ceremonial rites at Knossos and is to this very day the favorite folk dance of the Cretans. Kerényi, like myself, had been intrigued by Homer's description of the dance depicted on Achilles' shield and especially by the mention of Daedalus having built a dance floor for Ariadne. He supposed that the dance floor had been more than a clearing in the earth and more than a winnowing floor which was the ordinary location for ancient dances. He believed that quite likely it had been an inlaid floor so laid that the circular and pendulum motion of the dance was made a part of the floor. Hence, the labyrinth was built into the pavement. The chain dance, he believed, was an essential part of the initiation rites into the ceremonial worship of Ariadne, the priestess-goddess.<sup>20</sup>

So, the legendary Theseus, Prince of Athens, who accompanied the hostages to Crete, probably became involved in the chain dance in the great Palace of Knossos, and probably through the help of Ariadne, the priestess, he and the seven youths and seven maidens were saved. He may well have instituted a thanksgiving service at Delos, just as Plutarch says he did, where a legend was preserved that Ariadne—representing Aphrodite—gave Theseus a statue of the goddess and that, while the statue was being set up, the figure of the labyrinth was danced by the rescued youths and maidens.

And the chain of dancers probably gave rise to the thread of Ariadne. The thread is common to many fairy tales, and when long after the event the labyrinth was transformed into the maze, the thread substituted for the dancers.

Only gradually had it dawned on me that the Theseus story had been woven together over a vast period of time and that it was, in fact, not a true myth at all, but rather a legend or heroic saga—a saga to be sure with mythic elements. A true myth stems from the people or from a race of people; its authors and origins are deep in the past and quite unknown. We can guess, but not know, that true myths sprang out of the psychic energies produced by ancient fears and anxieties, out of religious awe and wonder, that the psychic energies were somehow spent or ordered in the transmutation into story, into symbols and images. Simple as myths appear, they tend to embody or to illuminate expandable truths of human nature or of human history. The majority of the participants of a true myth are supernatural. A true myth explains how and why things came into being; it tells of events that took place in primordial time—when things got started. Now the Pluto/Proserpine story fits the definition and pattern of a true myth. The Theseus story does not. It is a legend insofar as Theseus, King Minos, the labyrinth, the dance, even the bull, have some footing in history, in actual events. It is heroic saga insofar as one hero gives unity to a series of extraordinary happenings. True, the story takes shape around common

themes and at points parallels one or another of the ancient myths: it is a quest story, a trial story; it involves a descent into the underworld. And, at points the supernatural enters in. But, while not a true myth, the Theseus story has a mythic center; and the mythic center is the labyrinth itself.

The labyrinth is a very ancient figure and by no means confined to Crete. The oldest graphic of the labyrinth is that scratched into a rock of a subterranean grave in Luzzanas, Sardinia, and can be dated on good grounds as three thousand years before Christ.<sup>21</sup> The labyrinth in origin seems to have been connected with life and death. The entrance into life is the entrance into death; the turning about at the center signifies rebirth, the finding or entering into new life. Perhaps, at the very start, the labyrinth represented the journey into the underworld, and imitating the journey's path ensured the candidate a safe journey there and back again. Later, the labyrinth rituals were the base of initiation rites and ceremonies which were intended to teach the neophyte during his sojourn on earth how to enter the domains of death without getting lost. Mircea Eliade writes:

In a sense, the trials of Theseus in the labyrinth of Crete were of equal significance with the expedition to get the golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides, or to get the golden fleece of Colchis. Each of these trials is basically a victorious entry into a place hard of access, and well defended, where there is to be found a more or less obvious symbol of power, sacredness and immortality.<sup>22</sup>

So much for labyrinths. I had found out more than I could assimilate. My curiosity was assuaged. Years went by—twenty to be exact.

I was enjoying a well-earned sabbatical in Europe. The year was 1982. I entered the cathedral of Chartres. Now, one goes to Chartres to see the glorious windows and the hauntingly beautiful sculptured figures on the exterior. Gothic architects built to lift the heart and mind to God. And also the eyes. One instinctively looks up. That is why, I suppose, that although I had been in Chartres several times previously I had never looked at the floor. This time I looked at the floor or, more accurately, the floor presented itself to my vision. I saw quite unmistakably a great labyrinth inlaid into the stone pavement of the great nave. I questioned why the medieval stonemasons had set into the floor of a Christian church a pagan symbol. The thread of Ariadne was at the stretching point. I was still within the labyrinth.

This labyrinth at Chartres was no small figure. Upon inquiry I found that its diameter, some thirteen meters, is almost equal to the diameter of the great rose window which glows just above it. The path of stone, the labyrinthine path, moves first in one quarter of the great circle, then in another, and so gives the effect of a cross overlaying the whole. Further,

there are eleven circuits rather than seven. Hence, although the Chartres labyrinth is a true labyrinth, it does not follow the Cretan pattern. Originally, a brass plate covered the central stone, but unfortunately it was used towards the war effort in the French revolution.<sup>23</sup> A description of the brass, however, remains: in the center had been engraved the figures of Theseus and the minotaur. The labyrinth was known to the people as “le dédale,” “la lieue,” and “le chemin de Jérusalem.” “Le dédale” refers, of course, to the legendary builder of the labyrinth at Knossos. “La lieue” is not so easy to explain. *Lieue* means league; a league equals four kilometers which is considerably longer than the actual labyrinthine path which is exactly 261.50 meters or 857 feet in length. The usual explanation is that the medieval Christians traveled the path on their knees—and that took them an hour’s time, the same amount of time that it takes to cover a league on foot. The title “la lieue” implies, then, that the labyrinth provided a penitential path. The designation “le chemin de Jérusalem” would seem to imply that for the medieval Christian the linear road of the labyrinth symbolized the road to Jerusalem. Perhaps those poor who could not afford the time or money to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem traveled in substitution the road to the center of the labyrinth and out again. Hence, it was equivalent to a trip to the Holy Land, and considerably cheaper. Scholars think, however, that the more probable explanation is that rather than representing a pilgrimage to the earthly city of Jerusalem, it more likely led to the Heavenly Jerusalem, Jérusalem Céleste.<sup>24</sup> If so, this would mean that the Christian, too, saw the labyrinth as a symbol for life, death, and rebirth. Death was the entrance to paradise. What, then, of Theseus, the minotaur, and Ariadne’s thread? Theseus was seen either as Everyman or as Christ. The minotaur stood for Self or Devil. Ariadne’s thread became God’s providence or Christ as the way, the truth, and the light, or the Church itself.

Actually, the above are all educated guesses. Unfortunately, only guessing remains to us, for the significance of the Christian labyrinth, as such labyrinths are now called, was lost in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—and, perhaps, was already lost in the fifteenth century when the maze first began to be used graphically.<sup>25</sup> There had, also, been great labyrinths inlaid into the pavements of the cathedrals of Amiens and of Reims; those labyrinths had been destroyed by their abbots in the eighteenth century because children came into the church, played games on the labyrinthine paths, and disturbed the people at their prayers. The games were apparently similar to our hop-scotch, for the journey had to be made without stepping on any line. But, the children were noisy at their play; the abbots received complaints, and the labyrinths were removed. Fortunately, other Christian labyrinths remain.

After leaving Chartres, I did not go looking for labyrinths, but I kept

finding them in the most unexpected places. Of course, one tends to see what one has on the mind. Still, I had other things on the mind besides labyrinths. A major intent of the sabbatical was to put together a slide presentation for my Dante class. So, I went to Italy. I sought out the cathedral of Lucca; I wanted to take a picture of *Il Volto Santo*, the Holy Face, mentioned by Dante in Canto XXI of the *Inferno*. There set into the wall of the cathedral at Lucca was a mosaic labyrinth. I thought I could make out Theseus and the minotaur at the center, but perhaps not. At the "entrance" to the labyrinth, however, there is the following inscription. I translate from the Latin: "This is the labyrinth which Daedalus the Cretan built, from which nobody escaped who had gone inside, nor did Theseus without the help of Ariadne." The mosaic dates from the twelfth century and may have been part of a floor of an earlier church. In Pavia where I went to pay my respects to Boethius and St. Augustine, both buried, as Dante tells us, in the church of San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro, I saw in the neighboring basilica of San Michele the remnants of another wall labyrinth not unlike that in Lucca and likewise dating from the twelfth century. There was yet another in San Vitale in Ravenna, another in Santa Maria Trastevere in Rome. Surely, these Christian labyrinths derived from the Cretan labyrinth. Surely, here was another instance of the adaptable Christians taking a pagan symbol and adjusting it to their own purposes as they had, for example, with the signs of the zodiac. Or, was the labyrinth itself a kind of Jungian archetype imprinted somehow in the psyche of the human race? So many questions. And, the answers were not far off.

I was in Munich; it was the day before Christmas, and I was reading, or attempting to read, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a German newspaper not unlike the *London Times* or Paris's *Le Monde*—both newspapers that contain lovely literary and philosophical essays, critical book reviews, together with the news. Turning from section to section, I saw suddenly emblazoned in large black letters on the masthead of page 80 the word **LABYRINTHE** under which was the following verse in italics:

*Im Labyrinth verliert man sich nicht*  
*Im Labyrinth findet man sich*  
*Im Labyrinth begegnet man nicht dem Minotauros*  
*Im Labyrinth begegnet man sich selbst*

which is to say:

*In the labyrinth one does not lose oneself*  
*In the labyrinth one finds oneself*  
*In the labyrinth one meets not the Minotaur*  
*In the labyrinth one meets oneself.*<sup>26</sup>

The entire page was devoted to an account of a just published book by Hermann Kern entitled *Labyrinthe*, and the account was by Hermann Kern himself. Not only had he written the definitive book on labyrinths, but also, as Director of the Hauses der Kunst in Munich, he was preparing in Munich for the spring of 1985 a great exhibition and display of labyrinths of every variety.

The spring of 1985 came, and I was not in Munich for the great exhibition. I have, however, spent a good deal of time reading and examining Kern's magnificent book with its splendid illustrations of labyrinths from all over the world and from every century. I now know that my knowledge of labyrinths is but a mere scratch on the surface. If I would know more I must "study, concentrate, keep the mind on the page." Yet, as marvelous and learned as is Kern's great *Labyrinthe* book, I am glad that it was not published until 1982. I am content with my own adventure of the mind and happy that I followed Ariadne's thread into the labyrinth and out. But, just now as I write, it occurs to me that Ariadne's thread is, perhaps, not the best image of the adventure. It might better be described as Ariadne's chain dance—a dance of the intellect among fact and fables and, what appear to have been, mere chance observations.

And, did I, in pursuing Theseus back down the labyrinthine corridors of western culture and of my own past, discover my true Self? Perhaps, there through the half dark I saw, or seemed to see, sitting at the center—Self, curious and fastidious still.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1946) 59-60. The passage quoted is from John Russell's translation (London, 1948).

<sup>2</sup> *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, being *The Euthyphron, Apology, Crito*, and *Phaedo* of Plato, trans. F. J. Church (London: Macmillan, 1920) 105-06.

<sup>3</sup> Trans. Bernadotte Perrin, 11 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1914) I: 49.

<sup>4</sup> *The Complete Writings of Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War*, the unabridged Crawley translation with an introduction by John H. Finley, Jr. (New York: Random House, 1951) 93. For Pisistratus' influence on the Theseus story see W. R. Connor, "Theseus in Classical Athens," in *The Quest for Theseus*, ed. Anne G. Ward (New York: Praeger, 1970) 143-174.

<sup>5</sup> *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951) Bk. 18, lines 590-92.

<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, I: 5.

<sup>7</sup> I give current sources for this information because much of what I know of labyrinths came gradually out of what sources I know not. Hermann Kern, *Labyrinthe* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1982) 13-14. Dorothy Norman, *The Hero: Myth/Image/Symbol* (New York: World, 1960) 106-11.

<sup>8</sup> Trans. D. E. Eichholz, 10 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962) X: 67-69. Pliny's two kings have not been identified according to Eichholz.

<sup>9</sup> *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1937) I: 153.

<sup>10</sup> Anne G. Ward, "The World of Theseus: Bronze Age Crete," in *The Quest for Theseus*, 59-62. Sir Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, 4 vols. (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1964) I: 6; III: 283. Martin P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, trans. F. J. Fielden, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1949) 12-16. But see also Kern 46-47.

<sup>11</sup> Anne G. Ward, "In the Footsteps of a Hero," in *The Quest for Theseus*, 99-101.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, III: 282-84.

<sup>13</sup> Anne G. Ward, "The Cretan Adventure," in *The Quest for Theseus*, 114-17. Martin P. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (New York: Norton, 1963) 176-77.

<sup>14</sup> Ward, "The Cretan Adventure," 117. Jacquetta Hawkes, *Dawn of the Gods* (New York: Random House, 1968) 131.

<sup>15</sup> Kern, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1958) 18-23. See also Ward, "In the Footsteps of a Hero," 89-101.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Tidworth, "The Roman and Medieval Theseus," in *The Quest for Theseus*, 184-85. See also Kern, 62-67.

<sup>18</sup> Tidworth, 184.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Kerényi, *Vom Labyrinthos zum Syrtos*, 283 ff. Cited by Kern, 19, 50-61. See also Károly Kerényi, *Dionysos, Archetypal Image of the Indestructible Life*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976) 97-101.

<sup>20</sup> Kern, 19, 50-61.

<sup>21</sup> Kern, 22, 87-89.

<sup>22</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958; rpt. New Amer. Library, 1974) 381.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Villette, "L'énigme du Labyrinthe," *Notre-Dame de Chartres* (Mars, 1984) No. 58, 4-13.

<sup>24</sup> The above information comes from Villette, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Kern, "Labyrinthe," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* No. 296, Weihnachten, 24/25/26 (Dec., 1982), 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 80.



## Study-Guide Questions

1. What has this essay to do with your study of the Humanities?
2. In how many different ways is the phrase “the thread of Ariadne” used within the essay?
3. What is the meaning of the word *myth*? What is a myth? How does a myth differ from a legend?
4. Is the story of Theseus a true myth or is it a legend? Explain. If you do not know the whole story of Theseus, look it up in some dictionary of Greek myths.
5. Do you remember any references to Crete in *The Odyssey*? Of what value was Homer’s *Iliad* in explaining the true nature of the Cretan labyrinth?
6. What is the relationship between Crete, Mycenae, and Athens?
7. Identify the following names and places: Minos, Pisistratus, Plato, Thucydides, Plutarch, Pliny, Knossos, Delos, Helicon, Chartres?
8. What is the difference between a maze and a labyrinth? What seems to have been the most ancient mythic meaning of the labyrinth? Why the confusion between myth and labyrinth?
9. What are some of the explanations of the Christian labyrinth?
10. By what means might the Cretan labyrinth have influenced the Christian labyrinth?
11. Can you think of any modern instances of myth or legend having become incorporated in history?
12. In your own “storehouse of memory” do you perceive the beginning of what might become a “thread of Ariadne”?



**Heart of God, Heart of Oak:**  
*A Study of Two Heroes and Their Gods*

*Sister Barbara Green, O.P.*

In the bright hall of Zeus upon Olympus  
the other gods were all at home, and Zeus,  
the father of gods and men, made conversation.  
For he had meditated on Aigisthos, dead  
by the hand of Agamemnon's son, Orestes,  
and spoke his thought aloud before them all:

"My word, how mortals take the gods to task!  
All their afflictions come from us, we hear.  
And what of their own failings? Greed and folly  
double the suffering in the lot of man."<sup>1</sup>

The human beings whose gods dwelt on Olympus are probably not the first and certainly not the last to blame the deities for the vagaries of human existence, to ponder the question of the gods' role in their lives. The biblical stories of Saul and David raise the question in the minds of these characters and in our minds as we watch the epic unfold. How to factor the

problem of powerful deities and free human beings, of finite hands in reach of infinite resources is a dilemma beloved of poets, and we can ponder the problem both fruitfully and pleasantly in the company of those who tell of early Hebraic and Greek heroes.

### *The Biblical Story: Background*

For our purposes, the story of David begins in the encounter between God and King Saul (I Sam. 15). God, commander-in-chief of the Israelite forces, had commanded Saul to battle the Amalekites and when victorious to exterminate all life: men, women, children, livestock. The sound of lowing animals and the sight of the Amalekite king Agag still upright suggests to God that Saul has disobeyed orders. And for this disobedience (perhaps combined with Saul's failures in chapters 13 and 14) God rejects Saul as king and announces that he has already chosen a successor. Royal transitions are often awkward, especially if the incumbent survives, and this case is no exception. Several years and several chapters later, Saul is still clinging to his throne, to the external signs of power, while David has become, by degrees, king of the people once ruled by Saul.

Before turning to David, and perhaps so that we can understand God and David better, it is worth examining with a little more attention the cause of Saul's rejection. Our storyteller gives us the gist of it by judicious use of pronouns and adjectives. But first we need some background.

The backdrop for the battle with the Amalekites is both remote and immediate. The struggle for the patch of land called Israel in both ancient and modern times serves as warp for virtually every significant historical experience its dwellers have. The experience of being given the land, being drawn or pushed from it, and then struggling to reclaim it or repel invaders is a dominant storyline in Jewish tradition. And the land is more than acreage and livelihood, more even than security from oppression. The land is tangible proof of a bond between God and people. If the people live in fidelity to God's law they will dwell secure in his land; if they disobey, they will be taken from the land or it from them. Such a belief, whether or not it seems naive or superstitious to us, is one of the main supports for the long opus (including the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) in which the Saul and David materials occur, and we must accept it at least temporarily as part of the story we are being told.

And more proximately, the Amalekite problem rises at a particularly crucial time (late eleventh century BC) for Saul and the Israelites, whom we meet, their backs to the wall, fighting for their survival as an independent people. Their foe seems insignificant: five Philistine city-states located along a few miles of coast; but the Philistines have a mighty technology in the smelting of iron, and they appear to have a monopoly on it. The

Philistine threat will pervade the reign of Saul and may be seen as one of the catalysts in Israel's acquisition of a king.

In the period between the exodus from Egypt and the gathering of Israel's modest empire by David, military struggles to secure the land have the peculiar designation "holy war." Though our inferences are not so firm or complete as we might like, we can describe the holy war with some confidence."<sup>2</sup>

The holy war is linked to the process of God's liberation of his people from the bondage of slavery. The battles are not regulated according to practical and efficient military tactics, for they are seen—presumably by the beneficiaries and more certainly by the storyteller—as special interventions of God. Hence no standing army is necessary, nor is numerical superiority even desirable. Single combat or action by a few against the many is a more suitable vehicle for allowing God's decisive hand to be discerned. Holy war recitals stress the various means of consulting God: *urim* and *thummin*, ark, ephod. Typically the combatants abstain from food and sexual intercourse. God's intervention, whether coming through nature or more directly, results in the panicked rout of the foe and in the victory of God's people. The vanquished but surviving enemy is put "under the ban," utterly destroyed as though a contagious, dangerous presence.

One last point necessary for background and proper understanding of Saul, David and God concerns the institution of the monarchy. Prior to the choice of Saul there had been no king, interim problems being dealt with by temporary leaders. God was the king. The Philistine threat is described as a more enduring condition requiring, in the view of the Israelite elders, a more effective leadership. ". . . [A]ppoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations," they ask (I Sam. 8:5). Though scholars dispute the exact pitch of God's reaction to this request, an interpretation which recognizes the historical difficulties but also credits the poet with the art of telling the story with subtlety suggests that God is not essentially hostile to the idea itself.<sup>3</sup> Though he recognizes in the peoples' request for a new king a rejection of himself as incumbent king and sees in it nothing more or less than disobedience typical of so much of Israel's relationship with God, he agrees to the plan, preceding his compliance only with a solemn warning to Israel of what her choice of monarchy will inevitably involve; royal rebelliousness will both seduce and oppress the people.

The storyteller stresses God's role in the choice of Saul: prophet anoints, signs attend, lot verifies, military success endorses Saul's accession to the throne. The king did not achieve his position against God's will. The people's basic mistake was not their request for a king. The prophet Samuel sums up God's viewpoint on the topic of the human king: you were wrong to ask, but what is done is done. Follow the Lord faithfully, let your king do the same, and the Lord will not forsake you. But should your king ensnare

you, disaster will overtake you and him. The traditional obligation holds: obedience to the law. The presence of a king is theoretically neutral, seems hopeful to the people, but looks dubious to the prophet. God's eye is for obedience, however accomplished.

So it is Saul's disobedience that angers God, disobedience serious enough to result in Saul's rejection, and yet a disobedience of which he seems scarcely aware. Complacent in his victory (raising a monument to himself), Saul greets Samuel sunnily, reporting that he had completed his task satisfactorily. Is he nervous, bluffing, whistling in the dark? Is he cunning? bold? ignorant? stupid? Samuel's ironic reference to mooing and baaing prompts in Saul a shift of reference pronoun from they to we: "*They* have brought them from the Amalekites; for *the people* spared the best of the sheep and oxen, *to sacrifice to the Lord your God*, and the rest *we* have put under the ban'" (emphasis added). Not so, says Samuel. You, just the king, disobeyed the orders of the God who chose you and who told you to put all Amalekites, man and beast, under the ban. You profaned the ritual by swooping on the spoil, evil deed!

Saul, perhaps beginning to sense the problem, tries once again—desperation and sincerity pushing him to take fuller personal responsibility. "*I have obeyed* the voice of the Lord, *I have gone* on the mission on which the Lord sent me, *I have brought* Agag the king of the Amalekites, and *I have utterly destroyed* the Amalekites. But *the people took* of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things set aside for the ban to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal'" (I Sam. 15:20-21). Samuel then reminds him that obedience is a duty more basic than sacrifice, is better than sacrifice, and that disobedience is no better than idolatry. Samuel is not interested in the irrelevant details of who did what. The king is to help the people obey, not accede to their disobedience. Samuel's words penetrate Saul's defenses and he acknowledges his sin and accounts for it: he fears the people. Though Samuel and God have long since lost interest in the alibis, we can hear Saul out with patience and pity, as his next words attest to his insecurity even more clearly than his confession did. He asks forgiveness, and that request gaining from Samuel no response except the repetition of God's rejection of Saul *as king*, Saul asks to save face with the people.

Saul's rejection, though for a serious disobedience in a weighty sacral matter—and for obedience to man rather than to God—may seem unfair to us. Should not good intentions count for something? Does not ignorance lessen culpability? Might not God or his prophet have been more explicit sooner, more helpful if so fussy? And Saul seems to dangle pitifully, a witness to his own collapse, giving ground gradually before the strength of his successor. Uncomfortable for Saul and for God and for the new king and for the Israelites—and for us, the readers of the story.

But God is testing the mettle of a new man, and whether we are yet ready to abandon Saul's cause, whether we would delay God or Samuel or our poet, hoping for some happier reconciliation of claims, the storyteller moves us along to the next scenes. And as we follow the story of Saul and the new king David, there is sufficient ground for us to conclude that David has his flaws too and represents, in many ways, no substantial improvement over Saul. What gain? *Cui bono?* One of our clearest clues, though it is so small we probably scarcely notice it (I Sam. 13:14), is that the new king, presumably unlike the old, has a heart like God's own.<sup>4</sup>

Far from helping us, that clue seems to make matters worse. For we recognize all the more undeniably that we are now facing in this story questions not only about the human condition but about God. God's character; human freedom and divine control of events; God's prior knowledge and judgment; God and violence; God and preferential treatment of one group of people to the clear detriment of other peoples; God and favoritism. Some heart.

### *The Young David*

Who, then, is the replacement for Saul, the consolation prize winner, the second choice of God (yet better than Saul), the man with the heart like God's? Like Saul, David is physically impressive. As was the case with Saul, the storyteller shows us in numerous ways that David is king: he is selected by God, anointed by the prophet, proven in battle, acclaimed by the people. The accession of David to the throne is the story of I Sam. 16-II Sam. 5, and the leisurely recital of it leaves ample room for the flourishes and complexities of detail. What concerns us now is the character of the new king, his heart, and the insight his heart gives into God's. One of the stories of his introduction to Saul (I Sam. 17) provides us with a good opportunity to study David the youth, and while we are at it, to examine the skill of the storyteller. We can gain insight into the character of David and know how we gained it as we notice contrasts, pace and spacing of the story, and character shifts.

David, keeper of sheep, still obedient to his father's directives, arrives at the Israelite camp where Saul, who once followed the flocks of his father, now has responsibility for his people. Saul and Israel are threatened once again by the Philistines, and in fact each day for forty days they have been terrorized into immobility—in fact into retreat—by the vaunting of the Philistine hero Goliath. David's demeanor contrasts quite clearly with theirs. He arrives at the camp, deposits with the quartermaster supplies and gifts sent by the father to David's brothers, and goes to find his siblings. While David speaks with his brothers, Goliath bellows his challenge. The Israelite men first back off but then fall to discussing, a bit impractically, it

would seem at first, the reward promised by King Saul to the slayer of the giant Goliath. Though the sight and sound of the challenge are fresh for him, David displays no fear, only eager, interested attention. His ear is caught by the insult to God in the giant's words—or some would say by the reward. Perhaps both. David's inquiry into the pertinent circumstances occasions an outburst from his brother Eliab, who charges him with voyeurism, irresponsibility and ineffectiveness: "'And with whom have you left those few sheep? . . . You have come down to see the battle'" (I Sam. 17:28). The storyteller, having already assured us of David's reliability and allowed us to hear the purpose of his presence in the camp, allows us to decide this gibe in David's favor. We will hear David speak of his care for his flock later, too, and are now prepared to believe him if we weren't before. Eliab also provides for us a brief but clear study of a frightened man, lashing out at another, singling out the trait he senses is most troubling in himself.

David's ingenuous stance contrasts effectively with Goliath: heavily and hugely armored, his foreign name and gentilic testifying to the threat to the Israelite people. We hear Goliath described as David and the men see him, and while recognizing the seriousness of the "dense pack" defense, the clue to the soft spot is presented to us clearly. Goliath's words heighten the impression of danger and the ignominy of the situation, as he insults Saul's authority, taunts the Israelites with slavery, and impugns the power of God. Single combat is his suggestion, and it surely seems a safe proposal from his perspective.

And we must feel pity or compassion for Saul, unable to volunteer himself, impotent before the sneers against his God, unable to induce anyone else to volunteer even for an heroic death, let alone a successful encounter. Saul has offered gifts, rewards to be claimed only if the volunteer vanquishes the foe, of course. But even the hand of Saul's daughter cannot lure an Israelite into battle. Until David hears Goliath, that is. David's second speech, his enlistment with Saul, shows us something already different from the boy remarking on the giant's taunt and stung by his own brother's sneer. For David's approach to Saul is a masterpiece of courtesy and restraint, sensitive continuously to the implications of the request. "'Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight this Philistine'" (I Sam. 17:32).

He addresses Saul appropriately as lord and calls himself servant, all respectfully in the third person. He begs that no man be afraid: a volunteer is ready—a tactful way to take on a job properly Saul's. When questioned, he supplies references from his own shepherd's experience; no obvious competition to the king there. David has fought lions and bears with only his hands and the courage in his heart. And, concludes David, the God whose name and people are bearing the insult of the Philistine presence will be the one to provide the deliverance. It is a lesson in theology and in



holy warfare, coming innocently from David's lips but striking us with a sense of familiarity. And Saul accepts the lesson and the volunteer.

The arming of David is a significant moment in the story. In addition to linking David to heroes of other classical traditions whose bards invest them before battle, the dressing of David in Saul's armor stresses the contrast between characters. David finds the armor of the king too large for himself and removes it, giving us insight into the shrewdness of his judgment and introducing us to the dominant pattern by which the poet will describe David's accession to the throne: the young king will eventually step into the armor of the older king, win the hearts of soldiers and people, come between Saul and his relationships with his children, acquire the priest and the cultic apparatus. And each time, as in the present instance, Saul will have had a hand, ironically, in the replacement. "Then Saul clothed David with his armor" (I Sam. 17:38). The donning and doffing of metal armor also recalls for us the far superior armor of the Philistines and prepares us to be all the more amazed and intrigued when David chooses instead the five smooth stones. And the scene readies us to measure a change that will come over David shortly.

As the poet lets us linger over the approach of the boy to the giant, we hear David stress once again the religious significance of his labor and we recognize the holy war elements of this military encounter. And having spent forty-eight verses on the study of the boy David, our poet dispatches the battle itself as quickly as the boy does the giant: one slung stone, one verse to record it. With Goliath on the ground, stunned or dead, David finds himself with no weapon for the dénouement; and so, correctly for this type of heroic deed, he decapitates the defeated monster with *its* weapon. The story winds down quickly to panic, flight, and defeat of the Philistines—fruits of the holy war carefully conducted. We get a fleeting view of David putting Goliath's armor into his tent. Leaving aside the question of the tent (David being a commuter) and going beneath the absurdity of his ever thinking he would be able to wear it, we can see the storyteller showing us that the battle, begun with a slingshot but completed with a sword, has taught the already shrewd David a lesson about weapons. Having previously rejected man-sized, king-sized armor as excessive to his needs, he can now see the advantage of keeping the giant's armor for some later occasion: a small cloud on the horizon.

So as we follow this story about divine and human interaction, watching not only the fainting between God and David but the heart our poet says they share, we can feel somewhat confident in the early impressions. Saul's replacement, and presumably the God whom he resembles, seems bold, brave, stouthearted. He seems to eschew human approval for divine approbation, to break down stalemate and danger with craft and persuasion and a minimum of violence and force. The defensiveness we may have felt over

the treatment accorded Saul can subside. Perhaps God learned a lesson and has mended his ways.

### *Comparison with the Greek Epic*

The *Odyssey*, too, reflects the perception that human beings live their lives somewhat at the pleasure (and displeasure) of the gods; and like David's poet, Homer offers us insight as we study Odysseus. At this point, where the epics are so obviously close—perhaps even cognate—and where we can parallel the heroes and their deeds rather simply, let us shift to the *Odyssey* and the encounter between Odysseus and Polyphemos (*Od.* 9. 173-594) so that we can appreciate the common themes, motifs, characterizations and questions; so that we can consider further the question of the relationship between divine and human as drawn by another artist; and so that we can begin to work out some distinctions between the world views of the Hebrew and Greek cultures.

It is easy enough to recognize the folklore and literary motifs that the two episodes share: little man vs. giant; wit vs. brute strength; invulnerability of the giant except for one soft spot which the hero locates and exploits; vaunting of the giant, insulted by the seemingly inconsequential appearance of the hero; taunts and scorning of the hero's gods; arming scene; weapon of the vanquished used against him by the victor; stress on the identity of the hero.

David and Odysseus share heroic characteristics. Each is curious, brave—even brash—a clear contrast to his companions. When the companions urge caution the hero pushes ahead, whether wisely or foolishly, rightly or wrongly. Each, however, is also characterized as able to act carefully, subtly, courteously, stealthily when that is appropriate. The heroes of these epics see more than others do, or they see the same reality but understand it more deeply. In these episodes each hero sees a solution—perhaps the obvious one: killing Goliath with the aid of Saul's armor, killing Polyphemos with Odysseus' sword—but then realizes the solution would in fact be a trap. Then each recognizes that what he really needs to accomplish his purposes effectively is lying at hand, in plain view, a low-tech solution to a seemingly high-tech problem: five smooth stones and a boy's slingshot, a wooden beam and the fire in the *Kyklops'* hearth. Each hero, then, is clever, almost too clever for his own good. The successful quests in these episodes seed troubles that each hero will have to struggle with, but the struggles themselves breed experience and wisdom, so the heroes grow. Each hero is protected, helped or sustained by his deity.

Common themes structure the sagas of David and Odysseus: quest for the homeland (Saul and David to secure it, Odysseus to reclaim it); struggle to end chaos that threatens to engulf the hero's culture; hospitality and the

evil resulting from its abuse; power shifts as an old order crumbles and a new emerges.

What questions can the common features of these materials offer for our consideration? Which of these can best further our insight into the questions raised in this essay? I would recommend four lines of thought.

First, do these Greek and Hebrew stories suggest significant shifts in culture, away from tribal autonomy, from the *Kyklopes'* isolation, from individual heroic deeds toward a common venture, toward cooperation, toward the pooling of resources and goals which result in greater likelihood of success but perhaps less satisfaction for most participants? The Israelites are about to establish a monarchy that will make possible some achievements but bring in its train some great injustices. Odysseus' task is really just beginning as the *Odyssey* ends, for having reclaimed his heritage he must now administer it effectively. If such shifts are being discussed, these two heroic deeds are the last of their sort and become in some ways irrelevant to the new culture patterns opening up. Change perhaps regrettable, but certainly inevitable.

Second, do the stories suggest the dangers of lawlessness: what happens when sacrosanct tenets, most notably hospitality, are abused? I will develop this point further in the essay.

Third, what about the use of violence or force? Do these heroes triumph mostly because they use their wits? Is there a message here that heroes, these and others, cannot expect to counter force with force and succeed? Or is it a matter of using wit in service of violence? It may be irrelevant that death came through a slingshot and blindness through a stick; dead and blind is dead and blind. Each hero triumphs, but the temporary reduction in the scale of violence is not significant. Violence is not containable.

Fourth, how is divine and human interaction described? Each story is built around a weave of strife and cooperation between the gods and human beings. Each is set remotely against a background of table fellowship violated. The human beings have misbehaved at the banquet of the deity. Whatever the relationship might have been, discord now characterizes it. And the divine and human continue to interact, sometimes helping and sometimes seeming to thwart each other.

But the differences in the characterization of the divine make the hero's task—the human endeavor—vastly different. The Greek gods quarrel not only with human beings but among themselves. The god's interactions shift the fate of the humans repeatedly if whimsically. The most the Greek heroes can hope for is to placate the gods, secure some effective support, stay out of the way of the ricochet. The Greeks do not seem to love their gods for the qualities they possess, nor do they seek to emulate them or to be challenged by their virtues.

The Hebrew story reflects a different pattern. The sovereignty of the deity Yahweh eliminates divine squabbling as a factor in the human condition. Other gods do not exist, though some think they do, and so it is the danger of the illusion that the Hebrews must avoid. With only one God, then, and that one fairly consistent (at least by comparison with other deities), it is not almost hopeless for the hero (and other human beings) to think of staying aligned with divine purposes. The wide sweep of the arbitrary is at least reduced. The enmity between man and God is not inevitable or desirable or willed by God or stirred up afresh on that side of the relationship. The deity is not jealous of the human condition but wills that the humans “stay in line,” stay aligned for their own good, not because God stands to lose otherwise or feels threatened. *Shalom*, well being, is the common goal, the genuine goal of all creatures who have taken life from the creator. The goal of the human quest is for the human heart to love and be shaped by the love of God, to be the like of God’s heart. Wisdom is the recognition of the unity of creator and all of creation. Such, at least, is the frame with which the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist editor surrounds our story of Saul and David. Whatever questions arise for us about God’s treatment of Saul and David’s resemblance to God need to be worked at, initially or minimally at least, within the constraints imposed by that viewpoint. Let us resume that particular task.

### *Violations of Hospitality*

Though we left David at the beginning of his quest for the throne and cannot detail the stages of that journey, we can understand something of it and of the hero’s quest as we examine this epic at another of its most famous and crucial spots: II Samuel 10-12. Again without the luxury of seeing the patterns in detail, we understand that the storyteller has drawn David’s accession with three main lines: two very clear and the third studiedly and richly multivalent. The clear lines: David, anointed king even before the Goliath episode, also *became* king as he took over Saul’s kingly roles (effective leader of the militia, focus of communication with God) and as he usurped Saul’s position of pre-eminence in the hearts of those who served him (fighting men, son and daughter, priests and prophet, people). As noted before, Saul himself was often, whether consciously or unconsciously, a participant and helper in the transfer of power. A second very clear line that runs throughout the story is David’s absolute respect for the inviolability of the life of Saul, the Lord’s anointed. Even when Saul deserves it least, David is scrupulous in his efforts to keep from harming Saul, to insist on his own innocence and his right to be and seem vindicated in the face of Saul’s pursuit of him, to remove himself conspicuously from any situation in which the king might be harmed.

The third pathway along which the poet pushes the story is far more equivocally told and hence open to a plethora of interpretations. That pathway involves David, violence and deceit. As early as I Samuel 18 we can begin to wonder if David is truthful, and by chapter 21 we see the first unambiguous stain on David's character: he lied to the priest and the result was the massacre of almost an entire priestly line. He barely avoided violence against Nabal and was saved from it only through the skill of Nabal's wife Abigail (I Sam. 25). The deaths of Saul and Jonathan did not give David an automatic claim to the throne, since the Saulide Ishbosheth (Ishbaal) was helped up to it by Saul's commander Abner. But David's men ignominiously killed both Abner and then Ishbosheth, and though David was loudly indignant, even outraged, we have been given the latitude to wonder about his own role and his own response (II Sam. 1-6). But David finally became king over Israel and Judah.

It is the third pathway, on which violence and treachery lurk, that becomes most prominent in the latter part of the David story, the story about David the king. And this pathway leads us again to the topic of hearts.

As II Samuel opens, war provides the backdrop as before. However, this does not seem to be the holy war but the more secular arrangement of international affairs, an alliance between David's kingdom and that of Nahash the Ammonite that sours when Nahash dies and his son rejects David's condolences. The tangle of alliances pulls several peoples into the war but the return of the season of war finds a stalemate between Ammon and Israel and Israelite soldiers in siege before Rabbah of Ammon.

In our search to understand God's chosen king and so learn something of the heart of God, we are as usual at the mercy of our storyteller. And though the siege of Rabbah may not seem much different to us than did the Philistine war, it seems that the poet perceives a difference and wishes us to see it too. David has reacted not to an insult to his God but to an affront to his own dignity and authority. The war that ensues is not fought to preserve for Israel God's gift of land; it is not a war led by God where his might shows forth best in the paltriness of his people but a protracted siege of the city of another people. And when comes the springtime at which kings fight wars, David sends Joab; and so begins the episode toward which the whole saga has been building and from which will unfold the rest of the story of David's life and reign.

The story is told soberly in II Samuel 11, without melodramatic effects. While Joab and the fighting men and the ark are at war and David remains in Jerusalem, he sees a woman, confirms her identity as Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, sends for her, sleeps with her. When she conceives their child and David can foresee exposure of his deed, he contrives to involve Uriah in a cover-up. He summons the warrior from the war, tries to persuade him to go to his house and sleep with his wife; Uriah, Hittite

though he be, is more respectful of his own obligations and the good conduct of the war than to agree to such a suggestion; even when David makes him drunk, Uriah does not forsake his piety. David conspires again, with Uriah as unwitting partner, and this time David succeeds. Trusting the honorable message bearer will not interfere with the message, he sends in the hand of the victim instructions to Joab to effect Uriah's death. David instructs Joab to divert the process of the war in order to deprive the army of this one valiant warrior, to deprive the king of one of his mighty men (a very special relationship that seems to have stretched back to the days when David was fleeing Saul), and to deprive a woman of her husband. And then David tops off the deed with sanctimonious words of assuagement. David is guilty of dereliction of duty, adultery, breach of a sacred tie, disloyalty to the war effort, lies, insults, murder, cover-up. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this set of deeds is far more reprehensible than Saul's weakness in sparing Agag and a few animals for sacrifice to God! The resemblance between David's heart and God's does not seem much of a commendation for the deity. And God's reaction? In one of the few places where God comes into the stories of David's kingship we hear from the storyteller that "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (II Sam. 11:27). And so it might.

As with Saul, a prophet comes to notify David of consequences. And like Saul, David blusters a bit. But like Saul, he knows when he is convicted and admits his guilt. But here similarities between kings shift. For where Saul lost the kingship as a result of his disobedience, David's punishment, the consequence of "the thing" he did, is the death of the child conceived so dishonorably. And so it happens. Once announced, the word moves toward fulfillment. The child sickens; David intercedes for it with fasting and prayer; the child dies. We are confronted with something new to the story: the innocent suffering in place of the guilty. Whatever Saul's guilt was, it was between God and himself. So surely is David's but the hand of God strikes not man but child.

This episode in David's life, his singularly gross breach of his own royal duties, of his sacred bond with a compatriot, and his confrontation with death give us another opportunity to look at the *Odyssey* with its heavy stress on the crime against Agamemnon, the obligations of hospitality, and Odysseus' confrontations with his mortality.

The *Odyssey* is obsessed with the question of hospitality, familial relationships, and the results of violations of them. The main storyline involves the return of Odysseus to his home, his reunion with the faithful Penelope, the requital of the outrageous behavior of her suitors in her husband's home. The story is set against a larger backdrop of the violation of the hearth of Menelaos and the faithlessness of his wife Helen. And threaded through the *Odyssey* is reference to the return of Agamemnon to his home

and wife and the particular violations of hospitality he suffered (*Od.* 1. 49-59; 3. 205-93; 4. 80-542; 11. 425-513; 13. 447; 24. 100-03, 211-14). Both the Hebraic and Greek sagas stress the immorality of such violations, an immorality both personal and social. Like the Hebrew hero, every Greek who transgresses the code shows himself unworthy, reprehensible. Each will suffer consequences of his acts. But breaches of hospitality also threaten the social fabric. The whole story of David's kingship (almost the only part of it we are told) unravels from the murder of his companion and his adultery with that man's wife. The Homeric epics show an order radically rent when Menelaos' wife is taken; they show the evil continuing as Agamemnon's avenging son is pursued by furies; they show Odysseus' labors on Ithaka as formally equivalent to his various battles with chaos monsters before he arrives home; and they link his adventures with and departures from females to his quest for his own hearth. The *Odyssey* offers us contrasting models in Klytemnestra and Penelope and helps us ask to which of them we can liken Bathsheba.<sup>5</sup> The deities respond to the dangers of hospitality violation. The characters of Orestes and Telemakhos help us assess David's sons Amnon, Absalom, Adonijah and Solomon and feel for their father as we do so.

Odysseus' confrontations with his mortality are perhaps a bit more flamboyant than are David's, but we can trace the same human journey in both stories. Though Odysseus confirms his mortality when he finally rejects Kalyпсо's proffered gift of agelessness (*Od.* 7. 257-787), his journey to the underworld forces him to consider the destiny of a hero. He begins to learn there how he is to get home. He looks on familiar souls with new eyes, learns there about his father, mother, wife and son and begins to think of them in a new way. His romantic but ignorant rhapsody about death is cut short by his friend Akhilleus, who suggests Odysseus has still more to learn about life and death. Odysseus' very success in entering and leaving the underworld, his ability to confront death and grow in wisdom, wins from Athena the praise "hearts of oak" for himself and his companions (*Od.* 12. 22).

Odysseus confronts his human limitations even when he sleeps, for it is then that his men release the winds from their bag (*Od.* 10. 37-53) and slaughter the cattle of Helios (*Od.* 12. 396-432). It is, in a sense, Odysseus' weak human fabric as well as his companions' foolishness that brings about their demise and his further troubles. Odysseus' reclaiming of his place in Ithaka—his places as lord, son, husband, father, host—rebinds him to his fate as mortal man rather than as slayer of and victor over superhuman forces.

The shadow in David's character that has been deepening since the death of the priests and the assassination of the Saulides has now fallen on David's own child and brings the father, too, face to face with the mystery

and sorrow of death. It is common to read that the early Hebrews had no concept of an afterlife, and it is surely true that materials earlier than the second century B.C. give few hints of it. Influenced undoubtedly by contact with other world views, Jewish thought on the afterlife eventually develops along two distinct lines: resurrection of the body and immortality of the soul. In the passage at hand, David is consoled by neither of these beliefs. He intercedes for the sick child but ceases his plea to God once it dies. Questioned by his servants because they find his behavior to be such a reversal of the usual mourning customs, David observes that death is final. Any reunion between himself and the child will be a result of David's own death rather than the child's return. And he does suggest he will join the child, recalling a lament where Job speaks of the realm of the dead as quiet and untroubled and where kings are at rest next to children (Job 3:13-19). The death of the child reminds David of his own death.

The child's death is also linked clearly to another aspect of David's mortality: his condition as a sinful human being. Bathsheba and David's child is to die because its parents sinned, the prophet Nathan proclaims. We seem far removed from the shepherd boy rising to the defense of an insult to God, from the young man pursued by the jealousy of Saul and yet so protective of Saul's life and so eager for a reconciliation. David's fasting and prayer to God for the life of his small son are also an intercession to God for his own life, a recognition that caught up in the life of the child are David's own crimes against Uriah, against the war, against his people, against his kingship, against God. David's plea for his child is part of his cry of repentance.

There is a third way in which David confronts his own mortality in this episode, in which he faces the consequences of his limitations. It is clear that whatever other nascent beliefs in the continuity of personal existence there may have been, the dominant Hebrew way to live on is through descendants. A man's name lived when he had sons to carry it, when his children spoke their father's name over his heritage. And here David sees that possibility reduced as his child predeceases him. And linked in Nathan's message with the death of the baby was the promise that David's own house would turn against him. And the rest of the epic of King David details the defection and diminishment of his own sons: some drop out of the story silently;<sup>6</sup> Amnon will be murdered by his brother Absalom for his crime against their sister. Absalom will be killed by Joab while trying to tear the kingdom from his father David. Adonijah, too, will twice usurp and be killed as a result of it. David's power, fertility, his self-possession and control of events will seem to dwindle to very little. The tremendous blindness, weakness and fallibility that led David to gratify his desire with Bathsheba will dog his relationships in his private and public life from now on.



But after the death of his child, David has more to learn about his humanity. "Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba and went into her and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. And the Lord loved him . . ." (II Sam. 12:25). Having faced his own darkness, David receives forgiveness, a new child, an heir for his throne. And the Lord loved him.

What can we see of God's heart in the latter part of the story? We see that David, so beloved by all the people, so powerful as a young king, has a correspondingly great potential for evil. He sins titanically. And accepting his guilt without excuse, hearing his own sin proclaimed in the prophet's parable, David beseeches God for forgiveness, begs for his own life and his son's. With one petition granted and the other refused, David accepts God's answer to him, rises from the ground, consoles Bathsheba and begets another son. God is reflected in David's character: shepherd boy taking on the giant; young warrior beloved of his people; friend to Jonathan; husband of Michal. God's purpose can be seen in even the single-mindedness of David, who will stop at nothing to acquire the throne—nothing except turning his hand against King Saul. Even David's actions that so displeased God offer us insight into God's restraint, his justice and finally his compassion. David's actions are bold, imaginative, vital. David's God is spacious, generous, honest, loving, resilient, patient and gentle. In this David resembles God; David takes his measure from God, finds himself wanting, and God refashions the king's heart and recreates his spirit. David's illusions of omnipotence crumble as he sees his own weakness, and God raises him from the ground and instructs his heart. David's blindness remains in part, his Achilles' heel is not transformed; but his arrogance and intransigence are banked, at least until the end of his life. David's final years are a study not in non-violence but in one of its opposites: passivity. David's excessive power exercised so badly against Bathsheba and Uriah seems to have left him unable to counter in an appropriate way the excesses of his sons. This weakness pervades both private and public sectors, of course, since David is king and his sons each wished to be so too. The old violence, accompanied again by deceit, bursts forth once more from the deathbed of the apparently senile and impotent king. David seems not to have learned that part of his lesson well. But perhaps by now the instruction is for us, as David is about to rejoin his fathers (and sons). The violence unleashed as David passes on the throne to Solomon, continuing even when David is dead, provides only temporary security for his heirs as it achieves little that was satisfactory for him. The seeds of the critique of violence are in the tradition, in the call for love of God and of neighbor and in the plea for respect for all life, but it is not in the David stories that these seeds develop, except perhaps negatively.

What, then, do the poets offer us by way of insight into ourselves, our humanity, our relationship with reality larger than ourselves? What have these archaic stories to do with us? How do they presume to instruct us?

The poets are like ourselves except that they see more clearly, know more deeply, speak more compellingly. They draw their characters from the “great soup” of tradition, from their own experience, with their own artistry. Though the poets are not on the ancient scenes with video cameras, neither are their gods and humans mere puppets, projections. Each poet is concerned to show the range of our humanity, to illustrate for us the limits of what we can do, know, feel, hope for. The deity is part of what we must meet in order to learn about ourselves. God—the gods—can be seen as that which lies beyond our limits, as extra help for us, as a surge of power (should we be so fortunate), as divine arrangement or presence which offers us dilemmas, choices, opportunities for failure or success. The divine beings in these stories are shaped as characters, not human but built on that analogue, though with access to more than humans can achieve unless the gods assist. They help the humans exceed their own reach; they shape us to be our best selves. Or, as Zeus comments, does it seem that the gods set us up, expose our frailties, cause us to blunder from disaster to disaster? Athena helps Odysseus but no one assists Agamemnon. God forgives David a far greater sin than that for which he rejects Saul. We are not far in our journey toward humanization, have not reflected very deeply if such thoughts have not crossed our minds.

So we are back to the poets again and to their deep purposes. Homer, like other bards, invokes the Muses as he begins his story of Odysseus. Homer was not a witness to the story of Odysseus and Athena, nor was the poet of David’s court privy to all of the scenes he describes. The poets draw on the Muses, on the wisdom or spirit of God, for information and insight; for humans cannot know, unaided, the essence of the stories they tell. Aided by forces beyond themselves, the poets retell their own and our experience with images both clear and mysterious to us.

They tell the story of our youth, our dreams, our eager aspirations. They describe our successes and then they show our limits, our disappointments, our being thwarted by others like ourselves, or perhaps by those who seem quite alien. The poets celebrate and lament our limits, celebrate that we aspire for more than we can achieve, try but fail, sin but repent, and learn and so grow in insight, wisdom and compassion. The poets sing of our discovery that there is more in this world than our discernibly limited selves, that we can find companionship with other human beings, can choose their good over our own, upon occasion, or see others’ and our weal as common. These are forces beyond our ability to understand: the workings of nature, the seemingly random effects of choice, forces of good, forces of evil. The poets reflect our experience that life is not fair by obvious

measure: abilities and disabilities are apportioned unevenly; the good and young die out of season while the old and weary linger. The poets draw the gods to human scale—large but still to scale—and we are dissatisfied with their justice as we are with our own. We see our flaws in them: the gods have mortal heels. We feel they are alien to our world, even competitive with us for a few prizes: the good life, fame, success. We feel the gods are locked in strife with us, but perhaps that motif in our stories reflects our radical discontinuity with the rhythm and pulse of the universe, our unwillingness—inability—to align ourselves with the life that is around us.

The poets speak of intervention, too. The gods help out in ways obvious and dramatic, subtle and undetected. Which of us can say where our own conscious efforts stop and something more profound moves in? All the stories of the favoritism of the gods, of luck and choice and fortuity speak to our recognition of our limits. The providence of God is a metaphor for a relationship in which we recognize ourselves as frequent—continual—recipients. And, in both the Greek and the Judeo-Christian stories, divine providence is not limited to the gifts we evaluate as positive. The gods teach us about themselves and about ourselves in many ways, perhaps most profoundly in suffering. David and Odysseus may learn more about humanity when they confront its end than when they meet its zenith.

So the poets draw us into their own reflection on life and death, on mortality and immortality. Their song is, at first hearing, pleasing, inviting, whimsical, imaginative. Only as we listen more intently do we hear our own lines. And so the poets lead us to consider our existence—not to resolve it, because our rational minds cannot unravel the knot we are presented with, nor can that part of our consciousness coded to myths wear it down to loose threads. We enter the mystery ever more deeply as we grow wiser, recognizing gratefully that untangling the skein is not the goal of the quest. Our poets bring us close to deep contact with our humanity and with divinity, and we are better off for the encounter. Do the poets speak well and truly of us and of God? That has been answered affirmatively by the human community which turns and returns to these epics, each some three thousand years old. Each of us is invited to immerse oneself in the depths of these works, take our measure against what we find, turn and return again. If this is not the moment, wait patiently. The song will not cease, the Muses and the Spirit will not tire, the depth of the insight, the truth of the mirror will not wear out while you wait. To enter is a gift of the gods—perhaps the most vital that they give.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Homer *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1963), Bk. 1, lines 39-48. (Hereafter cited as *Od.*)

<sup>2</sup> A concise yet adequate summary of the holy war can be found in an article commenting on the episode preceding the Amalekite battle. J. Blenkinsopp, "Jonathan's Sacrilege I Sam. 14, 1-46: A Study in Literary History," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 26 (1964): 427-36. A less technical and more broadly focused discussion is contributed by P. W. Hanson, "War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible," *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 341-62.

<sup>3</sup> L. Eslinger, "Viewpoint and Point of View in 1 Samuel 8-12," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26 (1983): 65-69.

<sup>4</sup> H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 40-58, characterizes "heart" as the most important word in the vocabulary of Old Testament anthropology. It refers to the physiological center of the body. It is the organ most susceptible to fear, illness, exhaustion; it is also the organ of thought, where vital decisions are made. It is the place of unknowable impulses. The thesis of this paper, that David's heart is "like" God's, hangs on a single letter, a preposition. The "like" can mean that David obeys God's wishes; that is the usual translation. But the primary meaning of the preposition is "the like of." David's heart resembles God's heart.

<sup>5</sup> The question of Bathsheba's responsibility is a difficult though important and intriguing one. The storyteller does not comment directly on it, nor does any other character seem to speak for him. A careful reading of the episode provides a hint about the storyteller's opinion (which we need not agree with but which we should wish to detect). Surrounding the story of Bathsheba's relations with David are stories of Abigail (I Sam. 25) and Tamar (II Sam. 13). Each woman spoke and acted decisively when threatened. Abigail's initiative even in the face of David's initial disapproval helped him avoid bloodshed. And David's daughter Tamar, in a scene dependent in several ways on the David-Bathsheba encounter, speaks up to dissuade her attacker, to stress the folly being committed and the ignominy that will attach to both of them. By contrast, Bathsheba's silence would seem to give consent. The laws of Deut. 22:23-27 may also be presumed as background to the story, with David's royal rank not excusing Bathsheba from the law.

<sup>6</sup> Rather oddly, David's son Nathan (II Sam. 5:3) drops out of the Old Testament narrative but resurfaces in Luke's genealogy of Jesus 3:31.

## **Plato and the Computer:** *On the Love of Wisdom in an Age of Information*

***Philip Novak***

### *Philosophy?*

Looking out at the faces in philosophy lecture hall, I often detect widespread bewilderment. Some look forlorn, others worried. Mostly I spot the grimace worn by those who have unwillingly entered some twilight zone of experience. It says: How in God's name did I get *in* here? It is often accompanied by an equally expressive look: How can I get *out*?

Far from being surprised or distressed, I am in many ways sympathetic. Philosophy, after all, has a bad reputation. Though it was once considered the core and crown of education, today its status is diminished, and it would not be too much to say that our age has a prejudice against it. Part of this is philosophy's own fault as many of its branches have, over time, been reduced to dry and twisted conceptual exercises. But does philosophy really merit our disdain?

Sometimes I try to remedy initial aversion by pointing out that the word "philosophy" comes from the Greek *philos* ("lover") plus *sophia* ("wisdom"). It doesn't seem to help. For though few have trouble thinking of

themselves as lovers, many wonder what “wisdom” is, suspecting it to be a fanciful rendition of a less stuffy word like “knowledge,” and assuming, moreover, that it is acquired in the same way knowledge is thought to be acquired: by cramming one’s head full of information. Now cramming is not an easy thing to love *even* when the prospective information is perceived to be useful, career-related and potentially lucrative. But when the student realizes that the information to be “crammed” in philosophy class is composed of the abstract ravings of ancient geezers, love is all but lost. Wisdom, it is decided, is not worth wooing.

But *are* wisdom and knowledge really the same thing? And is wisdom truly obtained in the way all other “knowledges” are thought to be obtained, that is, through the successful digestion of massive quantities of information?

### *Computers and the Age of Information*

These questions are particularly apt right now because we happen to be in an age dominated by a single powerful tool—the computer. Computers seem to be everywhere and doing everything, on everyone’s lips and at everyone’s fingertips. A glance at my bookshelves reveals titles and subtitles with increasingly familiar rings: *Western Culture in the Computer Age* (Bolter, 1984), *Computers and the Human Spirit* (Turkle, 1984) and *Computer Power and Human Reason* (Weizenbaum, 1976). This is a mere hint of what one would find at the local bookstore, where entire sections are devoted to the theory and practice of the computer and to speculations on its cultural effects. And this is not to mention the spate of computer magazines occupying the shelves.

The computer has been touted as God’s gift to primary education, as a new form of human intelligence, and as the key to civilization’s progress. We will not assess these claims here. Perhaps it is enough to say that anything heralded as a panacea should arouse our skepticism. Instead let us ask more basic questions. What is all the hubbub about? What, after all, do computers do?

Computers are often described as information processing machines. A human being can put information—prodigious amounts of it—into a computer in the form of tiny electrical signals. This information can then be stored for later recall, or else combined, sorted, shifted, analyzed, played with, in short *processed*, in a multitude of ways and with remarkable speed. And process we do! From the labyrinthine corridors of government bureaucracy to businesses large and small, from workplace to home, from architect to accountant, from graphic artist to engineer, from oldster to youngster, we are locked in hotwire embrace with this latest and greatest technological tool. Combine the computer’s omnipresence with its chief function and

you understand at once why chroniclers have unhesitatingly dubbed our era the Age of Information.

"Information" has thus become something of a buzzword. A local radio station advertises itself with an impressive male voice referring to its programs as "The Power of Information." The implication is that keeping tuned will fatten one's brain with information and thus increase one's intellectual girth. Similarly, I remember a program on public television some time ago, the first of a series on home computers. The host smiled out at his faceless audience and pointed to a you-know-what. "This," he said, "is a computer! Through it, a tremendous amount of information can become available to *you!*" Presumably audience reaction was to have been some mental equivalent of Pavlovian salivation, anticipating all the delicious information (and power!) that could be had by going out and getting one of these magnificent machines.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with information as such. As tots we cannot learn to tie our shoes until someone gives us information—by telling or showing—how it's done. When we need to know about the food we put in our bodies, good information is crucial to our survival and well-being. If we need to fix our plumbing, books can give us information that, when mastered, becomes invaluable. And so on for innumerable other aspects of life. Education *does* proceed *largely* on the conveyance of information. But to mistake this for the entire story is, I believe, a serious mistake. To think that the accumulation of information is all there is to education, or that the mastery of information is the ultimate function of human intelligence, is to sell ourselves tragically short.

Before we see why, let us be clear about what is at stake here: it is nothing less than our fundamental assumptions about human nature. For what we affirm about the end of human intelligence we shall also affirm about our deepest human identity. We need but glance at history to see the road we're on. At the outset of the Industrial Revolution, Western man made great strides in harnessing the power of nature by building ingenious machines like the steam engine. So compellingly intricate were these new machines, so impressive the way in which their many separate parts worked together as a total system, that it was but a step to see them as metaphors for human beings. A French philosopher named La Mettrie stated what many were already thinking. In a work called *Man a Machine* (*L'homme machine*, 1748), La Mettrie wrote:

The human body is a machine which winds its own springs . . . Since all the faculties of the soul depend to such a degree on the proper organization of the brain and of the whole body . . . the soul is clearly an enlightened machine . . . Let us conclude boldly that man is a machine . . . (Johnson, 1981: 47, 51, 53).

Other thinkers, as disdainful of what they felt to be the empty metaphysical speculations of earlier philosophers as they were impressed by the new technology, were eager to assert along with La Mettrie that the human being was a soulless, though exquisitely complex, machine.

With the arrival of the machine called the computer this line of thought has taken on juggernautical force. When it was seen that the electrochemical functioning of the human brain synapses was uncannily similar to the on-off electrical pulsing by which the computer circuit runs, it was tempting to conclude that the human being was nothing more (and nothing less) than a "biocomputer," a sophisticated information processing machine that takes in "input"—physical food as well as mental "food" or information—and processes it to the best of its ability toward the optimum of its survival.

The current debate over whether or not the full range of human intelligence might one day be manifested by a computer is one of the liveliest in philosophy today. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most complex. I won't enter it directly here, but instead will keep my promise to say why I believe it is wrong to equate mastery of information with that peculiar human excellence we call wisdom. In so doing, I will be nothing more than a diligent student of Plato. For though Plato and his heirs might well agree that human beings are to a great degree information processors, they would insist that our deepest humanity comes to birth only as we become wisdom-seekers. We are back again at our old question: What is wisdom?

### *Plato on Wisdom*

A movie I once saw called the *Seven Faces of Dr. Lao* had a moment in which an old Chinese sage asks a little boy: "My son, what do you think wisdom is?"

Hesitantly, respectfully, the youngster replies: "I don't know, sir."

Smiling his approval the sage responds: "*That* is a wise answer!"

Plato's teacher, Socrates, would have liked that. In his own famous *Apology* (defense) before the citizens of Athens, Socrates says that his only claim to be wiser than other men rests on his awareness of how much he does not know. Intellectual humility is certainly one aspect of Platonic wisdom.

But the best path to Plato's notion of wisdom unfolds through an examination of wisdom's opposites: ignorance (*amathia*) and folly (*aphrosune*). Nowhere does Plato express himself more forcefully on human ignorance than in a single vivid passage in his dialogue, *Laws*.<sup>1</sup> Twice in a short span of lines Plato himself emphasizes that he is speaking of the *greatest* ignorance or unwisdom to be found in the human condition:



Now what type of ignorance may fairly be called the *greatest* . . . I am on the point of describing . . . That of a man who hates, not loves, what his judgment pronounces to be noble or good, while he loves and enjoys what he judges vile and wicked. It is this dissonance that I call the worst ignorance and also the *greatest*, since it affects a large part of the soul . . . [a]nd in one individual man when fair discourse is present in the soul, but produces no effect, but rather the very contrary. These are the types of ignorance I would pronounce the gravest dissonances. (*Laws*, 689b; cf. *Republic* 352a and *Phaedrus* 577c.)

Notice that Plato does not link ignorance with a lack of facts or absence of schooling but rather, and quite strikingly, with inner conflict. Ignorance here is linked to a lack of concord (*diaphonia*) between what one knows or feels to be true, noble and good, and what one actually winds up doing. It is not a deficiency of information in this or that category of life but an imbalanced condition of one's whole being. When a person is at cross-purposes with himself he is, in Plato's language, in a state of ignorance. Plato does not use this term derisively or disdainfully. He simply asserts that this unfortunate ignorance pervades the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

If ignorance is inner conflict, we might deduce that for Plato wisdom lies in inner concord, in a harmony between our intuition of what is good and noble and our actual activities. And we would be right. Plato often speaks about wisdom as the overcoming of discord and contrariety in the soul. He describes wisdom as a state of being "in unison" within oneself (*Phaedrus*, 443e), and the wise one as possessed of harmony (*harmonia*), proportion of balance (*metriotes*), temperance (*sophrosune*), and friendliness (*philia*). (Cf. *Republic*, 443d, 490d; *philebus*, 64e-65d; and *Laws*, 628c, 693c.) Other virtues such as compassion (*Republic*, 516c) could be added to fill out the definition of wisdom. What is crucially important to see, however, is that for Plato "wisdom" is not solely cognitive. Platonic "wisdom" points to an overall condition of one's being and the expression of that state of being in action. The "proof" of wisdom, in short, is all-around *virtue*, the sort of virtue that cannot be the result of occasional victories of will power over inclination but only a natural outflow of one's inner balanced condition. The crucial chariot analogy of the *Phaedrus*, in which the soul is likened to a charioteer who must maintain a *cooperative harmony* between reason, on the one hand, and emotions, on the other, underscores Plato's contention that a *balance* between logos and eros, and not some tyranny of reason, is the ideal.

I'm stressing this understanding of Platonic wisdom because an unwary reader of Plato might get the mistaken impression that he is all "head," no "heart," and despises the body to boot. It is true that Plato honors rational-

ity above all other human faculties and also true that the attempt to know Form, a discipline crucial to Platonic philosophy, appears at first to be an exclusively cognitive activity. Moreover, it is true that Plato and Socrates call philosophy the “practice of dying” because dying is understood as the separation of body and soul and that such a separation, in life, is precisely what philosophy attempts. The separation spoken of here, however, is not absolute, but *relative*, and for the purpose of finding a proper interrelationship between the various facets of human nature. A human being who somehow severed the relationship between the mind and the emotions would be a monstrosity in Plato’s eyes. But the opposite extreme would be equally monstrous: those ruled by the demands of the body or whose ability to think clearly is regularly devastated by storms of emotion are clearly those who are likely to be destructive to themselves as well as to others. Socrates is Plato’s hero not because he has smart brains but because he is an eminently balanced person from whom virtue naturally irradiates.

### *Techne and Sophia*

We are now in a position to understand Plato’s distinction between the pursuit of wisdom (*sophia*) and the cultivation of *techne*, Plato’s general term for the art of making things. Briefly put, *techne*, from which we derive our word “technology,” is the knowledge of how to *do* whereas *sophia* is the knowledge of how to *be*. *Techne* is transmitted through information, the learning and storing up of facts about the world and connection between these facts, whereas wisdom is not transmitted at all, but brought to birth in some other way. Just how we will see later on.

To Plato, *techne* without *sophia* is of dubious value. Technical knowledge is no guarantee against ignorance of the worst sort.<sup>3</sup> We can check this against our own experience. Have we not known creative people who yet remain fools; brainy people with a marvelous capacity for mastering information who yet remain unable to balance their lives or engage in satisfying, nondestructive relationships; brilliant people who do not know their limits or how to deal with impulses, or who, despite their technical brilliance, seem confused about how properly to spend the limited life-energy that is at their disposal? Such people are often found regretting things they’ve done, haunted by a sense of waste.

Plato’s rejection of the sufficiency of technical knowledge is evident when he notes in the *Republic* that the city is full of “many and manifold knowledges or sciences” (428c), none of which is effective in achieving political order, the *sine qua non* of human well-being. He mocks those who are information gluttons, always eager to “hear some new thing,” and “farming out their ears to listen to every chorus in the land” (475d). In the Cave parable, too, Plato ridicules those who excel in *techne* while neglect-

ing the pursuit of *sophia*. They are Cave celebrities, “experts” who can authoritatively expound on the nature and function of the flickering shadows on the Cave’s walls. They win prizes for “seeing the passing things (i.e., things with no enduring reality) most sharply and remembering best which of them used to come before and which after and which together and from these were able to predict what was going to come” (*Republic* 516d).

Again we must remind ourselves that Plato is not condemning *techne* as inherently worthless. On the contrary, it is good to gain skills, know facts, know how to make a good speech, use a hammer and add numbers. Studying the arts and sciences can provide a good basis for the pursuit of wisdom, but it does not address what is most essential in human beings. Without wisdom a human being is half-finished. Technical competence and financial success can swell the head to such proportions that that illusory fullness causes one to reject wisdom as a useless pursuit without even knowing what it is. This is the “double ignorance” that Socrates decries in the *Apology* (29b).

### *The Path to Wisdom: Remembering*

“How fine it would be,” says Plato, “if wisdom were the sort of thing that could flow out of the one of us who is fuller into him who is emptier, by our mere contact with each other, as water will flow through wool from the fuller cup into the emptier” (*Symposium*, 175d). Alas, it cannot be transmitted in this way. Nor can it be taught in the way a teacher normally teaches a student. In the *Republic*, Plato insists again that wisdom cannot be put into heads like water into an empty jar (518c). And since what goes by the names of “teaching” and “learning” is a process whereby someone who has information or skill conveys it to someone who does not, Plato claims that, so far as wisdom is concerned, there are neither teachers nor learners!<sup>14</sup> How then does one “get” wisdom?

Let us look more closely at what we might call the “empty jar” model of the mind. We may indeed be empty of the various informations and knowledges of life such as how to fix a carburetor, make a pie crust or determine the circumference of a circle. But wisdom—and here is Plato’s bedrock assertion—is *already* a part of our nature, knitted into the very fabric of our humanity. It is our natural birthright, something of which we all have a “store” within. Thus, Plato describes his own special notion of education in the following way:

. . . not an art of producing vision in [the soul] *but on the assumption that it possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should*, an art of bringing this about. (*Republic*, 518d; emphasis mine).

The reason we are not wise is *not* because we are empty of it but because we have neglected to tap the well of wisdom that is ours. The pressures of growing from infants into socialized adults have shifted our attention too lopsidedly toward the external world, and as a result, our pipeline to the well of wisdom within us has gotten clogged from disuse. We have in some sense *forgotten* what we already have.

Therefore, we must REMEMBER. "True seeking and learning," says Socrates in the *Meno*, "are in fact nothing but recollection" (81d). The path to wisdom, it turns out, is through remembering—remembering what is forgotten, re-collecting what has been scattered and dispersed. This is a most unusual doctrine! Can Plato mean what he says? Not only does he mean it, but we must realize that far from being some minor footnote to his philosophy, it is, rather, one of the keys to his entire teaching enunciated again and again in his most important dialogues. (Cf. *Meno*, 81d, 85c; *Phaedo*, 72e, 73b-c, 75e, 76a; *Republic*, 504c, 586e; *Phaedrus*, 248b, 249c; *Theaetetus*, 198d-e; *Lysis*, 222a; *Timaeus*, 90c.)

Nor has this idea died with Plato. The widely respected philosopher and educator, Jacob Needleman, has written as recently as 1982 that "[T]he function of philosophy in human life is to help man remember. *It has no other task*" (Needleman, 1982:4. Emphasis his).

Remember what? To ask this question is to reach down toward the very root of this teaching and to find there an assumption shared by Plato and Needleman and many others who came between. It goes something like this: When we are born we come out of our mother's womb. But in a deeper sense, we arise out of the womb of the universe. We are thus deeply akin to it. Just as our mother is profoundly present in us (through genetic inheritance) so too is the structure of timeless Universal Being present in us. Its truths are "known" to us, written into us and closer to us than our jugular vein. The *times* we are born into will be quite new and unknown to us. But deep within us resides the knowledge of abiding realities, the essential truths of Being.

For most of us, these natural belongings of the soul remain hidden and unreclaimed. Recollection is the key to that reclaiming. No one can tell us about the truths of Being, at least not effectively. Each of us must *remember* those truths for him or herself. Only when one personally experiences their resonance within can they be effective. Secondhand reports will not do.

We now see why philosophy *a la* Plato is so different from other fields of study whose *modus operandi* is the transmission of new information. For recollection, the heart of philosophy, proceeds not by accumulating information but by asking questions, by engaging in conversations about the deepest matters, and by having the patience to honor the questions as questions, resisting the grab for easy answers. Plato called this aspect of the

pursuit of wisdom *dialectic*, a give and take between “teacher” and “pupil,” an endless conversation about Being. Plato felt that it was such conversation, a continuous *dwelling with* the question (i.e., with no impatience to answer it) that catalyzes recollection, that stirs up that layer of ourselves where wisdom sleeps so that it can awaken and arise.<sup>5</sup> This also helps us to see why Socrates resisted the designation “teacher,” often preferring to be thought of as a midwife. For in his own estimation, Socrates was not providing anything new but rather bringing to birth what was already there.

I am aware that I have just been speaking about wisdom as occurring through the “recollection of the truths of being” which probably sounds like a purely mental process of discovering certain ultimate pieces of information, whereas before I spoke of wisdom as inner concord. If this is confusing, two notes may help.

First, the process of recollection is itself partly dependent on inner concord. They work together in a deepening spiral: at some point, *some* inner concord motivates one to seek more deeply. Seeking more deeply (in dialectic) effects “remembering,” which then strengthens inner concord, which causes one to seek more deeply and so on.

Second, the “truths of being” which are remembered are not such truths as “water freezes below 32 degrees F.” or “Los Angeles is south of San Francisco,” or other truths which can be stated in propositional form. They are rather intuitions of the deepest dynamics of Reality, intuited by one’s whole being and expressed in *patterns of activity or modes of being* and not, at least not very effectively, in words. This brings us to our final note on Plato’s path to wisdom.

### *The Beginning and End of Wisdom: Being Good*

Plato reserves a single, beautiful term for the deepest and highest Reality, for the Source of all Being, for the Pattern behind all patterns and for the fundamental Order of the Universe. He calls it *the Good*. Because each of us is a miniature Cosmos, mirroring the structure of the great Cosmos, the Good also dwells at our own deepest level, at our most fundamental being. Though it is within us, we do not know it, for, as ancient lore would have it, “like can only be known by like.” If we want to know the Good (which is our deepest nature) we must start by being good. Like a guitar string which when plucked will set another guitar string tuned precisely to the same pitch humming in resonance, so too must we be good if we are to be in vibrational alignment with the Good. To push the musical metaphor a step further: if the Good is the fundamental chord of universal Being, our lives must be in harmony with that chord if we wish to remember the Whole Music of Being. Only when our lives are morally tuned can the intellectual part of us hear—recollect—the deepest truths of Being.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Plato's path to wisdom has a profoundly ethical cast to it. The most precious lesson Plato learns from Socrates is that the pursuit of wisdom necessitates an *amendment of life*, a *transformation of character*, an *all-round moral effort*. Without such effort, the intellectual work involved in philosophy is about as effective as trying to ride off on a horse that is securely tied to a fence post. No amount of mental muscle, no quantity of information, can open the clogged pipeline to the Truth as much as goodness can. If we are to attain that wisdom in which we find our completeness, our inner life must have the same qualitative excellence as the object it seeks to know. Will I do Plato's profundity an injustice by encapsulating it?: In order to progress in wisdom, one must be good. The "gooder" one gets, the more one understands about Reality and the wiser one becomes. The wiser one becomes, the less effort it takes to be good. It's a package deal. <sup>7</sup>

### *Epilogue: Re-Collecting Ourselves*

Historians and journalists tell us that we live in an Age of Information. If they were asked to come up with a second-best label, might it not be "The Age of Stress"? Can you think of a complaint that falls from contemporary lips more frequently than feeling "stressed out" or "scattered"? We need not rely on supposition here. Not long ago TIME reported that "*two-thirds* of the office visits to U.S. family doctors are prompted by stress-related symptoms" (June 6, 1983; emphasis mine). Can there possibly be some connection between the avalanche of information the Computer Age sends roaring down upon us and the tension we feel?

It would be tempting to offer philosophy as a cure for stress, but I will resist the temptation. The market is already oversaturated. Instead I will simply offer a bit of wordplay and a closing observation.

Plato tries to teach us that the aim of philosophy is to re-member what has been dis-membered, to re-collect what has been lost. Reality is such stuff as human beings are made of, and the more we re-collect the abiding realities of Being, the more we re-member the scattered pieces of ourselves. What all the king's horses and all the king's men could not do for Humpty-Dumpty, we can do for ourselves. The entire re-remembering process must be complemented by an effort at virtue, and this effort is in its own way a putting-back-together of head and heart, of bringing con-cord (with heart) where there was dis-cord (without heart). Thus does philosophy earn its name as the love of wisdom, the love of inner unison.

Finally we might ask if there is anyone who can claim to *be* wise or who has completed the path to wisdom. Plato is quite clear on this point. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says: "To call [someone] wise . . . would I think be going too far; the epithet is proper only to a god. A name that would

fit . . . better, and have more seemliness would be 'lover of wisdom' . . . ” (278d). The great Plato scholar, R. E. Cushman, underscores the point:

The philosopher must content himself with the status which his name implies, a lover of wisdom. He will cherish every intimation of the truth which he is privileged to receive; but his peculiar excellence or virtue will be found, not in the possession of wisdom, but in the earnest and undeterred pursuit of it. (Cushman, 1958:56)

For Plato the goal is not to get to the end of the Path, for it may have no end. The goal, rather, is simply to be *on* the Path. To love wisdom, to pursue it intently and earnestly—this is enough.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is Plato's last dialogue, written at an advanced age. It is the only one in which Socrates neither speaks nor is referred to, thus suggesting unalloyed Plato. All quotations from Plato are taken from Hamilton and Cairns, 1961.

<sup>2</sup> There are two other references to ignorance in the dialogues that are worthy of note. First, in the *Apology* (29b), Socrates describes ignorance as the state of those who, not having wisdom, nevertheless presume to know what it is, scorn it, and judge it not worth the pursuit. Second, in the *Gorgias*, a conversation between Socrates and Polus makes clear that, for all his frankness, Polus is misconstruing to himself his real and true convictions (474b). This fairly common human trait, lying to oneself, Plato would also call ignorance. Ignorance is thus to be identified with either a) inner discord or fragmentation, b) presumption, or c) self-deception. Here we shall focus almost exclusively on the first.

<sup>3</sup> According to Protagoras in the Platonic dialogue of the same name (*Protagoras*, 321cj), *techne* was given to mankind by the mythic hero Prometheus. This seems to be a logical extension of the Prometheus myth which portrays the hero as having stolen fire from the gods. For nothing gave man more power to shape his environment, to bend raw materials to his needs, than mastery of the burning energy of fire. Of course, the gods punished Prometheus for his deed, chaining him to a high rock and allowing wild birds to feed eternally on his intestines. Fire, and by extension *techne*, the myth seems to say, are purchased at a heavy price; the ceaseless gnawing of human guts by the hunger for power and control.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Meno*. The focus of this dialogue is the question: "Can *arete* (virtue) be taught?" The answer is no. It cannot be taught and it cannot be learned. Since wisdom and virtue are, for Plato, almost interchangeable (we will say more about this below) the same may be said of wisdom: it is unteachable and unlearnable in any ordinary sense.

<sup>5</sup> J. Needleman has noticed that "[O]ur society has no place where the ultimate questions are honored as questions. Every institution and social form we have is devoted either to solving problems or providing pleasure" (Needleman, 1982: 75). If Needleman is right, it is little wonder why the psychologist C.G. Jung once said that modern man is in search of a soul.

<sup>6</sup> Whence comes the strength to rise above deeply ingrained, unfulfilling habits and the will to remain steadfast in the good? For Plato and Aristotle it was the human will itself which had to rise above its own dispersion, with a little help perhaps from plain old luck. For Asian traditions it is the same, though luck in this case is called beneficial past *karma*. For Christians, however, the human will was thought too infirm to take on this project.



While not denying some role to the will, the Christian emphasis is preeminently upon divine grace. (Book VIII of Augustine's *Confessions* provides a textbook illustration of this.) The stress on the role of divine grace marks a major parting of the ways between Christianity and other spiritual paths regarding this perennial human problem.

<sup>7</sup> Our interpretation of Plato's path to wisdom as a co-operation between the process of questioning/recollecting and the practice of moral excellence is given support in the person of Socrates, to whom we know Plato owed the inspiration for his life's work. For Socrates excels in two things: in "taking care for the soul's goodness" (i.e., living virtuously) and in questioning.

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## **Education in Plato's *Republic***

***James J. Boitano***

PERHAPS *THE MAJOR PROBLEM* which any political regime faces is the problem of establishing stability; i.e., maintaining order within the society. Plato was one of the first political philosophers to attempt to solve this problem in an integral way. His writings greatly influenced later thinkers and are valuable in assessing current attempts to educate citizens in the values of a particular political regime.

Proper education (*paideia*) according to Plato could provide the requisite stability in his ideal polis, the *Republic*. The Greek concept of *paideia* meant much more than what we mean by "education" today. The term was used in a general way to mean the equivalent of our concept of "culture."<sup>1</sup> It involved learning the basic skills but also included the result of the educational process as well: culture and the cultivation of the values of civilization. Plato saw education as serving to "cement" the different elements of the community together in such a way as to provide for a self-sufficient and well-ordered community. He saw the fruits of education being intricately woven into the characters of the men of the community and contributing constantly to the achievement and preservation of the

“good life” in the community and in the souls of men. Civic education, i.e. the education of the citizens to support the goals of the regime, was thus an integral part of the process of education, and this view influenced almost all political philosophers who came after Plato.

In examining the Platonic system of education, I will first discuss the relationship Plato believed existed between the human soul and the political community. There is an important difference here, I believe, between the modern interpretation of the connection between individual soul and community and Plato's interpretation. To understand fully what Plato assumes about human nature and its relationship to the political community is necessary if one is to understand what he is saying about education. I will then focus on Plato's attack on Athenian education of the fourth century B.C. To understand the weaknesses in the system Plato analyzed is to understand more clearly what Plato was attempting to do in establishing a better (nay the *best*) system for his ideal community. Third, I will outline the development of Plato's educational process from early childhood through maturity. What are the important components of each level of education? What does each component contribute to the overall search for ultimate truth? Finally, I will raise some questions which should serve as a beginning for students to consider the implications of Plato's ideas for their own experiences.

### *The Human Soul and the Political Community*

So the reason ought to rule, having the wisdom and foresight to act for the whole, and the spirit ought to obey and support it. . . . When these two elements have been brought up, and trained and educated to their proper function, they must be put in charge of appetite. . . . They must prevent it taking its fill of the so-called physical pleasures, for otherwise it will get too large and strong to mind its own business and will try to subject and control the other elements, which it has no right to do, and so wreck the life of all of them.<sup>2</sup>

Plato's method in outlining an ideal system of government in the *Republic* is to investigate the quality or character of the good and happy person. The human soul, according to Plato, is divided into three “parts”; i.e., three elements or powers each of which is manifested by some aspect of human behavior.<sup>3</sup> The highest of these elements is the reasoning power of the soul since it is the power which is best able to approach some comprehension and love of the ultimate Good (*ton agathon*). Reasoning is the one human faculty which is able to order the whole soul according to the order of the ultimate Good. A second quality of the soul is spirit or courage (*thumos*). This is a quality of will enabling one to act forthrightly in what

one has decided to do. (The level of knowledge in this quality of soul is based on faith or trust rather than on the understanding of reason.) This quality does not apprehend the Good in itself as reason does, but it trusts resolutely in reason's apprehension of the Good and follows reason's guidance. The lowest quality of the soul is desire (or the appetites) which human beings share with other animate creatures. These are the drives associated with passion, self-interest, and sensual urges. The happy and just person is one who has a well-ordered soul, i.e., who develops and maintains this hierarchical ordering of the soul's powers.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of education is to develop in the individual the knowledge and the virtue to achieve this condition of happiness.

By projecting the soul's elements into the polis of the *Republic*, Plato makes a connection which modern society does not often do. To Plato, if a community is well-ordered, the people living in it will be happy, and they will be able to maintain the order of their souls because the community itself helps to maintain that order. Any weakening of this order in the community weakens the order in the human soul and vice versa. Such order is not produced automatically but requires effort on the part of each person and the guidance of the political regime.

Plato's system of education is both an attempt to find what is the proper place and task for each person in the community (which will therefore work for the perfection of that person *and* for the community as a whole) and to develop within each class the necessary abilities to perform its duties well and thus contribute to the overall good life of the polis. Each stage of the educational process is so organized as to determine the proper capacity for comprehension of the ultimate Good which each person possesses. The educational system thus develops a sense of self-discipline in each citizen to control his selfish desires and appetites.

Because, unlike courage and wisdom, which made our state brave and wise by being present in a particular part of it, self-discipline stretches across the whole scale. It produces a harmony between its strongest and weakest and middle elements. . . . And so we are quite justified in regarding self-discipline as this unanimity in which there is a natural concordance between higher and lower about which of them is to rule in the state and individual.<sup>5</sup>

### *Plato's Critique of Athenian Education*

In the *Republic* Plato attacks the existing Athenian system of education. Plato argued that the educational system had corrupted the virtues of the good person and good citizen to such an extent that the polis of Athens was in chaos.<sup>6</sup> Plato's attack was a three-sided critique. First, he attacked the

Athenian practice of education as a private concern. In Athens, education was not supported nor directed by the polis. Private individuals contracted with tutors (Sophists) to teach their children. Plato's attack on the Sophists was that they often "tailored" the truth to meet the satisfaction of the paying customers. They were, on the whole, uninterested in exploring and loving wisdom; their teaching lacked the unique Socratic method of inquiry which forced a person to question continually any answer one might arrive at—especially answers which dealt with the ultimate purpose of life. While the Sophists asked "Is good a delusion?" Socrates asked, "What is the good?" Unlike the Sophists who assumed that there are no absolutes, Socrates and Plato believed that such absolutes exist. The Sophists were more concerned with producing citizens capable of debating positions on issues and persuading others to support their position regardless of the objective truth of the case. Education in their hands was not directed toward truth but toward the development of skills—especially the skills of argumentation and persuasion, i.e., rhetoric.

Plato argued that the polis must concern itself with education since its very life depended upon the qualities of excellence (virtues) which were developed in its citizens by the educational process. Since all persons were not capable of comprehending the truth at the same level, the polis had to establish and maintain a system by which each individual's capacity to achieve an understanding of truth at his level of understanding (and thus to achieve a level of excellence or virtue) was developed to the fullest. The rulers of Plato's *Republic* were to be the true teachers of men. They must have a "love of wisdom" which would manifest itself in the educational system as a constant search and love for the truth *qua* truth.

Second, Athens required only an elementary education for the citizens which was inadequate, in Plato's view, to produce true citizens and statesmen. The role of ruler required an understanding of ultimate order and goodness, which could be achieved only through a long, rigorous, and arduous task of learning and administering the affairs of the polis.

Readiness to learn and remember, quickness and keenness of mind and the qualities that go with them, and enterprise and breadth of vision, aren't usually combined with readiness to live an orderly, quiet and steady life; . . . but we demand a full and fair share of both sets of qualities from anyone who is to be given the highest form of education and any share of office or authority. . . . And we must not only test it [i.e., this type of character] in the pains of fears and pleasures we have already described, but also try it out in a series of intellectual studies . . . to see if it has the endurance to pursue the highest forms of knowledge, without flinching as others flinch in physical trials.<sup>7</sup>

Because this type of character and quality of soul is so rare, only a few persons will have the ability to rule the city well and what will distinguish them from the others will be a love of wisdom rather than a love of power, wealth, or prestige.

Throughout much of the Peloponnesian War and following the defeat of Athens at the hands of the Spartans, Plato believed the polis was governed and administered by incompetents—men who were pandering to the wishes of the multitude and who were neither capable of understanding true order and justice nor capable of administering the state according to true virtue. The polis was incapable of achieving justice since its rulers (who were the full body of citizens) did not understand the true meaning of the concept. Since they had never been taught to question constantly their assumptions and opinions about such virtues as “justice,” they acted only on the basis of disconnected opinions about it which led them into riotous and chaotic discussions about laws and administrative actions. In a vivid passage Plato describes what such “mobocracy” entailed:

When they crowd into the seats in the assembly or law courts or theater, or get together in camp or any other popular meeting place, and, with a great deal of noise and a lack of moderation, shout and clap their approval or disapproval of whatever is proposed or done, the rocks and the whole place re-echo, and redouble the noise of their boos and applause.<sup>8</sup>

So much for the art of statesmanship which upholds the ideal of rational and deliberate weighing of options and choosing the best course of action regardless of the popularity of the decision!<sup>9</sup> Certainly, for Plato, this was no way to order and to administer a political community.

Third, Athens made no provision for the education of women. They were simply instructed in household duties. Plato considered it necessary for true justice that a woman should receive the same training and education as a man.<sup>10</sup> This would permit her to achieve the level of virtue of which she was capable. The polis was that much weaker and disordered for not seeing the necessity to educate a large element of the community which had a potential for good living and for contributing much to the welfare of the polis. Plato thus incorporates women into all three levels of the *Republic* and requires that they receive the same education as men. “There is therefore no administrative occupation which is peculiar to woman as woman or man as man; natural capacities are similarly distributed in each sex, and it is natural for women to take part in all occupations as well as men, though in all women will be the weaker partners.”<sup>11</sup>

### *The Ideal Educational Program of the Republic*

The methods of education set forth in the *Republic* reflect Plato's belief in the active participation of the soul in the educational process. Objects are not "presented" to the soul, but the soul directs itself to objects which it desires because there is an attraction between the object and a power of the soul. The instructor should never try to force this movement of the internal power to its object. He is concerned with structuring the environment (i.e., the objects toward which the soul moves). "That environment he seeks to adjust in such a way that the spirit, as it looks around, and moves in response to the attraction which it feels for what it sees, may look around on things beautiful, and move towards the beauty which it sees."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the true art of "teacher" lies in setting the right objects before the soul in order that the person will be drawn toward the true awareness of the various manifestations of the Good (and ultimately, if possible, toward the Good itself). Plato's theory of "remembrance" which is developed in his dialogue *Meno* is what the teacher builds upon. According to this theory, the soul "remembers" the form or Idea of an object or quality which it had beheld in an earlier spiritual existence. Through the influence of environment the teacher helps a student to resurrect this memory. The teacher's manipulation of environment is the basis Plato uses to develop the various stages of his educational system.

. . . [W]e must reject the conception of education professed by those who say that they can put into the mind knowledge that was not there before—rather as if they could put sight into blind eyes. . . . But our argument indicates that this is a capacity innate in each man's mind, and that the organ by which he learns is like an eye which cannot be turned from darkness to light unless the whole body is turned; in the same way the mind as a whole must be turned away from the world of change until its eye can bear to look straight at reality, and at the brightest of all realities which is what we call the good. . . . Then this turning around of the mind itself might be made a subject of professional skill, which would effect the conversion as easily and effectively as possible. It would not be concerned to implant sight, but to ensure that someone who had it already was not either turned in the wrong direction or looking the wrong way.<sup>13</sup>

Plato is thus taking a definite stand against those who hold to the relativism of truth and to the belief that a teacher infuses his student with knowledge. The dialectic method, developed by Socrates and used by Plato as a teaching device in his Academy, was the vehicle *par excellence* for turning and directing the soul to the proper good and thus permitting the person to "know himself."



Plato's educational plan consists of two major stages. The first involves elementary training up to the age of eighteen, with two additional years after this of military training.<sup>14</sup> It is not clear from the text whether members of the artisan class are to be involved in this phase of education, but it seems reasonable to assume that they would be since this phase deals with the development of the qualities of self-discipline which Plato believed were the prerequisites for living the good life in an ordered polis. Also, moderation is the virtue most predominantly present in the artisan group and it is in this stage of education that such moderation is developed among all the members of the society. Another reason for making the assumption that everyone participates in this early education is the fact that Plato bases advancement in the educational system (and thus in the class-structure of the polis) upon demonstrated potential and achievement on prior educational levels. All youths must be initiated into the educational process in order to test their abilities and determine who among each class of the society should be advanced to the next educational level.

During the first part of this elementary stage, Plato emphasizes the important influence which stories told to children by their mothers and nurses have on their development. The early phases of this education are very crucial to the initial development in the young of a sense of self-discipline and order which will serve as the basis for the order of the community.

And the first step, as you know, is always what matters most, particularly when we are dealing with those who are young and tender. That is the time when they are easily moulded and when any impression we choose to make leaves a permanent mark. . . . Then it seems that our first business is to supervise the production of stories, and choose only those we think suitable and reject the rest. We shall persuade mothers and nurses to tell our chosen stories to their children, and by means of them to mould their minds and characters which are more important than their bodies.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the environment must be manipulated almost from the birth of the child, and this manipulation leads Plato to discuss the problem of censorship. (This will be discussed below.)

As the child grows, the curriculum becomes more formalized. In this first stage (from birth to 18 years) the curriculum consists of gymnastics and music. These terms must be construed more broadly than the meaning used today. Gymnastics involved not only exercise, but the care and training of the body, including diet and hygiene. One must learn to care for the body properly since its well-being is an essential beginning for living the good life. Another reason was the necessity to produce strong warriors in the

auxiliary class, and this required the development of good healthful habits at an early stage of physical development. But perhaps the most important purpose was that Plato was aware that mental and physical fitness are related; that the higher element, the soul (wherein resides the mental capabilities) uses and directs the lower element, the body. Thus, the body must learn to respond to the direction of the soul, and to be under the control of the soul in a well-ordered person. Plato saw that the development of self-discipline through the training of the body was an essential first step in the ultimate training of the soul to be the ruling element.

Training in music consisted not so much in singing and instrumental music as in the study of certain specific forms of poetry and literature. This study began the analysis of an order and harmony which would be explored in a much more theoretical form in the higher stages of education. Its purpose was also to relate the deeds of great men for the edification of the young—to instill in them a feeling for proper limits and standards in their actions.

To accomplish this end, Plato proposes a rigid system of censorship to assure that the stories of early childhood and the training in music will be conducive to the type of social and political character which is desirable in the community. Some types of music are detrimental to this development, and it is important for the rulers to prevent these from polluting the minds of the young.<sup>16</sup> This is especially the case with those forms of music which are not conducive to the proper ordering of the human soul. Such forms appeal primarily to the emotions and thus evoke an uncontrolled and irrational response (much like our modern romance novels). They also often depict the gods as less than perfect, and by so doing make it difficult for men to strive for the goodness and order which is proper to human persons, for the gods are the most perfect of beings and should be depicted in the proper way if men are to be expected to act properly.

Accordingly, if it [i.e., the soul] comes into contact with a dramatic form of expression, it will assimilate itself to the spirit of that form. Throwing itself into different characters, some of them good and some of them bad, in hearing or reading a drama it will begin to throw itself into different moods in its own actual life. It will begin to pose, now in this attitude, now in that; and it will thus go exactly contrary to the fundamental principle of the state, that a man should do the one thing, and preserve the one attitude, to which he is called.<sup>17</sup>

In the just state, according to Plato, the literary form most acceptable will be the epic form in which the narrator presents a single perspective, or only occasionally takes on the personality of one of his characters and allows that character to speak.

Both music and gymnastics are required for education and both are directed toward the welfare of the soul and therefore of the person. "Neither alone leads to a satisfactory result, for gymnastics alone makes a man rough and quick-tempered, while *mousike* alone makes him too soft. What we should aim at is a proper balance of those two elements, temper and love of learning."<sup>18</sup>

The second stage of education involves a plan of advanced study for those individuals who have passed the screening process of elementary education.<sup>19</sup> This new phase of education begins at the age of twenty and continues for fifteen years. The second stage permits a more individualized form of instruction since the group is much smaller than the elementary group and since Plato believed that the best type of instruction for philosophical understanding was a close relationship between pupil and teacher. Such a relationship would involve both teacher and student in a loving pursuit of the Good through loving the good which they each see in the other. Together they become true "lovers of Wisdom" (philosophers) after long and arduous study.

Plato is quite clear about the distinction between higher and elementary education. The elementary stage "gave a training by habituation, and used music and rhythm to produce a certain harmony and balance of character rather than knowledge; and its literature, whether fictional or factual, had similar effects. There was nothing in it to produce the effect [i.e., the true understanding of ultimate reality itself rather than these examples or imperfect glimpses of this reality] you are seeking."<sup>20</sup> What is now sought is the certain knowledge of the truth found in philosophy.

The curriculum that will begin to lead these persons toward truth is mathematics (from its lower to its higher forms) and astronomy. This is the curriculum of the education system for the first ten years of stage two. Arithmetic is the first studied, and it involves the science of numbers in its broadest sense. Training in arithmetic, Plato believed, was the basis for all study of the truth, and for all practical arts as well. He felt that if one could not distinguish between unity and multiplicity (the one and the many) one could not think nor even act properly. Our perceptions very often are contradictory; whenever we advance beyond simple quantitative perceptions and try to understand qualities, we find that we can be involved in a number of contradictions. This is because the qualities of things which we perceive are relative to those of other perceptions. Thus, the same object may seem both large and small depending upon our comparison of that object with others which we perceive. The question which is raised is whether there is an absolute "large" or "small." If there is such, then how can there be many things which are large and many which are small; or how can there be something which is both large and small at the same time. Our minds are at a loss in attempting to confront these contradictions. Arith-

metic (i.e., the science of numbers) aids us in understanding and resolving the difficulty: it helps us to understand the meaning of unity and diversity. In other words, we learn that the concept "large" is a unique concept regardless of its relationship to things we perceive. When we perceive several objects and give each of them the adjective "large," we are applying the single meaning to a multiplicity of forms which we experience. How can there be a multiplicity of "large" when we experience it in different ways (e.g. a house is large in a different way than an elephant is large)? What Plato is seeking to do is to arrive at an understanding of the unique meaning of the term "large" itself, regardless of its experiential manifestations.

If our perceptions of the unit, by sight or any other sense, is quite unambiguous, then it does not draw the mind towards reality any more than did our perception of a finger. But if it is always combined with the perception of its opposite, and seems to involve plurality as much as unity, then it calls for the exercise of judgment and forces the mind into a quandary in which it must stir itself to think, and ask what unity in itself is; and if that is so, the study of the unit is among those that lead the mind on and turn it to the vision of reality.<sup>21</sup>

A study of arithmetic will lead men more than any other study to begin to ask questions about multiplicity and unity. The purpose of this phase is to develop reasoning ability in the students. Through this study they begin to question their perceptions in such a way that they move to a level of higher reasoning ability which was left undeveloped in their elementary education.

Following arithmetic, the students are taught plane geometry which is the study of two-dimensional objects. Since these do not exist in our sensual world except as representations of abstract perfect forms, this study moves the student to look to the realm of Ideas for the perfect reality, in which this sensual world only participates.<sup>22</sup> Astronomy is also studied not to know and view the heavenly bodies, but to understand the laws of motion; i.e., the ways in which perfect mathematical bodies which are nonexistent in our imperfect sensual world would move in a perfect mathematical space.

In the study of harmonics (a high form of mathematics), Plato builds upon what was studied at the elementary level. In the advanced form of this study, however, he emphasizes a study of the *principles* which are involved: the study of ratios and mathematical proportions which produce harmony. Once again the study is designed to move the student from the world of sensual experience, which is a fleeting and imperfect experience, to the realm of principles (or Forms) which is the realm of absolute truth that

regulates the sensual world we experience. This is moving the student to understand the realm of reason and to move beyond the realm of sensual experience.

Following the ten-year study of mathematics, the student begins a five-year study of dialectics ("to render and exact an account of opinions in discussion").<sup>23</sup> This dialectic is the ability to think and to express oneself logically. Since the universals, the Forms, are the objects of reasoned or logical thought (what he has argued above), then dialectic is the discovery of these Forms. It is the method by which one philosophizes; i.e., the method by which one arrives at a true understanding of reality.

Those who understand dialectics will be able to grasp the various Forms and, finally, some awareness of the ultimate Good. They will be able to classify things according to these forms since they no longer judge things by "opinion" but know them in their truest sense. Dialectic is "the coping stone that tops our educational system; it completes the course of studies and there is no other study that can rightly be placed above it."<sup>24</sup> At this level, then, the formal education of the student ends, but his pursuit of the Good and his understanding and love of it have only begun, for he will continue his "study" for the rest of his life. The educational process up to this point has been a constant development of the intellectual powers of the student which has moved through the various stages to the ultimate attainment of human knowledge: an apprehension and an appreciation of the ultimate Good.

At age thirty-five, those who have succeeded thus far in their intellectual advancement are assigned to perform civil and military duties in order that the polis might benefit from their theoretical knowledge and also "that they may have as much practical experience as their fellows."<sup>25</sup> Plato is always consciously aware of the necessity to utilize theoretical knowledge in the interests of the community as a whole. His philosophers do not live in "ivory towers" removed from the everyday cares of the world. Theoretical knowledge must be used to order the community's life or the "good life" will not be possible in the community. During this practical stage, which lasts for fifteen years, the screening process of the students continues. Ultimate political service for them has not been reached, for they are still considered "trainees." They are learning the concrete and practical applications of the principles which they have been studying up to this point as theory. Through their education they are now aware of the problems of a unity and its various manifestations, which means that they are prepared to understand the unity and diversity which must exist in a political community. They now are able to apply their theories to the administration of the polis.<sup>26</sup> According to Plato, service to the polis is one of the virtues of those who have achieved the highest level of knowledge.

When those who have successfully completed this in-service course in public administration reach the age of fifty, they have completed the entire training course and have demonstrated their ability to govern as well as to philosophize. They are then inducted into the Guardians, the true persons of reason, whose task it is to order the society and to control the elements of the polis so that the polis will be the just and "beautiful" city (*Kallipolis*). As Guardians, their time is divided between matters of administration on the highest level of the polis and periods of pure speculation contemplating the Good in its ultimate perfection. For Plato, the philosopher ruler must love the Good in itself and in its manifestation in the unity of the polis; it is this idea which ties the philosopher to the polis and makes him concerned that it is properly ordered.

The society we have described can never grow into a reality or see the light of day, and there will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed, my dear Glaucon, of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands . . .<sup>27</sup>

Plato is well aware, however, of the tendency of the philosophers to shun their mundane responsibilities of ruling for the peace and enjoyment of contemplation. But, justice demands that these persons be the rulers of the polis since they are the best in the hierarchical order of the society (and justice demands that they not be ruled by anyone of lower ability or intellectual stature).

. . . [W]e have bred you [the philosophers] for your own sake and that of the whole community to act as leaders and king-bees in a hive; you are better qualified to combine the practice of philosophy and politics. You must therefore each descend in turn and live with your fellows in the cave and get used to seeing in the dark; once you get used to it you will see a thousand times better than they do and will distinguish the various shadows, and know what they are shadows of, because you have seen the truth about things admirable and just and good.<sup>28</sup>

Plato does not discuss law in the *Republic*, not because he overlooked this aspect of rule, but because he believed that the best men (the Guardians) would not need laws to govern. In fact, he felt that it would be harmful to govern the most perfect state by laws: "I shouldn't have thought . . . that a real legislator ought to bother about making laws and institutions of this sort either in a bad state or a good one; in one because they are

no use and nothing comes of them in the other because they are partly obvious and partly the automatic result of earlier training."<sup>29</sup> Plato thus emphasizes the self-discipline and the wisdom which come from the educational process to maintain order in the community.

## Several Questions for Discussion

A reading of Plato's *Republic* presents a number of questions concerning his educational methodology and goals for the student of political philosophy. It is not my purpose to answer these questions here, but to raise them for further discussion as students attempt to confront Plato's meaning in studying the text.

For many modern American students there is a reaction against the elitism of Plato. Who is to determine who should advance along the path of education? Should I.Q. tests or some other standardized testing scheme be used to determine who should rule? Is there a connection between the ability of a political ruler to rule and his intellectual knowledge? What types of knowledge should a ruler have to be a good ruler?<sup>30</sup>

An important issue which is raised by Plato is the connection between the individual soul and the polis as a whole. In fact, the entire dialogue is based upon the premise stated in Book II that the interlocutors can find justice in the human soul by looking for it in the soul writ large (i.e., the polis). We as moderns see a break between the individual and the political community. We believe that there is a part of us which is private and not subject to control by the political community. Even Aristotle, in his *Politics*, questions the extent of unity which Plato assumes in the *Republic*, and points out the problems of overcoming too extensively the distinction between individual and community. Even his critique does not convey the extent of the problem we have in dealing with Plato's assumption of perfect unity and no individuality in the ruling group of the *Republic*. How much should our lives be controlled by the community and its standards—even if those standards are claimed to be the true and noble standards upon which all persons should base their lives? Have we lost the connection which Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle assumed existed between moral well-being of the soul and political order in society? Without an absolute sense of what is right and good, is it possible for us to argue that political rulers (as well as all persons) must conform their lives to an objective, transcendent standard of Good?

Aristotle raises an important objection to Plato's educational scheme by arguing that Plato has mixed the roles of philosopher and statesman. For Aristotle the intellectual virtue of wisdom (*sophia*) is different from the virtue of practical wisdom (i.e., prudence [*phronesis*]), and thus Aristotle has no place or role for the philosopher ("the lover of wisdom") in the polis. He argues that the philosopher's goal is to find truth and in so doing he must remove himself from the daily cares and concerns of life, whereas the



statesman's goal is to rule well and so must be concerned with the daily needs of his city. Plato tends to minimize the tension directly (although Socrates' own life and mission in Athens graphically indicates such a tension between philosophy and politics), but it is one which we must confront as citizens in a democracy.<sup>31</sup> How much can one expect from politics and the political community in living a happy and morally good life? Have Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and other modern thinkers (even our own Founders, Madison and Hamilton) raised a legitimate argument against the classical thinkers in arguing that the best we can expect from individuals is that each will seek his own self-interest first, and that any political order which does not take that into account is doomed to failure?<sup>32</sup> What is the price we pay for having such a "realistic" or less noble view of the possibilities of human nature? Do we become less able to appreciate the nobility of human nature when we look for crass or enlightened self-interest as the motivation of human action?

These are only some of the questions which the modern student could raise concerning the issues discussed by Plato in his educational program in the *Republic*. What is important is that the student realize that the questions posed by Plato's analysis are enduring questions which every person should consider and attempt to answer. It is in this way that each is able to fulfill the challenge offered by Socrates and Plato to examine one's life in as complete a manner as possible. Only then is one able to live a truly human life and to achieve true human happiness.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, tr. Gilbert Highet, 3 vols. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939-1944).

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 441e-442b. The translation used for textual material from the *Republic* is by Desmond Lee, *Republic* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1974). References to Plato's dialogues will be cited using the Stephanus standard pagination numbers.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 436b-441c.

<sup>4</sup> This of course was an assumption on the part of Plato, and Aristotle after him, based on their own experiences and those of Socrates, who was Plato's teacher.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 432a.

<sup>6</sup> For a good account of the educational system of Athens during Plato's life see Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*. One of Plato's points throughout his dialogues is that such a chaotic educational system prevented the Athenians from recognizing and accepting a truly good man such as Socrates.

<sup>7</sup> *Republic*, 503c-504a.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 492b-c.

<sup>9</sup> Contrast this Platonic approach to rational statesmanship with the ideas of Machiavelli in the *Prince* who breaks with the Platonic tradition of accepting an absolute standard of right action by giving a new meaning to the idea of "rational" decision making. The new meaning presents enlightened individual self-interest as the standard of right action. Modern political philosophy has been shaped by this "new" approach to statesmanship, and has had to confront the problems which are associated with its basic assumptions.

<sup>10</sup> An interesting point of speculation is whether or not Plato would have permitted a woman to be "Philosopher Queen" if she possessed the necessary aptitudes and abilities. Although he probably felt that it was possible but highly unlikely that such would be the case, I believe that he would have accepted one because of his view that justice requires those who are the best to rule over the others.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 455d.

<sup>12</sup> Ernest Barker, *The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle* (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), p. 123. Compare and contrast Plato's methods with those espoused by such modern thinkers as B.F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948); John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1916), Sidney Hook, *Education For Modern Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963) and other works on contemporary educational methods.

<sup>13</sup> *Republic*, 518c-e. For an excellent illustration of this idea and the use

of dialectic in pushing the soul to remember truth see Plato *Meno*, 82b ff.

<sup>14</sup> *Republic*, 376e-412a.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 377b-d. An example of a good story would be one which depicted persons behaving in noble ways or one which showed evil repercussions resulting directly from bad behavior.

<sup>16</sup> An example of the kind of literature which Plato would permit the student to read would be one which depicted the gods acting correctly, and not warring and arguing against each other as depicted in some of the Greek classics. He would, for example, probably argue for censoring parts of the *Iliad* or of several plays of Sophocles which have too complicated a meaning for most students who no longer understand the nuances of the poetic devices used by the poets to convey their understanding of order and proper human action. What he was most concerned about was depicting the models of good and virtuous behavior in ways which could be understood by most persons. For an interesting, non-conformist view of Platonic censorship see Whitney J. Oates, *Plato's View of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972).

<sup>17</sup> Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 236 commenting on *Republic*, 410c.

<sup>19</sup> See *Republic*, 521c-541b.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 522a.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 524e.

<sup>22</sup> See Grube, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

<sup>23</sup> *Republic*, 531e, translated by Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937), p. 195. I have used Shorey's translation here because it is much closer to the literal Greek used by Plato: *dounai te kai amodexasthai logon*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 534e. For another discussion of the relationship between philosophy and dialectic see Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 539e.

<sup>26</sup> Certainly one of the difficult problems they now face is how to render just punishments which are meaningful to both the community as a whole and to the wrongdoer. As rulers who know what justice really is, they must be prepared to dispense it in practical ways which both protect the community and its values and improve the person who has done wrong.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 473d.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 520b-d. Ruling, from the perspective of Plato, is no easy task and is filled with risks. Only the love of wisdom can keep a philosopher committed to his task.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 427a. Plato later changed this view somewhat. In the dialogue *Laws*, he sees a basic good law (i.e., a constitution) as the best *practical* ordering principle of the polis. But he still argues that it is to be established

by a wise man, and should be seen as only relatively the best—not absolutely so. The perfect system is still that which is ruled by wise men.

<sup>30</sup> See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> See Leo Strauss' writings, especially his *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

<sup>32</sup> For a good discussion of the modern approach to the problem of self-interest and human action based upon it see C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). For arguments presenting a moral position coming out of the checks and limits placed on individualism by the U.S. Constitution see Claes G. Ryn, *Democracy and the Ethical Life* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) and John H. Hallowell, *The Moral Foundations of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

## **Celtic Christian Ireland:** *Storehouse of the Past, Workshop for the Future*

*Sister Barbara Green, O.P.*

THE DOMINICAN COLLEGE HUMANITIES PROGRAM introduces its students in the fall semester to the three great civilizations which are the bedrock—the well-spring—of Western culture: the Hellenic, the Judeo-Christian, the Roman. In the spring semester the student returns and, if attentive, notices that though the classics born around the rim of the Mediterranean remain highly influential, the settings in which they will continue to thrive have expanded to Europe and the British Isles. It may seem to the student consulting a map that the progression from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea to Aegean, Adriatic and Atlantic waters is natural enough. But there is an interesting loop to the journey of Western art and learning, a loop up through “Hibernia” (balanced, in fact, by a similar loop through Constantinople) that both preserved and enriched the heritage that spread over the European continent.

“You cannot understand the Middle Ages unless you know something about Ireland,” quotes Ludwig Bieler, a Celtic scholar. “Ireland might indeed be called a harbinger of the Middle Ages. Not, to be sure, the only one, but one of the most effective. During the centuries between Christian

antiquity and the Carolingian revival, when the foundations of medieval Europe were being laid, only the Irish had something to contribute that was new as well as lasting."<sup>1</sup>

The question to be pursued in this essay involves the little loop, the byway through the history, culture and soul of Ireland which produced such an enkindling of spirituality. What was the flame burning in the hearth that warmed the house of Ireland, her larger neighbor to the east, and parts of Western Europe in the fifth through ninth centuries? Why did such a fire catch, burn hot but quick, to be banked by the invasions that followed? Or to phrase the question more classically: What is the character of the Christian religious experience that made Ireland both a storehouse where ancient learning could be guarded and a workshop from which new treasures could be brought forth, best of the old and the new?

### *Background*

In order to begin work on these questions, we must go back to Christianity, that very special blending of Semitic and Hellenistic cultures, and look at its first few hundred years of life. The initial blaze of Christianity with its unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ had died down in some sense by the end of the second century, if by that we can understand that its period of origins was over, its scripture set, its governmental patterns beginning to stabilize, its expectations of the imminent end of the world modified. Though it continued to gain new adherents and so to expand, it also began early to retrench and to seek a mutually beneficial arrangement with the civil authorities which were heir to the Roman Empire. Within three centuries the young Christian Church was closely allied, for good and for ill, with the aging structures of the Roman Empire. Political and economic privileges were acquired, probably vital for the continued growth of Christian communities. Theology, rising from the confrontation of experience and world views of various sorts with systematic thought as well as with the rich poetry of the Bible, was being forged as it defended orthodox views against heterodoxy. In general, it is fair to say that the lines were converging toward harmony and uniformity, for good and for ill. The price paid was loss of a certain freshness and vitality.

New sprouts continued, of course. Individuals seeking a more ascetic and vigorous spiritual discipline than they found in the mainstream went out to the deserts to deepen their relationship with God and, paradoxically it would seem, with other human beings. Groups of such individuals eventually gathered to pray and contemplate and be of service to the Church in various ways. Monastic life, a phenomenon close to the heart of many and diverse religions, had emerged from within the Christian community.

One other quick summary must precede our inquiry into the story of Irish Christian culture, and that involves the Celtic peoples, of whom the Irish were one group. Part of the distinctiveness of Irish Christianity can be seen and understood only as we look at its pagan Celtic heritage.

The Celts are discernible as a linguistic or cultural group whose presence in Europe stretches back to the third millennium B.C.<sup>2</sup> They were not a narrowly distinct group but represent rather a general identity, responsive to various changes as other cultural elements came into contact with them.<sup>3</sup> The group germane to the present study seems to have dwelt in northwestern Europe in the first millennium B.C. with a flowering of their culture in the fifth through first centuries.<sup>4</sup> The Greeks and Romans were quite interested in the Celts, as we can read in Plato, Xenophon, Caesar, Livy and others. Celtic tribes menaced Rome in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and allied with her Carthaginian foes; Julius Caesar encountered Celts in the first century B.C. when he went into Gaul; St. Paul writes to them as Galatians in the first century of our own era, urging them to persevere in their conversion to Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

The Celtic group in which we are most interested moved into Ireland in the second half of the first millennium B.C. The culture that they took with them has been the subject of considerable study but little consensus. Some scholars (both ancient and modern) have tended to idealize them as intellectually advanced, akin to the Greeks and Romans. These scholars describe the priests as philosophers musing over the indestructibility of the soul, as attuned to the secrets of nature, as arbitrating cases according to rational principles.<sup>6</sup> Others see them as barbarians whose shaman priests propitiated nature and manipulated their fellows.<sup>7</sup> The issue is an important one, though perhaps beyond resolution and certainly beyond the scope of this paper. What is significant is the undeniable fact of compatibility between the Celtic culture of Ireland and the Christianity that later encountered it. In the interests of demonstrating that point, a few aspects of Celtic culture can be described.

The Irish epics and sagas are the most useful source of information on pre-Christian Ireland.<sup>8</sup> They indicate a society which valued learning, certainly among the priestly and poet classes. The episodes in the stories embody legal principles presumably operative in the society: for example, a bargain once made held, even if it involved more than the partners understood at its inception.<sup>9</sup> Social patterns were based on the family and on agriculture. Women as well as men play important roles in the myths. The gods and goddesses often take human form themselves, illustrating the Celtic belief that physical death does not end life but merely shifts it to another expression.<sup>10</sup> The stories reflect a love of nature and an emphasis on trees and groves, springs, wells and rivers as important sites.<sup>11</sup> Animals are often helpful to the heroes or harmful, but in either case quite actively

involved. The fascination with animals shows up in the highly abstract and geometric art characteristic of Celtic culture in the British Isles and on the continent in the early centuries of the present era: primarily small scale metalwork objects with intricate and delicate patterns composed of geometric and zoomorphic (abstract animal) forms.

### *Preliminary Assessment*

So, with these brief summaries of Christian and Celtic cultures before us, we can begin to gaze into the fire that ignited and spread so quickly when the two came together in fifth-century Ireland. The Irish produced a beautiful and distinctive form of Christianity that caught quickly, burned brightly, flickered and was restoked, but whose early vigor was pretty well spent within a few hundred years. The embers into which we can gaze—the illuminated manuscripts, the stone crosses, the adventure literature, the monastic ruins, the metalwork—invite us to think about the culture which produced them, for such a unified diversity of fine art is not produced except under very remarkable circumstances. As we become familiar with the heritage of Irish Christian culture we may feel wistful and deprived and curious about the fire itself, and hence the subject of this essay: an inquiry into the nature of Irish Christianity in the fifth through ninth centuries.

So let us look now at the chalices and reliquaries, casings for vital religious experiences; let us follow the animals with their toes and tails curved among the lattices of illuminated letters celebrating God's word revealed to man; let us follow the saints on their travels around Ireland and away from it; let us go on pilgrimage to the graveyards of Ireland and read the carved stone crosses that have been proclaiming for hundreds of years the triumph of life over death. Let us examine the *Penitentials* or manuals for priests hearing confessions, the arguments over the date for Easter, the controversy over the shape of the tonsure on the heads of the monks; and let us ask what it all means.

As we examine these now cold artifacts, one sense that emerges is that Irish Christianity was a brief equilibrium, the product of a skein of paradoxes or tensions which held together very creatively for a short time. A great love of nature, expressed in an extremely abstract and geometric art; a fierce love of the homeland, coupled (in some cases) with a determination to renounce it forever; an absorption in the codification of rules and laws and moral circumstances, and yet a sense of play and creativity with shapes and words; a fervor for some things matched with a tremendous apathy—almost a defeatism—about others; kindness and warmth and cold disdain; practicality and dreaminess; obedience and inventiveness; the impetus to gather in community in order to accomplish common aims, challenged by a rugged and indomitable independence.<sup>12</sup> These anomalous but evidently



fruitful blends can be seen clearly in the lives of Irish Christian monks, scholars, poets and artists of the early Middle Ages and in the art they left to their Church and to Western Civilization.

Such lines of tension, though observed and described as causes now, are not really constructed from the outside, of course, but grow from a center. The Irish Christian culture was produced from the lives and energies of strong and creative men and women who fell deeply in love with God and sought to embody that love constantly and in every aspect of their lives. It is in the effects of these attempts and in their intensity that we can glimpse the God whose presence these saints craved. We can also see why this particular set of tensions did not last very long. The quickness of the Irish flame and its genius can lead us to be glad that it existed, to regret its loss, to consider its lessons for us, and to reflect upon the God it so desired to show forth.

### *Coming of Christianity to Ireland*

Christianity does not seem to have come to Ireland very much before the arrival of St. Patrick in the first half of the fifth century.<sup>13</sup> Patrick was a Briton, born into a Christian family but not particularly fervent in the practice of his faith. Captured from his father's house by slave traders, he lived as a captive in Ireland until he escaped and made his way on foot (two hundred miles) to the coast, finally reaching his home. He was then inspired in a vision to return and evangelize his captors, having himself awakened to the value of his own Christian status. Patrick had found God (so to speak) and now wished to bring that same experience to the Irish. Such a determination enables us to discern the secret of his great energy to accomplish his task: his love for God and his eagerness to draw into that love people whom he cherished. Patrick himself says:

When I, once rustic, exiled, unlearned, who does not know how to provide for the future, this at least I most certainly know that before I was humiliated I was like a stone lying in the deep mire; and He that is mighty came and in his mercy lifted me up, and raised me aloft, and placed me on the top of the wall. And therefore I ought to cry aloud and so render something to the Lord for his great benefits here and in eternity—benefits which the mind of men is unable to appraise . . . . But after I came to Ireland—every day I had to tend sheep, and many times a day I prayed—the love of God and his fear came to me more and more, and my faith was strengthened. And my spirit was moved, so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night, and this even when I was staying in the woods and on the mountain; and I used to get up for prayers before

daylight, through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm, and there was no sloth in me—as I now see because the spirit within me was then fervent.<sup>14</sup>

Patrick's autobiographical writings, his *Confession* and letters, constitute more a praise of God and a spiritual bequest than a systematic account of his life; details of the latter are incidental, leaving much to inference<sup>15</sup> (and thus to legend). His preparation to return to Ireland involved formal study and ordination to the priesthood in France. One source of information, Prosper of Aquitaine, a contemporary historian-analyst, also informs us that Patrick was not the first to be sent to Ireland but was preceded by one Palladius and by a pair, Lupus and Germanus. Palladius was sent by Pope Celestine in 431 to check a heresy known as Pelagianism.<sup>16</sup>

Pelagianism, perhaps most familiar to us from the writings of St. Augustine, denied the doctrine of original sin and its attendant view of human nature as flawed in some basic way. Pelagius insisted upon the ability of human beings to choose the good without needing the assistance of grace. The birth of Irish Christianity from the matrix of this question about our humanity is very significant. Much of the rigor of the early practice of the faith is understandable as a denial of the Pelagian position that goodness comes easily and as a recognition that asceticism and discipline can train the mind, will, heart and body to choose well—with the assistance of God's grace.

At any rate, even if he was not the bishops' first choice to cross the channel, the lack of success of Palladius occasioned the sending of Patrick in about 435. Patrick's success was quick and dramatic. We have the story of his confrontation with the Irish lords at Cashel, their giving way before his zeal and message, and the ceremony of conversion. Legend has it that Patrick accidentally skewered the foot of the high king of Munster with his staff; but the neophyte, thinking that the painful gesture was part of his initiation into an austere faith, bore it without flinching.<sup>17</sup>

Though it is impossible to glean unambiguous historical data from ancient sources whose purposes were more varied, the confrontation between Christian and Celtic cultures does not seem to have been particularly bitter or violent, a refreshing and intriguing contrast with so much of Church history. The two traditions seem like two strong and independent people who meet, are drawn to each other, assess and then do the rearranging necessary for a deep and mutually beneficial friendship. The cultures shared a deep belief in and respect for the supernatural, a love of learning, a zest for storytelling, an appreciation of natural symbols. The Irish seem to have been amazingly open to the Christian wooing and the result is more an awakening of latent possibilities than a sea change.

### *Centers of Learning*

Whether in loose imitation of monasteries in France (influence of Martin of Tours is suggested) or, more likely, as the most natural embodiment of the new life, Patrick and the other early Irish saints known to us gathered into groups; the map of Ireland is dotted with ruins of monasteries allegedly founded by Patrick, Kevin, Declan, Brigid, Enda, Comgall, Ciaran, Columba, Brendan. Monasteries, however the details may be arranged, are places where people can gather who want every aspect of their lives to enhance their relationship with God. (Or so they begin.)

The ruins of St. Kevin's monastery at Glendalough in County Wicklow give a sense of what the founders had in mind for the incarnation of their faith. The details of Kevin's life may be apocryphal but are nonetheless instructive for what they show about historiography (or hagiology) as well as spirituality.<sup>18</sup> The Bible provides birth story motifs for Kevin, as for many other religious figures. An angel intervened shortly before his baptism and revealed his name; the milk needed for his infant diet was provided by a mysterious and reliable white cow who dropped by the household morning and evening. There are several tales of the young boy's generous gifts of food which was in his care to beggars; when he was rebuked for his largesse, the supplies were found to be complete again. Kevin was sent as a boy of about twelve to a monastery where he studied, presumably the Bible and the Church Fathers, the Latin classics (including Virgil and Horace) and the pagan lore of Ireland.<sup>19</sup> In the template that produced the stories of Kevin's life and so many other Celtic lives we can see again that intense thirst for God and things of God, a desire to retreat to communion with him in ever-deeper solitude, a fierce asceticism.

Kevin's refuge was Glendalough, and we see there ruins of a split-level monastic settlement, clustered around two lakes. Typically there were individual stone cells—huts, really—for the monks and several tiny chapels, suggesting the individual nature of Irish monasticism. There was a church slightly larger than the chapels but still small, perhaps thirty by forty feet. When there was need for more space, typically a second church would be built rather than the first enlarged.<sup>20</sup> Kevin's desire was to be a hermit, not a founder, teacher or abbot: his "bed," a stone slab, is located apart from the cells and overlooks the upper lake. Yet Glendalough was a community, a school, a scriptorium, and it attracted saints and scholars from all over Ireland.

The rather anti-social side of these early men and their misogynist behaviors (they rudely and often physically rebuffed the friendship of women: Kevin repulsed the later holy woman Kathleen with a bunch of nettles;<sup>21</sup> Columbanus stepped over the prostrate body of his mother in his haste to escape a female<sup>22</sup>) seem extreme to us, even unhealthy. As Kevin

retreated from social intercourse, even in the monastery, he entered into greater intimacy with all of nature, especially befriending animals. There is insight behind such paradox. It was a creative experiment to live such a physically simple and austere life immersed in the wildly, sensuously beautiful valley of Glendalough. To restrain oneself from superficial human contacts so that one can study, be absorbed in nature, and listen to God more deeply is a classic quest in religions. These passions—or the behaviors that are intended to reflect them—could seem aberrations, but a closer scrutiny of these early Irish Christians will show healthy fruits from such lives.

Though there may have been more monasteries for men, such centers for women were not uncommon. St. Brigid, at whose school Kevin is said to have studied, provides one such example. As would be the case later in the thirteenth-century Dominican foundations for women, the fifth- and sixth-century Irish women's monasteries provided places for converts to Christianity to live apart from their families, centers where their faith could be protected, strengthened and embodied. The foundresses, even in stereotype, seem to have been strong people: innovative, efficient, scholarly,<sup>23</sup> resembling the heroines of the Irish sagas. The Brigid of pagan literature, a daughter of royalty, mother goddess and fertility figure, presided over learning and literature, crafts and healing arts.<sup>24</sup>

Monasteries were organized along familial lines, with land and leadership kept within families and inherited. Though the ruins hardly credit it, monastic enclosures often contained (in addition to the cells, chapels and churches mentioned above) facilities for schools and for the copying and illuminating of manuscripts, as well as support for the feeding and clothing of the permanent residents. Love of scholarship and of Christian texts specifically is one of the most appealing and intriguing aspects of the Irish contribution to Christianity. It deserves to be weighed against claims of other social inadequacies. To treasure the written word, copy and illuminate it, to study and interpret it and keep it vital and moving is a height of love of neighbor as well as of God.

The Christian "conquest" made available to the insular Celts a system of alphabetic writing flexible enough to allow for the development of literature. The Irish already had many stories of their origins and of the exploits of their heroes and these benefited from Christian culture in two ways. First, the writing itself. Though the poets who told the stories relied on their memories and their skill at recounting the stories to keep them vital, the transition from oral art to literature required an alphabet. The Irish had evolved a script called ogham, somewhat analogous to Roman numerals, with sounds being represented by combinations of linear strokes. Just as it is difficult to imagine much sophistication in higher mathematics with a system as ponderous as Roman numerals, so it is hard to envision the

growth and subtlety of literature without an alphabet, and in this case, the Latin language. Equally important, the classics and the scriptures provided the story-loving Irish with many new themes, motifs and episodes. Irish forebears quickly joined the descendants of Adam and Eve and Noah.<sup>25</sup> Scriptural episodes offered embellishments for the lives of the saints, as we have seen. The apocryphal texts were special favorites, being even more replete with mysterious (not to say bizarre) elements than was canonical material. Materials not so eagerly accepted in the Roman Church turn up in Irish material. So stories show Judas as having killed himself not in remorse for his betrayal of Jesus but so that he could be in place and so released when Christ harrowed hell; the blind soldier Longinus who pierced the side of the dead Jesus is cured of his affliction by the wine/blood that gushes forth; that same effusion, spilling to the earth, baptizes the head of Adam which was carried to the correct spot by the Great Flood. Even the names of the last two people who will be killed by the antichrist before the second coming of Christ are revealed: Enoch and Elijah, who never quite died even in canonical scripture.<sup>26</sup> The Irish named the three magi: Melchio, Aspar, Patisara.<sup>27</sup> Later medievalists would depend on Irish sources for some of this information. The Irish scholars used the Apocrypha quite freely and flexibly, not being too scrupulous about logical or theological implications.<sup>28</sup>

Though scripture was the chief subject of study (and the religious classics that commented upon it), the Irish managed that work without much knowledge of Hebrew. They produced useful commentaries on Greek as well as Latin classics. They wrote poems, prayers and hymns, biographies and homilies, breviaries and missals, some in Latin and some in the vernacular.<sup>29</sup> The poets delighted in the endless variety of arrangement of words, beautiful to eye and ear, challenging and sustaining to mind and heart.<sup>30</sup> The Irish receive the credit for adding the technique of final word rhyme to Latin poetry.<sup>31</sup> And so the intellectual and spiritual blaze began and burned brightly and grew steadily, adding luster and insight to the classics on which it fed.

Perhaps the best place to look more carefully at scriptural manuscript illumination is at the monastery at Kells (County Meath), a sixth-century foundation credited to St. Columba. While we are there we can examine some other facets of Irish Christian culture as well.

Before looking at the finest of the manuscripts produced by the Irish monks, it is surely fitting to recognize the contribution of many nameless men and women who spent their lives copying, preserving and protecting the scriptural texts and thus making them more widely available. That it was sometimes a far from glorious task can be glimpsed through marginal notes telling of defective materials, bad light, ill health, cold weather, need for haste.<sup>32</sup> The earliest extant Irish Christian manuscript is a sixth-century

psalter, the Cathac of St. Columba, also called "The Battler," as it was carried into battle as an aid to victory. The most famous, ornate and highly sophisticated manuscript is the Book of Kells, an eighth- or ninth-century work.

The Book of Kells is a Latin text of the four gospels, and ironically, for all its splendor, a rather poor text. One assumes, often correctly, that the scribes responsible for the transmission of texts were skilled at Latin grammar, vocabulary and syntax; trained in interpretation; experienced at reading the transcriptions of their fellows. The Book of Kells is, however, a jumble of St. Jerome's text and an older Latin text, with too many errors, misspellings, misreadings and anomalies.<sup>33</sup> Its script is a distinctive, insular majuscule, written on lined vellum in black ink, illustrated lavishly with blues, reds, greens, yellows and especially purples.<sup>34</sup> The colors were produced from natural extracts of animal, vegetable or mineral products, mixed with water and a fixative such as egg white. These colors achieved brilliant effect by being applied in clear, bold pattern and designs of paint overlay.<sup>35</sup>

The plan behind the illustration of the text is not possible to discern, what with pages missing and pages blank. Experts can detect at least three artists at work within the pages, each with a distinctive style. There are illuminations of initial letters, of the chi/rho abbreviation-symbol for Christ; there are whole carpet pages of illustration only, with no text. The evangelists are portrayed in a form that seems, to those accustomed to Greek and Roman art, quite abstract and stylized. Faces are rigid, hair stiff, anatomy bent to space available, clothing shaping patterns rather than conforming to physical contours which should lie underneath. One scholar points out that these figures had quite a journey "from the classical world where [they] began into a Celtic one where real things must first be dismembered and then pieced together again according to a different law. In the absence of manuscripts showing the successive stages of the process, we shall probably never fully understand how the hard-won gains of the European pictorial tradition came to be jettisoned so casually by the insular scribes . . ." Though he concludes, "Patterns of patterns though they be, these portraits are, nevertheless, endowed with a haunting majesty."<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps the description, a bit patronizing, really, bears its own deeper insight "according to a different law." The Irish art is more conceptual than representational, meant to suggest rational content rather than to be suggestive of visual accuracy. The scene of the Temptation of Christ in the Book of Kells is one of the most interesting full-page illuminations in the manuscript. Set within a decorated frame, the illustration depicts a half-length figure of Christ, on top of or behind the Temple, in either case towering in relation to the building. The Temple architecture is reminiscent of Irish houses, churches and the popular metal house-shaped reliquary shrines. An ugly, dark, skeletal devil appears below and to the right,

counseling the larger figure. While depictions of the Temptation of Christ are not uncommon in Christian art, the accurate setting for them is the desert, where none attends but the protagonists. The unusual addition here of a crowd of onlookers seems to suggest a conflation or montage of Christ's temptation with his preaching ministry. Hence the effect is filled with theological depth as well as with visual interest: believers learn from the example of Jesus' struggle with evil as well as benefiting from it less tangibly as they attend the "pioneer" of human experience (as the letter to the Hebrews puts it).<sup>37</sup>

Animals abound in the Book of Kells, as in related manuscripts. Fish, snakes, birds, otters, cats, butterflies, mice and hens chase each other and intertwine, often biting each other. Some are fantastic and mythical. Some are realistic enough to prompt one scholar of Celtic art to imagine their particular creator spending hours with his sketching book in the monastery animal yard, training his eye and hand to catch the creatures' contours and movements.<sup>38</sup> In addition to their decorative function, the animals have symbolic relevance: otter, cats, mice, butterflies (representing the cosmological entirety of sea, earth and air) are depicted consuming wafer and fish, Eucharistic symbols.<sup>39</sup>

Abstract ornamentation of nearly infinite variety fills spaces on the pages of the manuscript. Spirals are interwoven so intricately that it requires a magnifying glass to lead the eye along their pathways. Intricate but never confused, reports Françoise Henry; the spirals inevitably arrive at their destination without a snarl or a slip-up.<sup>40</sup> Finally there are plain letters with simple blotches of color, like acts of self-denial amid the luxuriance of their fellows.<sup>41</sup>

One scholar concludes for us:

This extraordinary manuscript is difficult to approach or to judge as a work of art. Its mysterious motives are too removed from the twentieth century (although they form one of the minor obsessive themes of that latter-day example of Celtic concentration on intricate pattern, *Finnegans Wake*) and they achieve too fully the aims of an art which was non-classical, non-representational, non-humanistic, and which was destined to remain outside the mainstream of European culture . . . . The Book of Kells is to be marveled at rather than enjoyed . . . .<sup>42</sup>

From this treasure and its siblings, what can we infer about the Irish monks? Certainly a love for the scripture and a care for its transmission, but also a tremendous reverence for the manner of its proclamation. The infinite patience to interweave the spirals; the elaborate variation of geometric squares and circles, many richly filled in; the endless creativity at

recasting birds and snakes into new species give insight into the love of seemingly pointless elaboration. And the passion to arrange and order almost infinite numbers of intricate flourishes tells us about the depth of devotion to this particular *opus Dei*. It also leads one scholar to suggest that we know little, actually, about pagan Celtic ornamentation and its motivation, and that the determined presence of the nature motifs may be intentionally related to the vitality of the work of art.<sup>43</sup>

Related to these same characteristics but more practical and less appreciated today are the Irish *Penitentials*, also traditionally associated with St. Columba. These works were classifications of moral transgressions with appropriate penance prescribed. In the first few centuries of the Christian Church, sin was recognized to be social as well as individual and was atoned for by public, usually extended, penance. The Irish Church was the first to restructure the sacrament of penance in recognition of its aim to heal both individual and society as well as to correct and punish.<sup>44</sup> The *Penitentials* furnished graded penances, so there was some fit between sin and penance. Sensibly, penances varied in length and severity according to the nature of the sin, the frequency and persistence of same, and the rank and disposition of the sinner. Penance were mostly fasting, prayer and almsgiving. An example at random will illustrate the pattern:

If one of the clerics or ministers of God makes strife, he shall do penance for a period of seven days with bread and water and salt, and seek pardon from God and his neighbor, with full confession and humility; and thus can he be reconciled to God and his neighbor. If anyone has decided on a scandalous deed and plotted in his heart to strike or kill his neighbor, if (the offender) is a cleric, he shall do penance for half a year with an allowance of bread and water and for a whole year abstain from wine and meat, and thus he will be reconciled to the altar; but if he is a layman, he shall do penance for a period of seven days; since he is a man of this world, his guilt is lighter in this world and his reward less in the world to come. But if he is a cleric and strikes his brother or his neighbor or sheds blood, it is the same as if he had killed him, but the penance is not the same: he shall do penance with bread and water and salt and be deprived of his clerical office for an entire year, and he must pray with weeping and with tears, that he may obtain mercy of God, since Scripture says: Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer; how much more he who strikes him. But if he is a layman, he shall do penance for forty days and give some money to him whom he has struck, according as some priest or arbiter determines. A cleric, however, ought not to give money to either man or woman.<sup>45</sup>



The confessor was not only a representative of Christ who would come to judge but a doctor, a "soul friend" or advisor.<sup>46</sup> The *Penitentials* show the same love for order, for classification of endless though related variation that is visible in the manuscript illumination. They also show a respect for law and an acknowledgment that circumstances affect the quality of a human act. Not designed to be entrapping for sinners, the lists were meant to serve as bulwarks against ignorance or incompetence of priest and mental doubts or scrupulosity of penitents, all suggesting once again the particular and distinctive Celtic blend of precision and even severity with compassion and creativity. The *Penitentials* surely attest to the belief in weakened human nature as well as in its capacity to turn toward God. They also recognize the limits to arbitrary power which written law and respect for it could achieve.

The site of Kells also gives us access to several beautiful examples of another unique feature of Irish Christianity: the sculpted cross. Ireland's old ecclesiastical ruins hold many of these tall sentries which were sculpted between about the sixth and eleventh centuries. Church ruins often include cemeteries, of course, and our own custom of memorial markers might lead us to mistake the nature of the Celtic crosses. They are neither markers nor memorials but rather symbols proclaiming Christ's victory over death. Placed among the dead, they were a teaching to the living that the cross of Christ—appearances perhaps to the contrary—was an ultimate and decisive victory over the forces of sin and death. Like the manuscript illumination and the *Penitentials*, the crosses are a testimonial to the Irish love of learning and concern for the well-being of the community. And like the aforementioned texts, the crosses show the Irish love for elaborating the design so as better to communicate the content of that learning.

Generalizations are unsatisfactory but nonetheless can add some information to our assessment of early Christian Celtic culture. The earliest of the crosses may have been wooden; survivors are all stone: first plain, then adorned with simple carvings both abstract and representational, becoming in the ninth or tenth centuries more ornate and detailed. Standing up to eighteen feet tall, usually on stone bases, the crosses—for they are crosses and not crucifixes—leave the surfaces of both beams and the wheel that usually joins them available for the carving of both scriptural and mythological scenes and interlaced design familiar to us from the manuscripts.

It is difficult at first to understand rationally why the crosses are so appealing. Many are broken, chipped or just worn down, exposed as they have been for centuries to Ireland's bracing climate. Perhaps their very survival and their wordless testimony are part of it; their blunt fidelity to the belief that even amid the ruins are not only what they seem, warms the heart of all manner of pilgrims.

The carvings on the crosses are representational, even narrational, only toward the end of the period. Quite unusual is the cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice whose face shows the Last Judgment, with Christ ushering some figures to bliss and others to wrath.<sup>47</sup> The earlier carvings are more hieroglyphic and symbolic. The human figures seem at first almost grotesque, partly due to the stone medium, perhaps—though eyes that have looked also upon the stonework at Chartres are not eager to credit that explanation. Rather the rough and simple figures aim to draw the pilgrim viewer behind or through the surface to consider the truth being proclaimed. The panels juxtaposed are components to be linked together,<sup>48</sup> the figures representing an abstraction to be considered.<sup>49</sup>

The favorite story, it would seem to this pilgrim, is the story of Adam and Eve, who are usually in some posture of sorrow. The man and woman do not lack dignity, nor are they cringing and panicked as occasionally one sees them in art (e.g., Masaccio). But they have blundered, recognize it and regret it. Other Old Testament scenes show comparable texts of human struggle against the forces of sin or temptation or danger: Cain killing Abel; Daniel in the lions' den or in the fiery furnace with his three companions; Abraham preparing to give his only son back to God; Noah helping the animals onto the ark; Jacob wrestling with an angel. One might suppose that the stone carvers simply chose the most exciting and graphic scenes to accommodate small, hard spaces. Henry would see in such choices traces of the ninth-century reform of Irish Christianity or the experience of Viking raids, both to be described below.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps so, but such inferences both negate Celtic creativity and overlook the spirituality we have seen elsewhere; recognition that living a moral life involves struggle; awareness of the importance of heroic effort; belief that God will smooth the path of those who wish to draw near to him. Hence seen also are depictions of the anointing of David and David playing the harp; the baptism of Christ at the confluence of two rivers (the Jor and the Dan, as Irish tradition has it<sup>51</sup>); the multiplication of loaves. Despite the seeming crudity of the carving, details are often startlingly clear: baggy pants and Viking swords can help date the crosses;<sup>52</sup> a figure of the crucified Christ with outsized hands suggests a theology of his redemptive death and a subtle comment on the hidden power of the Eucharistic liturgy.<sup>53</sup>

As was true elsewhere in Irish Christian culture, the Celtic past is caught up into and enriches the new insights: Celtic love of stone, heads, animals, of abstract ornamentation allows the biblical and non-biblical animals (e.g., the swan) to provide for the viewer a kaleidoscope of images that never fails to provoke new insight.

## *Departures*

Strangely, it might seem, the next relevant aspect of early Christianity in Ireland is departures from it, departures of two sorts. The first include actual geographical journeys from Hibernia (as it is called in maps from this period) to Britain and to Europe. Once again three Irish saints will help us consider this anomalous phenomenon of determination to leave the beloved homeland.

The first journeyer we have already met: St. Columba, associated with the foundation at Kells. Columba's life is available to us in a different form than has been the case for other individuals. For he had a nearly contemporary biographer, Adamnan. (Columba's dates are ca. 520-580, Adamnan's 628-704.<sup>54</sup>) Adamnan gives, in addition to the usual stock elements, quite a bit of actual information from the idiosyncratic life of the saint (and some good historical, cultural and linguistic data). The stock elements, stressing similarities between Columba and various scriptural heroes, testify of course to his sanctity. His birth was foretold to his mother; rays of light surrounded his boyish slumbers. Though born into Ireland's powerful Ui Niall clan, Columba renounced his birthright—or more accurately, he brought its beneficence into the Church. Educated first in fosterage and then at a monastery school, he studied Christian classics and Irish history, literature and poetry.<sup>55</sup> His role as abbot or master of a school and his ancestral tie to secular politics involved him in a mysterious episode (possibly involving the issue of sanctuary) which led to his temporary excommunication.<sup>56</sup> Another story is told also, involving Columba's zeal for his monastery. Once when our saint was on a visit to a certain Finnian, Columba's host showed him a rare manuscript psalter. Columba borrowed it and made a secret copy (by hand, of course). Finnian claimed that he had been unjustly deprived of his property (an ancient copyright litigation!) and took the matter to a third party for adjudication. The judge, St. Diarmait, decided against Columba, citing as pertinent the aphorism: "As the calf follows the cow, so the copy follows the original"<sup>57</sup>—a saying more metaphorical than analogical, since manuscripts were vellum, from calfskin. The ensuing battle over the psalter cost many lives and a remorseful Columba decided he needed to depart, legend suggests.

So Columba had two practical incentives to emigrate (excommunication and war) and went perhaps for philosophical reasons as well: desire for greater asceticism, even a desire to do penance (the renunciation of Ireland being, even in non-religious courts, the height of same), and zeal to evangelize foreign lands. Whatever his motives, the most prominent result of Columba's exile from Ireland to the western coastal region of modern Scotland was the founding of a great monastery complex on the isle of Iona. Iona held pride of place among foundations for quite some time and was the parent of some important daughter monasteries.<sup>58</sup>

Its monastic life was modeled on what Columba had known in Ireland. The community was self-supporting, with fishing providing an economic as well as nutritional base.<sup>59</sup> The internal life of the monastery was centered around mutual love, shared goods, strict obedience, common prayer, rigorous fasting.<sup>60</sup> The scriptorium at Iona is credited with the “Battler” psalter mentioned above and with the Book of Durrow, both alleged to be from Columba’s own hand; with the earliest manuscripts of Adamnan’s life of Columba; with many psalters; and even with the Book of Kells.<sup>61</sup>

One cannot, however, think of a primarily missionary motive when considering the travels of St. Columbanus to Christian Europe and St. Brendan to the Atlantic Ocean, both also in the sixth century.

Columbanus, a man zealous for learning and sanctity even among the giants of his era, was the first of a significant number of his countrymen and women who would travel to Europe during the next several centuries. Such pilgrims, for that is what they were, were drawn to centers of holiness and learning on the continent. Columbanus’ path took him to Luxeuil, St. Gall, Bobbio, leaving seeds of reform behind him. This scholar-ascetic, wishing to draw Christians to a closer following of Christ, was influential in bringing to the monastic communities of France and Italy the passionate commitment, rigor, and penitential fervor with which Ireland was ablaze.<sup>62</sup> Clerics and laity flocked to his houses and embraced Irish monastic life, more vigorous than the Benedictine life then dominant in Europe. It is through houses like Columbanus’ that the great blaze of learning, best embodied perhaps in the illuminated manuscripts, jumped from island to mainland. The art would be preserved but not imitated. The monastery as center of scholarship and the manuscripts full of truth as well as beauty found their way into the mainstream of Christian culture.<sup>63</sup>

Quite different is the peregrination of St. Brendan, an Irish monk who longed to be a hermit. Apparently dissatisfied with the results of his withdrawal to an oratory on Mt. Brandon (Ireland’s second highest “mountain” at 3000 feet), Brendan gathered a group of recruits, equipped a curragh, and sailed out into the Atlantic. His travels, though not available to us in a manuscript earlier than the tenth century, show a blend of motives: wanderlust, desire for a stricter life, eagerness for a greater challenge. Behind those motives, though, we can glimpse the same search for God that characterized Columbanus’ monastic reform and Columba’s missionary efforts as well as the faith that remained in Ireland. Brendan’s travels are, among other ways they could be described, an allegory of the pilgrim’s search for God. Brendan and his men sailed the Atlantic, encountering dangers and adventures of various sorts, returning regularly to the same island in seven successive years for the celebration of Easter. A blend of mythic elements familiar from Greek, Latin and biblical classics, from Irish mythology and from mysticism, the story is filled with extraordinary

and highly elaborate motifs.<sup>64</sup> It is not, perhaps, great literature, but it is a unique and therefore valuable product of Irish Christianity.

The spilling over of energy, the jumping of the flame from its own hearth, visible in at least three distinct patterns just described (missionary, pilgrim, adventurer) is not the only sort of departure of which we must speak. There is a second type of departure: a waning of vitality, a cooling of the fire, that is less positive than what we have seen in the lives of Columba, Columbanus and Brendan. If Irish Christianity was produced from a unique blend of combustible materials of Celtic compatibility and Christian vigor as described above, its core was love of God. The greatest of the Irish saints fell in love with God and manifested it in a particular way at their particular time in history. The core produced a way of life—in fact, as we have seen, a profusion of fruitfulness. Such fruits are produced only from a molten core, not from a cooler sort of attraction to the effects of it, from interest in a way of life. To devote one's energies to living a way of life is not at all the same as living a way of life because of great love.

So laxity came relatively quickly to the Irish church (eighth century) and manifested itself in a general retreat from the austerity that had been one of the hallmarks of the early Christian life. The retreat from austerity was fueled, too, by the tremendous wealth of the monasteries which led to a shift in values, to a sort of institutionalization of the way of life that had been so productive.

Reform sprang up as quickly, and it was not so much an organized and focused effort as spontaneous, unorganized, arising in several places at once.<sup>65</sup> The reform, called *Celi De*—Companions of God, vocalized popularly as *Culdees*—was manifested by a shift to a greater asceticism yet, a desire to withdraw still more completely from common society (whether in or outside of the monasteries), a greater thirst for contemplation. One particularly interesting phenomenon of the reform was yet another form of departure, to the islands and peninsulas. The reformers chose spots that had been holy places long since and withdrew to live spiritually apart from their monasteries, though in some cases in physical dependence on them.<sup>66</sup> First preferring simply to withdraw, the reform eventually sought also to restore vigor to the monasteries. A quest for ascetical piety replaced the earlier emphasis on intellectual and artistic concerns.<sup>67</sup> Whether the efforts to revitalize Christian life would have been healthy and fruitful or not is a matter for debate, since the arrival of the Vikings from 795 onward focused the energies of the Church on another type of danger.

### *Arrivals*

If the vitality of Irish Christianity can be said to have left its own hearth in the ways noted above, we ought also to suggest that invasions of two types brought to an end the period being described in this paper.

The first type of visitor was very obvious: Viking and Norse ships brought raiders to the coast and settlers eventually to the inner regions of Ireland. The monastic centers, with stable economic reserves and valuable and beautiful liturgical treasures, were obvious targets. The invasions brought to the monasteries disruption, disorder and fear, as inimical to regular life and intellectual pursuits as are military assaults dangerous to physical life. The foreign invasions, coming as they did in the midst of internal crisis, thwarted whatever real revitalization might have been effected. Many monks and scholars fled their monasteries and Ireland itself; the insecurity of life had a demoralizing effect on those who remained. Hence the effort at monastic renewal, the rekindling of the earlier vision, died rather ineffectually.<sup>68</sup>

A second "invasion" is more subtle to detect but no less deleterious in its impact: the long controversy between the Celtic Church and the Roman Church over matters essentially disciplinary—the determination of the Easter date, the shape of the clerical tonsure, the manner of administering certain sacraments—but also related to ecclesiastical nature and authority.<sup>69</sup> The Irish Church had developed certain practices in isolation from Roman procedures, and only when Anglo-Roman Christians met Celtic Christians from Iona did the discrepancies become vexing. We might wonder (from perhaps a too smug pluralism) why it would matter so whether monks were identified by a circular tonsure on the crown of the head or by a swath cut across the front of the skull; or whether Christians should celebrate according to solar or lunar calculation that Christian feast which itself so reordered time. But these two quarrels were indicative of other and more basic differences between insular and continental practice of the faith.

The very structures of Celtic and Roman ecclesiastical governance clashed. The Roman Church was diocesan, organized and governed regionally, with appointments made from and allegiance due back to Rome; the model was military and imperial, born as it was from the head of the empire. The Celtic Church adopted a mode equally compatible with its own roots: a familial, monastic model, where power resided within the many monasteries and was not referable to any center external to itself. Bishops were welcomed at monasteries for various reasons, but exercise of authority was not among them.<sup>70</sup>

Needless to say, Roman efforts to secure Celtic allegiance were resisted for general as well as specific reasons. The Irish contested each point hotly and at length and lost each point as decisively. Ultimately most of the leaders of the Celtic Church bent before the inevitable. When the Benedictines arrived in Ireland, bringing with them the dominant model of the monastic life from Europe, Ireland's indigenous model was doomed and would, in time, be snuffed out.

### Conclusion

The fact that the flame did not burn hot indefinitely and that the early Irish Christian adventure seems to end on a negative note should not in any sense diminish our appreciation of the accomplishment. If it is true, as I have suggested, that the core of the Irish faith was deep love for the God whom they recognized in the preaching of Patrick and whom they sought to know and serve in each aspect of their lives, then such intensity *en masse* is probably inevitably ephemeral. The Irish monastic life and the art produced there—the illuminations, the crosses, the scholarly texts, the spirituality—was forged in a hearth whose conditions were not to be imitated or reproduced by mere human endeavor. The Irish received the Christian heritage and, not mere custodians, stamped with their own character what they loved the best before returning it to the common stream of tradition.<sup>71</sup> The Irish contribution to Christianity was not political but imaginative, graphically and spiritually and in the combination. The quick, hot flame: the passionate rigor, the creative spirit, the extraordinary energy with which the Irish lived their love of God was a unique and valuable contribution to Christian culture. “We may say without exaggeration not only that some works of lasting value were produced by some outstanding Irish scholars, but also that Irish learning gave the nascent Middle Ages a stimulus which enabled them to outgrow their masters.”<sup>72</sup> In some ways, undoubtedly; in some other ways, perhaps we moderns might well consider ourselves learners at the feet of these early Celtic Christians.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Bieler, *Ireland; Harbinger of the Middle Ages*, trans. L. Bieler (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. vii, quotes a remark made to him by another Celtic scholar, Ernst Lewy. (Hereafter cited as Bieler, *Harbinger*.)

<sup>2</sup> Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 9-14.

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Herm, *The Celts: The People Who Came Out of the Darkness* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976), p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-40.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Nora K. Chadwick, *The Celts* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> Ross, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> Herm, p. 236.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240-41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>11</sup> Ross, pp. 58-60.

<sup>12</sup> Brendan Lehane, *The Quest of the Three Abbots* (London: John Murray, 1968), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ludwig Bieler, *The Works of St. Patrick* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1953), p. 3. (Hereafter cited as Bieler, *Works*.)

<sup>14</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Bieler, *Works*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth MacGowan, *The Rock of Cashel* (Dublin: Kamac Publications, 1973), p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth MacGowan, *Glendalough* (Dublin: Kamac Publications, 1982), pp. 41-42.

<sup>19</sup> Katharine Scherman, *The Flowering of Ireland: Saints, Scholars and Kings* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1981), p. 110.

<sup>20</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> MacGowan, *Glendalough*, p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> Scherman, pp. 111-15.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Finlay, *Columba* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1979), p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur Ua Clerigh, *The History of Ireland to the Coming of Henry II* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1970), p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> D. N. Dumville, "Biblical Apocrypha and the Early Irish: A Preliminary Investigation," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 73 (1973): 302-09.

<sup>27</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 14.



- <sup>28</sup> Dumville, p. 336.
- <sup>29</sup> James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), I:622-744.
- <sup>30</sup> Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 38-44.
- <sup>31</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 15.
- <sup>32</sup> Bernard Meehan, "Irish Manuscripts in the Middle Ages" in *Treasures of Ireland: Irish Art 3000 B.C.-1500 A.D.*, ed. Michael Ryan (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1983), p. 48.
- <sup>33</sup> Peter Brown, *The Book of Kells* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), pp. 75-76.
- <sup>34</sup> Marie De Paor and Liam De Paor, *Early Christian Ireland* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958), p. 128.
- <sup>35</sup> Brown, p. 91.
- <sup>36</sup> A. T. Lucas, *Treasures of Ireland: Irish Pagan and Early Christian Art* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1973), p. 76.
- <sup>37</sup> This paragraph is heavily indebted to conversation with colleagues Wood Lockhart and Leslie Ross.
- <sup>38</sup> Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period* (London: Methuen, 1947), p. 147.
- <sup>39</sup> Meehan, p. 50.
- <sup>40</sup> Henry, p. 145.
- <sup>41</sup> Lucas, p. 79.
- <sup>42</sup> De Paor, p. 129.
- <sup>43</sup> Henry, p. 204.
- <sup>44</sup> Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 85.
- <sup>45</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 50.
- <sup>46</sup> Hughes, p. 85.
- <sup>47</sup> Lucas, p. 159.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- <sup>49</sup> Henry, p. 190.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 167-70.
- <sup>51</sup> Lucas, p. 112.
- <sup>52</sup> de Paor, p. 148.
- <sup>53</sup> Henry, pp. 167-68.
- <sup>54</sup> A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson, eds. with translation and notes, *Adomnan's Life of St. Columba* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1961), pp. 92, 96.
- <sup>55</sup> Scherman, p. 151.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151-52.
- <sup>57</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 11.
- <sup>58</sup> Anderson, p. 87.
- <sup>59</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 47.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>62</sup> Scherman, p. 174.

<sup>63</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Lehane, pp. 68-70.

<sup>65</sup> Scherman, p. 207.

<sup>66</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 57.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>69</sup> Kenney, pp. 211 ff.

<sup>70</sup> Finlay, pp. 169-70, 177-78 (the whole of chapter X is useful).

<sup>71</sup> Lehane, p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 143.

## The Available Past

*Priscilla Jackson Umphrey*

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIPS among academic disciplines, particularly those between history and the arts, seems inevitably to lead to discussing the relationship between fact and fiction. Do the stories told in literature and art distort historical events, pretty them up and make them more palatable? Or do the arts, when their subject matter is factual, make the past available to us in ways that transcend the records of history?

I want to speak to these questions by considering two great leaders, Charlemagne and William of Normandy; two battles in which they figured, Roncevaux [Roncevalles] and Hastings; and two works of art inspired by those battles, *The Song of Roland* and the Bayeux Tapestry.

To begin chronologically is to begin with such facts as we seem to have about Charlemagne and the battle of Roncevaux. I say "seem to have" because, as anyone who has ever read several conflicting newspaper reports of a single incident knows, so-called facts are very often open to question, and always open to interpretation.

The most useful source for this information about Charlemagne and Roncevaux is the *Vita Karoli* [*Life of Charlemagne*] (ca. 830) by Einhard, or Eginhard, Charlemagne's chaplain and sometime secretary. Einhard chron-

icles an incident which took place as Charlemagne led his army back toward Germany after a successful expedition against the Moors in Spain.

[W]hile his army was marching in a long line . . . the Gascons placed an ambush on the top of the mountain . . . and then rushing down into the valley beneath threw into disorder the last part of the baggage train and also the rearguard which acted as a protection to those in advance. In the battle which followed the Gascons slew their opponents to the last man. . . . In this battle Eggihard, the surveyor of the royal table; Anselm, the Count of the Palace, and Roland, Praefect of the Breton frontier, were killed along with very many others. Nor could this assault be punished at once, for when the deed had been done the enemy so completely disappeared that they left behind them not so much as a rumour of their whereabouts. (19-20)

There are a number of other nearly contemporary accounts of this battle which took place in 778 at Roncevaux. One of these, the *Vita Hludovici Imperatoris* (ca. 840), written by an anonymous author sometimes called the Astronome of Limoges, includes the observation that “[T]hose who were marching in the rear guard of the army were massacred in the mountains; as their names are so well known, I won’t bother to mention them again.” It does seem clear, as Gentil points out, that “the battle at Roncevaux had so struck men’s imaginations that, more than sixty years afterward, the names of the victims were still strong in their memories” (12-13).

During the next centuries the story not only survived, but was elaborated upon, and finally around 1100 someone—more about that someone later—wrote a poem of approximately four thousand lines about the incident. This is the earliest and finest of the *chansons de geste*, the songs of great deeds; it is called *Le Chanson de Roland*, *The Song of Roland*.

When we read this medieval epic we find that the event at Roncevaux has undergone a curious transformation. Charlemagne, who was born in 742 and would be thirty-six years old in 778, is, we discover, believed by his enemies to have “lived more than two hundred years.” The Gascons [Basques] who attacked the rear guard in the mountain pass are now Saracens, infidels. Roland (mentioned only as a casualty by Einhard) becomes, along with his companions, Oliver and Archbishop Turpin (who were not mentioned at all by Einhard), a hero of Achillean proportions who, upon his death, is carried immediately to Paradise. The ambush itself is discovered to have been treacherously arranged by Ganelon, Roland’s stepfather and Charlemagne’s baron, in order to bring about the death of Roland. And the deed which Einhard tells us could not “be punished at once” is indeed immediately avenged.

What is it that has happened in a little over two centuries to transmute Einhard's simple chronicle into this great epic of the Middle Ages?

First, obviously, the tale was somehow kept alive, and it grew. Facts became, to some degree at least, fictionalized. A chronicle became a story. Prose became poetry.

But why? The bare-boned facts had been recorded. Why elaborate?

I mentioned earlier that facts are always open to interpretation; for interpretation is the method by which we may better understand the meaning behind the facts. Facts themselves often tell us less than we need to know to make use of them—because life, viewed merely as a series of “facts,” seems at times, as the poet says, to have “really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (Arnold 33-34).

We try to make sense of a life that is hard to live—a life into which we are born willy-nilly; through which we rejoice and suffer, randomly it seems; and at the end of which we die, with little choice of when or how. We try to make sense of it; we're too close to it, however, to do so to any great degree, to perceive a pattern. We lack perspective. But a story, a fiction, imposes order upon the apparent chaos. It provides us with a longer view and suggests causes and effects.

For example: why, the ancients might have wondered, did the tragedy of Troy happen? Looking backward, Virgil and, after him, Dante could point out that if Troy had not fallen, Aeneas would not have had to flee; if Aeneas had not had to flee, Rome would not have been founded; if Rome had not been founded, the Roman Empire would not have been established; if the Roman Empire had not been established (this Dante, of course), Christianity would not have found a seat, and the Western World as we know it would not exist.

We can speculate in the same way about the tale of Roland. Why, the people of the Middle Ages might have asked, did those brave men, the best of Charlemagne's knights, die in such a way—not even in battle, but in ambush? And so the story developed to bring honor and glory to them and to impose order upon chaos; to fit the incident in with the divine scheme; to “justify the ways of God to men” (Milton I, 26); and to point out what a glorious but difficult and sad and weary thing it is to fight for good against evil.

Having postulated why the story survived and evolved, we may begin to wonder, how, in an era of minimal literacy, it grew into the epic we know today and how the legend of Charlemagne grew to the immense proportions that it achieved during the late Middle Ages—for the Roland song is only one among many of the tales of Charlemagne which have been embodied in art forms.

We may speculate that the story was first passed along by word of mouth—as news, gossip. Soldiers are notorious for their propensity to

rehash, perhaps even exaggerate, the battles they have witnessed or been involved in. And something about this battle was particularly captivating to the imagination. This, too, was the era when pilgrimages were in fashion; certainly the deeds of Charlemagne and his paladins must often have come into the minds and conversations of those traveling the great pilgrimage route which actually traverses Roncevaux and leads to Santiago de Compostela, a shrine which, as later legends have it, was built by Charlemagne to house the remains of Saint James. Scholars surmise that at the pilgrims' rest-stops along the way—for even in the Middle Ages tourists stopped for food and rest and entertainment—there were jongleurs, singers, story tellers, who entertained and edified the travelers with tales of the great heroes. Doubtless, too, the jongleurs and minstrels, trouveres or troubadours, who journeyed from great house to great house, earning their livings through singing, chanting, story telling, often took Charlemagne as their subject.

Many of the legends which arose are recorded in the *Pseudo-Turpin* (ca. 1150), properly titled *Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi*, which purports to have been written not, of course, by the Archbishop Turpin who died at Roncevaux, but by an historical Turpin, Archbishop of Reims, who died peacefully at home around the year 800. Is there a fiction in the making here? What might be the relationship between this historical Turpin and the great warrior priest Turpin of *The Song of Roland*? Is this merely a coincidence of names? Or did some later story-teller, some admirer of Turpin perhaps, deciding that a battling bishop would add zest and depth to his tale, transform a chronicler into a character?

At any rate, in the *Pseudo-Turpin*, of whose author we are uncertain, we find recorded many of Charles's legendary exploits. And a number of these, in turn, are represented in an early thirteenth century stained glass window of Chartres cathedral. In one panel of the "Charlemagne window" Roland is depicted defeating a giant (an incident not mentioned in the *Chanson*); in another panel he is blowing his horn, Oliphant, and fruitlessly trying to break Durandel, his sword, by striking it against a rock; in a third panel Charles is being informed of Roland's death. But the Charlemagne window depicts not only scenes from *The Song of Roland*, it also incorporates them into two narratives of other, perhaps later, legends connected with the figure of Charlemagne.

The first narrative, echoing the *Pseudo-Turpin*, begins with Charles receiving messengers from the Emperor Constantine (a fourth century figure and no contemporary of Charlemagne). Charlemagne then appears, fully armed, in a vision to Constantine, who sends him off to deliver the Holy Land from the pagans. This having been accomplished, Charlemagne returns to Constantine and receives from him reliquaries which he takes back with him to his chapel at Aix la Chapelle.

In the second narrative, which also echoes the *Pseudo-Turpin*, Charlemagne is visited by the spirit of Saint James, who "exhort[s] the Frankish emperor to liberate the land where his corporeal remains lie 'unknown and without memorial.'" In the remaining panels we see Charles carrying out the task set him by Saint James. He defeats the pagans in Spain, orders churches built, most importantly Santiago de Compostela for James himself; and he goes back to Aix la Chapelle, losing, as we have seen, Roland and the rest of the rearguard along the way (Nichols 95-100).

The *Chanson*, the *Pseudo-Turpin*, the window at Chartres are only three of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of works of art which take as their matter the legends surrounding Charlemagne. Once again, why? Why all these stories, statues, manuscript illuminations, stained glass windows taking Charlemagne as their subject—as a great leader who receives supernatural portents, who wearies of, but never fails to carry out, the almost super-human tasks laid upon him?

It is, of course, no new idea to suggest that humans need heroes, people who exemplify the qualities we most cherish, figures who show us what we might be, what a human is capable of. This is true for any era, but perhaps particularly so for the centuries surrounding Charlemagne's reign. It was a time of great expansion for Christianity and, in its expansion, Christianity destroyed much that had been—both physically by throwing down buildings and statues, and in other ways by denying old gods, discouraging old myths, frowning upon tales of older, pagan heroes. So a great Christian hero was perhaps needed—not merely for purposes of propaganda, but because the human heart craves such figures to admire and to revere.

And there was Charlemagne, ready for legend as well as history. Charlemagne, not only a great soldier and king, but one associated (as we have seen in the *Pseudo-Turpin* and the Chartres window) with Constantine, the Roman Emperor who, through the Edict of Milan in 313, had ordered complete freedom of worship throughout his realm; Constantine, who had lent his personal support to the Christians, relieving the considerable persecution they had suffered under Roman rule; Constantine, who had championed the church and used it to help unify his empire which Charlemagne was later to restore and consolidate.

Coronated as Emperor and Augustus of the Holy Roman Empire, a leader whose "authority . . . derived from his implicational relationship with Constantine . . . Charlemagne could be seen less as a successor to Constantine than as a *renovatio* of him, a re-presentation of what he was perceived to have stood for" (Nichols 73).

The medieval imagination seems to have perceived Charlemagne, in his mystical association with Constantine and through his own achievements, as the greatest defender of the faith, the epitome of the Christian hero—thus, the very stuff of which legends are made.

\* \* \* \* \*

Some two hundred years after the time of Charlemagne, about the time that *The Song of Roland*, as we have it, was written down, another Christian leader was setting out to claim his kingdom and, although he was presumably unaware of it at the time, to become something of a legend himself. Early in the year 1066, upon hearing that Edward the Confessor, King of England, had died and that Harold Godwinson had assumed the crown, William Duke of Normandy prepared to invade England. Although adverse weather delayed his fleet's sailing, the invasion was duly carried out. After Harold was killed in a battle every bit as bloody as the one which had taken place at Roncevaux, William claimed the throne of England.

Those are the "facts." But they don't tell us very much. Indeed, they tell us less even than does Einhard's account of the "treason of the Gascons," about the motives of the individuals involved and about the justness of their actions.

But just as *The Song of Roland* elaborates, albeit in a fictionalized form, the actions of Roland and Charlemagne, so a later work of art, or "document" as it is often referred to, the Bayeux Tapestry, elaborates the actions of Edward, Harold, and William.

We know a bit more about the construction of the Tapestry than about that of *The Song of Roland*. It was probably commissioned by William's half-brother, Bishop Odo, shortly after William's accession to the English throne. The Tapestry is embroidered, rather than woven, in woolen thread upon linen cloth, and measures approximately 230 feet in length by about 20 inches in height (Bertrand 6). The Tapestry is distinctive because of its unusual shape, but what is truly extraordinary about it is that, whereas most tapestries depict one scene or at most a series of scenes, the Bayeux Tapestry actually tells a story. Like *The Song of Roland*, it is a narrative, and this is its tale.

Edward the Confessor, childless king of England, sends Harold Godwinson to Duke William of Normandy with a message. The Tapestry itself does not say explicitly what the message is, but it is believed to have been a confirmation from Edward that he had named William his heir and successor to the throne of England. Upon Harold's landing in Normandy, he is taken prisoner by Guy, Count of Ponthieu. When news of this reaches William, he arranges for Harold's release and takes Harold with him to battle against Conan of Brittany. As the troops march toward battle Harold gives proof of his chivalry and courage by rescuing two soldiers from the quicksand surrounding Le Mont Saint Michel. William and Harold are victorious and, after the fighting is over, William gives Harold arms as a reward for his valor. They then return to Bayeux where Harold, his hands resting upon reliquaries, swears an oath, perhaps under duress, before William. Once again, the Tapestry does not make the oath explicit, but



there can be no doubt, in the medieval understanding, that in one form or another Harold is swearing loyalty to William, thus becoming his dependent or vassal and owing him support.

Harold returns to England and, upon the death of Edward, immediately claims the throne. Not long after his coronation a "hairy star," Halley's Comet, appears in the sky, and is taken as a portent of evil. William, upon hearing of what he considers Harold's usurpation of the English throne, prepares a fleet and invades England. The Tapestry, in describing the battle near Hastings in October, 1066, relates all the horrors of medieval war. Bodies are slashed, hacked, mutilated, stripped of arms, and Harold is killed, leaving the way open for William's victory and his assumption of the English crown.

Although *The Song of Roland* and the Bayeux Tapestry employ different media, the one embroidered with threads and the other with words; although we call one a *chanson de geste*—a song of great deeds—and the other a tapestry, there are striking similarities between them.

In content both take as their subject matter a battle between two nations, a battle which results from treachery or the breaking of an oath; both employ warrior/bishops (Turpin and Odo) as characters; both emphasize, in epic style, the intervention of supernatural forces and the carrying out of a divine plan; both, too, give the hero a worthy adversary (for whatever else the infidels in *Roland* may be they are no cowards once battle is joined), and dramatize the bitterness of war—even of a just or holy war; both display the pageantry and color of chivalric feudalism.

In technique, both are told through short scenes, irregularly divided and vividly sketched. In *Roland* the lines are grouped into *laissez*, "bundles" of lines, verses of irregular length. In the Tapestry, scenes are "bundles" of pictures enclosed by stylized trees and buildings. Both, also, are open-ended rather than neatly tied up in the manner of, for instance, a Victorian novel, with the future safely accounted for. When we come to the final lines of *The Song of Roland* we know that Charlemagne must continue fighting for his faith, but we do not see him do so; likewise, when we come to the final remaining stitches of the Bayeux Tapestry we know that William will be crowned King of England and undoubtedly face many new trials; however we, once again, are not to witness them.

But there is another, more important similarity between the two works: both are interested in displaying, through the dramatization of specific events, the character of a leader and a justification for his actions. We may assume, I think, that the audience for *The Song of Roland* was sympathetic toward Charlemagne and his actions; they were after all a Christian medieval audience and Charlemagne was a great medieval Christian leader who defended his kingdom and faith from the barbarians and infidels. The

Bayeux Tapestry, however, could not be so certain of finding a sympathetic audience, particularly in England, the conquest of which it celebrates. The English, after all, *were* English—Anglo-Saxon—and William, after all, was Norman. He spoke a different language; he brought with him his own nobles; he arranged for a great and bothersome census to be taken in order to catalogue his new possessions in *The Domesday Book*. Many of the English, as witnessed by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, felt resentment, if not downright enmity, toward him. And most of all he shed much Christian blood—great quantities of it—both English and Norman. Here was not the Great Charles repelling heretical invaders, but a Christian king himself invading a Christian land and killing others of his faith.

How to justify such an action? Perhaps by explaining through a popular medium one's motives and the events leading up to the action—by creating, as Michael Parisse writes, a “propaganda film” (51)—the Bayeux Tapestry—which, like *The Song of Roland*, tells the version of the story that one wishes to propagate. For we can see that the narrative of the Tapestry follows closely such facts as we have at our command, but elaborates them, adding details of crucial importance to its primary function of capturing its audience and convincing that audience of the rightness of William's actions.

And in creating this propaganda might it not be worthwhile to suggest that one's motives and actions are based upon those of an established hero? That, like that hero, one was forced to shed blood because of the treachery of one's own vassal? Could it have been in the mind of the designer of the Tapestry to suggest that as Charlemagne was forced to battle because of Ganelon's treachery, so was William forced to battle because of Harold's treachery—that William, like Charles before him, was actually conducting a holy war, a war necessary to fulfill the divine plan?

The idea that I am playing with, of course, is that the Charlemagne legend, as embodied in *The Song of Roland*, influenced the design of the Bayeux Tapestry; but is there evidence to support such a conjecture?

We have seen that there are similarities of content and structure in the two works, and we know that the Tapestry was created and the *Song* written down within two decades of each other. We know, too, that the Tapestry was certainly ordered by the Normans and that the *Song* is transcribed in Norman French.

There are two other clues that *might* link the two works. The first clue is that in 1125 William of Malmesbury, describing the Battle of Hastings in his *Gesta Regum Angelorum [Deeds of the Kings of England]*, tells us that Taillefer, a jongleur, led William's troops to battle, going before them, tossing a sword into the air and chanting a song of Roland “that men might be encouraged by the martial example of the hero” (Le Gentil 18, Moncrieff vii).

The other clue, as in the Turpin question in *Roland*, lies in what is perhaps merely a coincidence of names. In both the Tapestry and in the *Song* we find a person named Tuold or Tuoldus. His name appears in the enigmatic final line of the Oxford manuscript of *Roland*. It is "to all outward appearance, a simple, self-explanatory line typical of closing formulae in romances and epics alike" (Hult 892).

The line reads: "*CI FALT LA GESTE QUE TUROLDUS DECLINET.*"

What drives the scholars to distraction about this line is that, despite its outward appearance, it is not a "simple self-explanatory line." Because of changes in the definitions of some words in the French language between the twelfth and twentieth centuries, no one knows exactly how to translate it. Scott Moncrieff, in his *Roland*, translates: "*SO ENDS THE TALE WHICH TUROLD HATH CONCEIVED.*" Dorothy Sayers, on the other hand, translates: "Here ends the geste Tuoldus would recite." Patricia Terry tries it this way: "Here ends the poem, for Tuoldus declines." Whether this version implies that he refuses to tell any more of it or that he has fallen into ill health remains a moot question.

One determined translator lists every possible permutation:

Here ends the song	that Tuold composes, paraphrases, amplifies
Here ends the tale	that Tuold completes, relates, that Tuold declaims, recounts, narrates,
Here ends the gest	that Tuold copies, transcribes, for Tuold grows weak, grows weary, declines,
Here ends the written history	
Here ends the source	that Tuold turns into poetry.

(Goldin n.p.)

Perhaps the most graceful, although least scholarly, manner in which to treat the puzzle is to agree with George Saintsbury that the *Roland* is "the great song that Tuoldus [whoever he may be] did something absolutely uncertain with" (Moncrieff 139).

So there it is. We have the facts, the words "*CI FALT LA GESTE QUE TUROLDUS DECLINET,*" but they are meaningless to us because we cannot interpret them to find out who Tuoldus was or what he did with the Roland song.

Is there some other approach? Is there some way, without distorting such "facts" as we have, to speculate upon the problem? What if we turn to another source of information, bring our background knowledge of the age to bear, and make a leap of imagination? What about going back to the

Bayeux Tapestry to see if there are any clues which might connect the two Turols?

The Tapestry's Tuold seems to be a minor character, and appears only once, in scene ten (Parisse 15) where William's messengers confront Guy de Ponthieu, yet he is one of the few persons in the Tapestry who is given an identifying inscription rather than being merely mentioned in the narrative of the running Latin text. This would seem to suggest that he is a personage, someone of importance, in the court of William of Normandy.

One commentator writes that he is "some kind of bearded dwarf" (Bertrand 13). Another calls him "a bearded character named Tuold," and remarks that "the fact that he is so small is in direct relation to the requirements of the drawing and does not signify that the character depicted is a midget" (Parisse 112-113). Parisse also writes that "Tuold can probably not be linked in any way to the author of the Song of Roland [sic]" (112). His assertions may well be valid. On the other hand, it comes readily to the memory that it was not uncommon for court entertainers, or fools (who most often were *not* fools at all) to be midgets or dwarfs. And one may wonder if the Tuold of the Bayeux Tapestry might not have been William's fool; if he might not have entertained his duke with some version of the Roland song; if his words mightn't have been transcribed; if Taillefer, being more normally formed and agile, having learned the song from Tuold, might not have been inspired, or ordered, to lead William's troops into battle with its chant.

That is a lot of conjecture, and I cannot substantiate it. I have established no "facts" about this matter; indeed, what I have established, or, at least, tried to establish, is the beginning of a fiction. And what that fiction accomplishes for me is not to distort the historical events, but rather to illuminate them; for by thinking about, by "playing with," relationships among these various people, events, and works of art, I have made them come to life for me; they have become part of my own experience, my own memory. And to create vicarious experience is, after all, the point of storytelling.

Although this discussion has not uncovered any new, verifiable information about Charlemagne or William, about the Bayeux Tapestry or *The Song of Roland*, I hope it has established the worth of conjecture, the worth of searching for relationships. I hope that the discussion will suggest that works of art, that works of history, that works of literature do not exist in disciplinary vacuums, but that they illuminate one another; that they illuminate the minds and imaginations of their own ages; and that they help to form and illuminate the minds and imaginations of future ages.

For if we can recognize the connections between the image of Constantine and the legend of Charlemagne and between the legend of Charlemagne and the story of William, perhaps we will be capable of recognizing that these connections extend to our own age. Perhaps these stories, by educating the heart as well as the mind, by telling of the values cherished by ages past, can help us to recognize the values we cherish.

Most of all, I hope to suggest that the purpose of fiction is not to distort the "facts," or to pretty them up. Rather, its purpose is to go beyond a mere recitation of them, and to order them in a fashion which universalizes their meanings. As Aristotle tells us, "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened but what may happen. . . . for poetry tends to express the universal . . ." (*Poetics* 9.1451b.1, 3).

Fiction interprets and synthesizes experience so that we may gain insight into and understanding of the often baffling, seemingly random, workings of the human condition; fiction by engaging our emotions, our imaginations, our intellects creates for us memories of the emotions, the imaginations, the intellects of those who lived before us and makes available to us the experience and wisdom of ages past.

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## Reading Medieval Art

*Leslie Ross*

To adore images is one thing; to teach with their help what should be adored is another. What Scripture is to the educated, images are to the ignorant, who see through them what they must accept; they read in them what they cannot read in books.<sup>1</sup>

These words, written by Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth century, introduce us to an idea about art which may at first seem very strange. The quote comes from a letter written by Pope Gregory in which he argues for the usefulness of artistic images as teaching devices. The unlettered person who cannot read books, he says, can read art instead. This may seem like an odd idea. We do not normally think of *reading* art. We *look at* art; we may *appreciate* art; but we don't *read* art. Or do we?

"Reading art" is, in fact, much of what art history is all about. When art historians study and write about the art of the past, they are primarily interested in describing works of art within their historical and cultural contexts. They are concerned with understanding the arts of the past as visual reflections of historic time periods, cultures, interests, and ideas. Studying art in this way requires that the viewer learn the language of art, a

non-verbal language. The language of art is a visual language; one must learn to *listen* with the *eyes* and to *read* without words.

But, just as any language may change through history, the visual language of art will change as well. We may find the Middle English of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* quite confusing today. It is not the same English language that we now use. We can certainly recognize some of it, but there are unfamiliar words and spellings which are quite baffling. Once we get used to those words and spellings however, it all becomes clearer. The same is true of art history. The art of the medieval period differs significantly from the art of the Renaissance period and the art of the modern period, as Wood Lockhart has discussed in his essay in this volume. When we learn the visual language used in the art of the past, we are able to understand it better. Although we may never be able to understand it as well, or in the same way, as the contemporary audience, we certainly come closer to understanding the art of the past when we become informed viewers.

Let us return to Pope Gregory's letter, and his description of the usefulness of artistic images. Pope Gregory's idea that art is able to teach the viewer has often inspired historians to stress the didactic function of medieval art. Historians of medieval art frequently write that the sculpture, stained glass windows, and objects of precious metalwork which adorned medieval churches functioned partially as teaching tools for the largely illiterate medieval population. The sculptured portals of churches, carved with Old and New Testament figures and scenes, and the stained glass windows, filled with elaborate narrative stories, are thus understood as *visual* substitutes for *written* descriptions. As the major percentage of medieval society (especially the non-clerical classes) is assumed to have been illiterate (and books, or rather hand-written manuscripts, were precious and unavailable for the common people, in any case), the *visual reading* of art served as a substitute for book learning and as a supplement to verbal description, such as sermons and oral readings from the Bible in church services. We thus tend to imagine medieval church-goers understanding, and explaining to each other, the figured doorways and colored windows of their hometown cathedral, perhaps proudly explaining the significance of a window for which they might have helped pay.

This may be an acceptable, modern vision of the medieval situation, to a point. The point at which one may begin to question this notion, however, is when one actually passes through the portals of a great Gothic cathedral like Chartres or Reims, or when inside the building, one stands transfixed by the glow and play of colored light from the magnificent stained glass windows. The doorways of Chartres and Reims are extremely elaborate, carved with hundreds of figures and scenes both large and small. Twentieth century art historians have written volumes simply describing portions of these sculptured programs.<sup>2</sup>

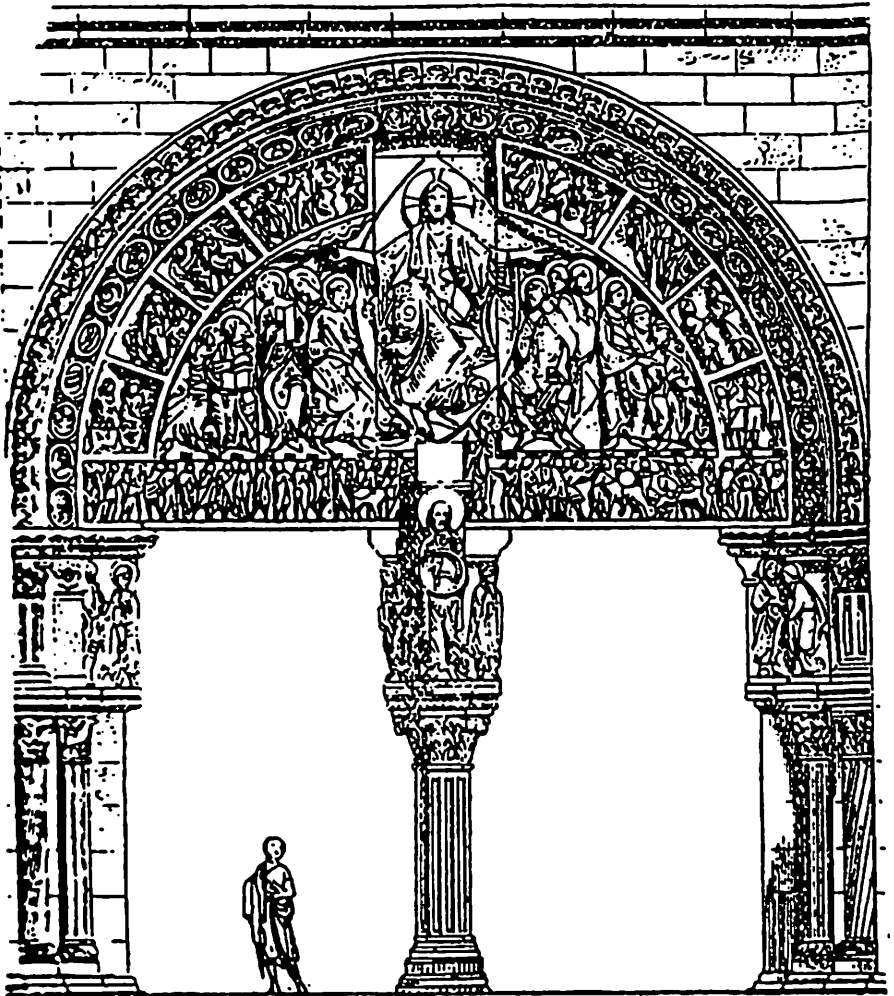


Figure 1. The Portal of Vézelay.

And it is not simply the Gothic cathedrals which have complicated windows and doorways, but the earlier Romanesque churches as well. In France, the churches of Autun, Moissac, and Vézelay (figure 1) all have sculptured portal programs of immense and overpowering complexity.

When we visit these places today, we may feel quite dwarfed and also quite baffled by all the visual imagery. Annoying amounts of neck-craning, and even the use of binoculars may not bring the total picture into focus. It all may seem like “too much” to the modern viewer, all “bits and pieces.” We may just not get the picture at all.

This confusion is especially surprising when one considers the visual sophistication of the twentieth century. As modern people, we are constantly bombarded by visual imagery—in newspapers, magazines and on television. We cope with, and filter, this imagery on a daily basis. We may look at magazines *and* watch television at the same time. If our television set is equipped with a remote control device, we may change television stations at an incredibly rapid pace—based on a quick and succinct reading of visual imagery.

But when we stand in front of a medieval doorway—which isn’t even moving around or going anywhere—we find it hard to understand. The visual language is quite different from what we are used to, and we may certainly find it hard to understand why Pope Gregory thought that illiterate people would be able to “read” these images so clearly. Or, why St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in the early twelfth century, actually complained that monks (among the literate) may be too “tempted to read in the marble than in . . . [their]books.”<sup>3</sup>

It may be interesting to consider whether the “visual literacy” of the common person in the Middle Ages was on a more or less advanced level than our own; however, what we can say for certain is that their visual language was quite different from ours. But it was not a totally foreign language; just as Chaucer’s Middle English is recognizable to some extent to the modern reader, the visual language of medieval art can be understood by the modern viewer, provided he stops and looks long enough (and is not tempted to too quickly “change the channel!”).

Reading medieval art requires patience; but the patience will be well-rewarded because the pieces of the jig-saw puzzle will fall rapidly into place, once one knows how to read the clues. And the clues (as in any good mystery story) are always quite obvious, in retrospect.

*Clue A: What looks important is important*

One of the operative principles behind medieval imagery is much the same as in modern advertising imagery; the simpler and bolder the image, the more clearly it will be perceived. Figure 2 shows a page from a mid-eleventh century manuscript written and illustrated at the Norman



Figure 2. Avranches, *Bibliothèque Municipale* MS 72, f. 97.

abbey of Mont St. Michel (Avranches, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 72) (figure 2).<sup>4</sup> The book is a collection of treatises by various Church Fathers (e.g., St. Jerome, St. Augustine) against various early Christian heresies and heretics. The illustration specifically depicts St. Augustine engaging in a conversation with one of these heretics. Whether or not this episode took place, historically, is not what is important for the audience and the artist. What is important is that St. Augustine's ideas were correct. How do we know this? By a correct reading of the visual clues.

The picture itself is divided into two parts, framed by an arch, with columns on either side. Curtains are pulled aside in the lower section of the page to reveal the disputing figures. St. Augustine is not only identifiable by the halo around his head but also by the fact that his physical size dwarfs the other figure. St. Augustine is seated on a fancy chair with pillows, and if he stood up, he would fill the whole page. But he is not standing up; he is seated; and even seated his presence overwhelms the figure approaching him from the right.

St. Augustine is gesturing towards the other figure; it looks as if he is pointing at him—or, more accurately, he is “making a point.” This raised-finger gesture is, in fact, an important clue to understanding the meaning of the illustration. This particular gesture is part of an understood repertory of images in medieval art; it means that the figures are talking to each other and that a point is being made. That St. Augustine's point is the right one is clear when we move to the upper section of the illustration.

There, framed in an arch, a haloed figure appears holding a book and gesturing. This is the figure of Christ. How do we know this? We know this not only from the elevated position of the figure but also from the special type of halo the figure bears. There is a cross inscribed in the halo; and it is another aspect of the standard repertory in medieval art that only Christ is depicted with a cross-inscribed halo. He is raising his hand in a gesture of benediction, and so we know that St. Augustine's ideas are sanctioned by God and the church.

### *Clue B: A part may tell a whole*

Figure 3 shows another illustration from another eleventh century manuscript, also from France, probably from the Norman abbey of St. Ouen at Rouen (Rouen, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 467) (figure 3).<sup>5</sup> This illustration is not a full-page picture but an illustration within an initial letter. This letter (*P*) is part of the text of the book and introduces a new chapter in this Biblical commentary of St. Augustine on the Gospel of St. John.

The illustration inside this initial letter depicts five people in back of a horizontal line which has objects drawn on it. From what we know already about medieval art, we can determine that the larger figure in the center of



Figure 3. Rouen, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 467, f. 121.

Photo courtesy of Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art.

the picture is Christ. The illustration focuses upon this figure—by his central placement and enlarged size, not to mention the cross-inscribed halo which only Christ can wear. We can “read” this illustration outwards from the most prominent figure.

Christ is holding objects—a cup and a round item. Suddenly it becomes clear. This is a picture of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist—the bread and the wine. We can now read the horizontal line in the picture as a table behind which the figures are seated. There are fish—in dishes—on the table, and cross-inscribed loaves.

But, if this is the “Last Supper,” where are the rest of the Apostles? There are only four other figures here besides Christ, and there should be twelve (says the modern mind). In fact, it doesn’t matter. We figured out that this was the Last Supper because of the presence of Christ and his gestures and the table and the objects depicted. The four other people depicted there are just enough to *imply* the presence of others. The space is too crowded anyway to admit more figures, but crowded enough to suggest the presence of others.

We see depicted in this medieval illustration only enough visual information to clearly tell us the basics of the story. The rest of the story we know by implication. The visual information is condensed—an abbreviated version—we mentally supply the “missing persons” in our own imagination. We could also call this a type of “visual shorthand.”



Figure 4. Durham, Cathedral Library MS A.II.14, f. 87v.  
Photo courtesy of Dean and Chapter, Durham Cathedral.



*Clue C: There is more than meets the eye*

An additional enrichment to the imaginative condensation of imagery in medieval art is the fact that these abbreviated images may contain a wealth of readings. Witness Figure 4, an illustration in a late eleventh century Bible from Durham, England (Durham, Cathedral Library MS A.II.4)<sup>6</sup>

This is again, an initial letter signaling a chapter opening in the text, in this case, the opening for the Gospel of St. Matthew in the New Testament. In the Latin text, the Gospel of St. Matthew begins with the words, "*Liber generationis . . .*" (the book of the generations . . . or, the genealogy . . . of Christ). The illustration here is not *contained within* an initial letter (as in the example above) but cleverly *forms* the initial letter *L* for *Liber*. The vertical bar of the letter is an angel with wings, and the horizontal bar of the letter consists of a winged dragon.

These pictures are nice, but do they have any relevance to the text—in terms of illustration? Indeed, another standard convention in medieval art is that the authors of the gospels—the Four Evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are each identified artistically by a certain *symbol*. This imagery derives from a variety of references within the Bible itself, and is a standard feature in medieval art—just like Christ's cross-inscribed halo.<sup>7</sup>

The symbol of St. Matthew is the *man* or the *angel*, and the winged angel represented here is holding a scroll which reads, "*Liber generationis . . .*" This is the symbol of St. Matthew holding the opening words of the gospel of St. Matthew.

But what about the dragon? Is the dragon simply a convenient form used by the medieval artist to make the bottom horizontal bar of the "L" initial? Indeed, no. We are most likely dealing here with the conflation of two images. Not only can this angel-with-the-scroll be "read" as the symbol of St. Matthew, but the image can also be "read" as the depiction of the Archangel Michael—the chief fighter against evil/Satan/the serpent and dragon—the guardian of high places.

The image of the Archangel Michael trampling on, or battling with, the dragon is another one of those common conventions in medieval art, an image which occurs so frequently that it becomes a standard symbol—just like the symbols of the Four Evangelists. A medieval audience, visually versed in these conventions, would likely have no difficulty recognizing the form and the meaning. The modern mind, however, may have some logistical difficulties with this. "Does the figure represent St. Matthew or St. Michael?" we may ask, "How can it represent *both*?"

Now I do not mean to suggest that such "logistical difficulties" would never have occurred to a medieval audience—we really don't know this information—but what I would like to suggest is that the merging of these two images (the angel-with-the-scroll: St. Matthew, and the angel-

trampling-on-the-dragon: St. Michael) contributes greatly to the symbolic power of *both* readings. But more importantly, the individual images then become subsumed into a much larger meaning: the triumph of Good over Evil. And whatever else one might say about this concept, for the medieval Christian, the birth of Christ (which is what the opening part of St. Matthew's gospel deals with) would seem quite appropriately illustrated with an image that implies this idea. The medieval artist conflates two images, and the medieval audience (accustomed to such symbolism) recognizes the power of these images in terms of an overall concept—the “big picture.”

A further iconographic type might also be cited here which reinforces these ideas. Christ appears in many guises in medieval art, but one very popular image depicts Christ trampling on beasts—snakes and dragons especially. This idea is derived from Psalm 91:

. . . thou shalt tread upon the adder and the basilisk and trample under foot the lion and the dragon.

*Psalm 91:13*

Later Biblical commentators (such as St. Augustine) interpreted this reference to mean the triumph of Christ over Satan, the triumph of the powers of Good over the forces of Evil. And, when medieval artists illustrated Psalm 91, they often depicted the reference quite literally, by an image of Christ treading on evil-looking animals. So it is not simply the Archangel Michael who treads on the dragon of evil, but Christ also does this in medieval art. And the image appears so frequently, and looks so similar to the images of St. Michael (except for the fact that Christ has a cross-inscribed halo, you recall) that *any* image of a dragon-trampling figure in medieval art would, we imagine, necessarily call into mind a whole wealth of symbolic meaning. This richness of meaning goes far beyond the individual context or specificity of one given image, and implies deep and related levels of meaning and association.

Understanding that there is often “more than meets the eye” in medieval art marks an important stage in our visual literacy. When we realize that our surface-level reading of medieval art *only* “scratches the surface” of implied or symbolic meaning, we come a little bit closer to understanding the richness of medieval art as perceived by contemporary viewers. Obviously we need to be careful in doing this as correctly as we can, and not reading twentieth century meanings *into* medieval art. And this is where art historians must rely, if at all possible, on written texts and contemporary accounts which tell us what the symbols meant in their own time.

The three examples chosen above—from medieval manuscript illumination—are selected samples of individual visual schemes common

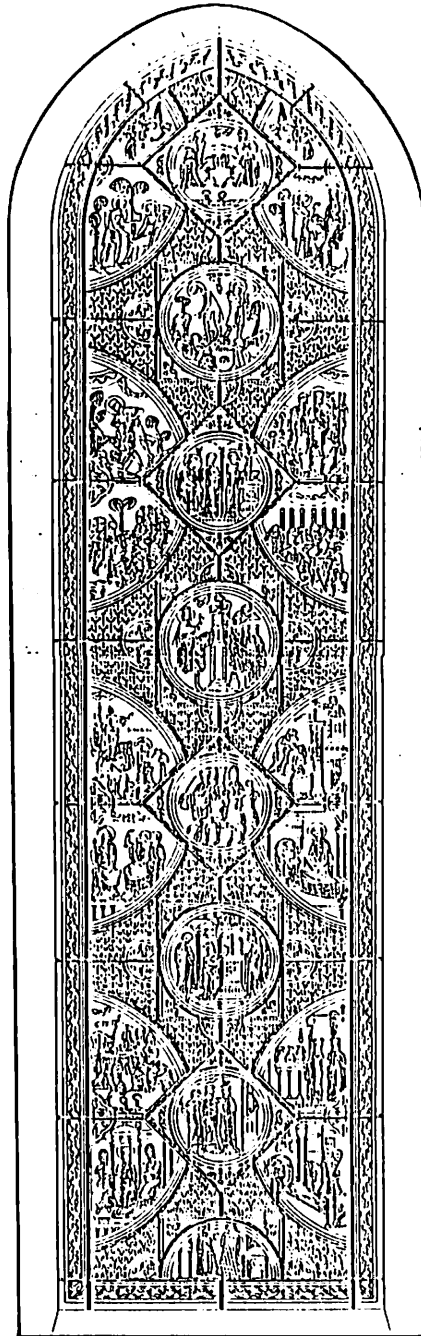


Figure 5. Chartres Cathedral, Charlemagne window, ca. 1225.

in medieval art. If we now look back to the problematic situation with which we originally began this study—standing, for example, in Chartres Cathedral and looking at the stained glass windows—let us see if we can now apply some of our new visual literacy to a larger and more complicated example of medieval art.

Chartres, among the first cathedrals to be built in the High Gothic style (ca. 1200), is quite dark inside. Chartres is famous for retaining a significant number of twelfth and thirteenth century stained glass windows—176 windows to be exact—which create glowing visions of dominant blue and red tones. These windows contribute significantly to the supernatural atmosphere inside the building, rather than actually throwing an immense amount of light into the building's interior. Ongoing restoration efforts on the windows at Chartres are today clearing away some of the dirt and grime of modern air pollution (a problem typical of all medieval stained glass), and the windows are slowly being brought back to at least an approximation of their medieval appearance.

If we walk up the north aisle (the left side of the cathedral), almost as far as the easternmost end of the building, and pause beneath one of the many stained glass windows there, we will find the “Charlemagne window”—created in the thirteenth century, probably ca. 1225.<sup>8</sup> The window is tall and narrow, pointed at the top: a typical lancet window. The window (see figures 5-7) is divided up into many small panels. Down the center of the window are seven full panels—round alternating with rectangular—and a half-circle at the very bottom. There are also eight additional half-circles on the sides of the window, each half-circle divided into two scenes. If we stop to count all the panels (there are twenty-four separate scenes depicted in just this one window), our first impulse may be to simply regard this window as indeed a very pleasing and beautiful thing, but also a real “visual overload.” How possibly are we to make order of this seeming chaos? Is there any way that we can understand the stories depicted here? Is there any organizational principle at work?

Indeed, there are several organizational principles here and the first one to understand is that generally speaking, one reads a stained glass window from left to right (like most books), and one begins at the bottom. Let us begin then with the lower-most half-circle, noting immediately that it is smaller than any of the other panels and appears even a bit oddly isolated. This small semicircle doesn't seem to “fit” with any design sequence—running either up or across the window—and in fact, the subject depicted in this panel does not “fit” iconographically with any of the other narrative story lines in the window. This is a representation which symbolizes the donors of the window—the people who paid for it. In this case, it was the guild of furriers—makers of fur garments. One can see a furrier holding up a fur robe (to a prospective customer?). In fact, many of the windows at

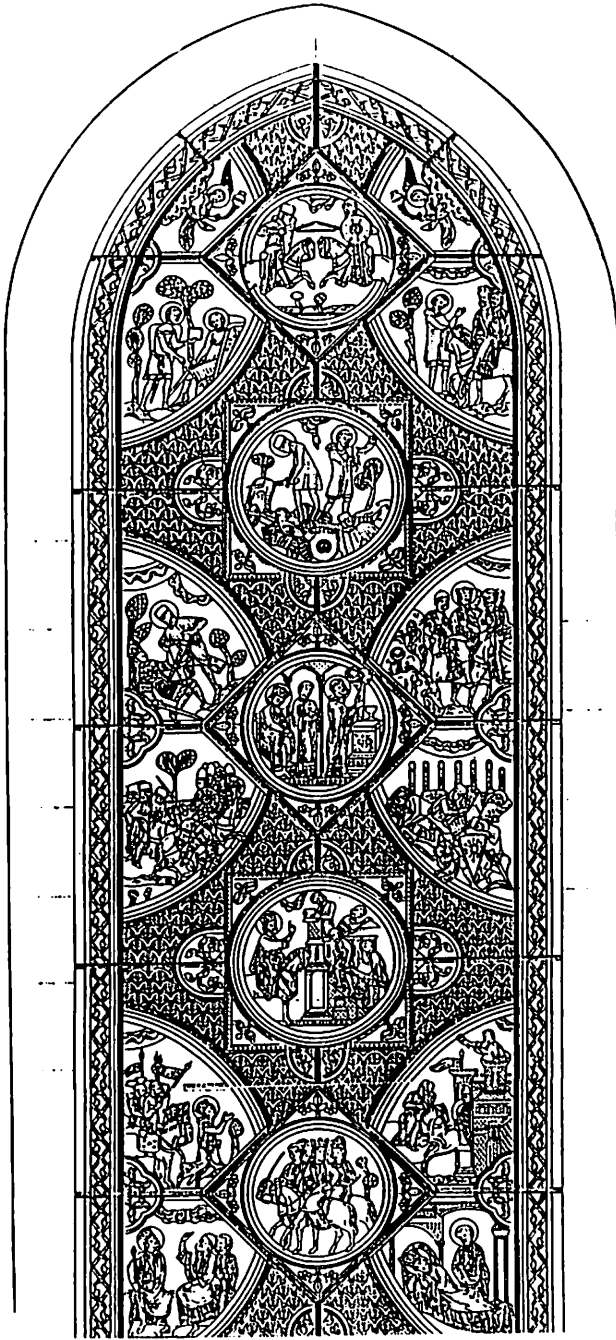


Figure 6. Chartres Cathedral, Charlemagne window, ca. 1225.

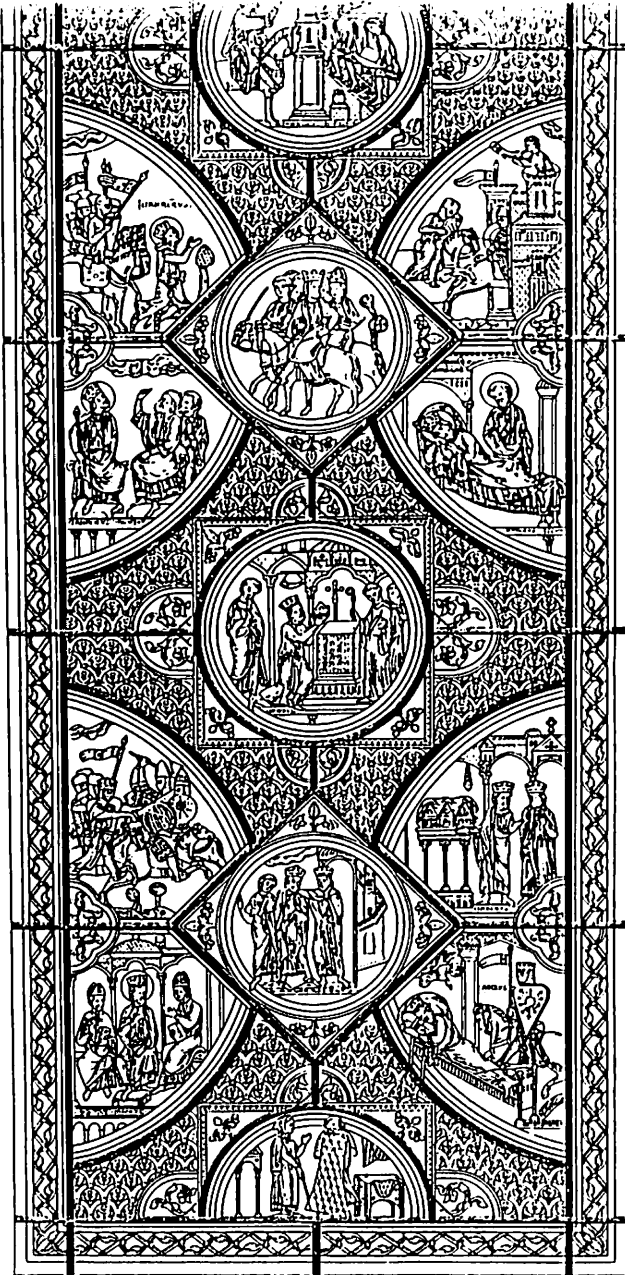


Figure 7. Chartres Cathedral, Charlemagne window, ca. 1225.

Chartres were collectively paid for by the guilds (members of certain trades) of the city of Chartres. Having contributed to the finances of the cathedral, the guilds then wished to have credit for doing so; thus the explanation for this particular scene.

Having passed this hurdle, let us continue now with the main narratives of the window. These episodes deal with the life and deeds of Charlemagne—an historic figure raised to legendary status in the medieval period—the prototype of the good, wise, just, and fearless Christian ruler. If we study the lower group (figure 7) of five scenes in panels—two semi-circles connected by a rectangle—we are immediately introduced to the most historically ridiculous but also the most symbolically significant aspect of the medieval Charlemagne mythology. Charlemagne, in the lower left vignette, identified by his crown and the Latin inscription (*Carolus*), is being visited by two messengers. Their raised-hand gestures indicate that a conversation is taking place. What are they talking about?

To find this out, we turn to the lower right vignette. Here we see the fourth-century emperor, Constantine, sleeping while an armed soldier on horseback appears in his bedroom. Constantine's sleep is not at all disturbed by this looming warrior on horseback, and in fact, this represents a dream-vision of Constantine's in which the (eighth century) Christian warrior-king Charlemagne appears as a solution to his problems with the infidels. The infidels, one understands, were attacking the Holy Land, an event of less historic relevance for either Constantine or Charlemagne but quite specifically relevant to the thirteenth century—when the window was created. Anyway, Constantine sends his messengers to summon Charlemagne for help. Charlemagne responds to Constantine's request for aid and is welcomed by Constantine—we see their meeting taking place in the middle linking medallion. Charlemagne battles successfully against the pagans in the next left-side vignette (the pagans are identified by their round shields, in contrast to the heart-shaped or triangular shields of the Christians), and Constantine, in gratitude, gives him precious relics (including, incidentally, relics which later came to Chartres) in the next right-side vignette.

Moving up one more segment, a single medallion provides vertical linkage—in terms of design and in terms of subject matter—to the next cluster of episodes. This roundel depicts Charlemagne bringing the relics to his chapel at Aachen, an episode which marks a transition to more coherently eighth-century events.

The next cluster of episodes deals with Charlemagne's struggles with the pagans on his own territory. The lower left vignette in this sequence shows Charlemagne, again crowned and enthroned, looking up at the sky and clouds. He is accompanied by two other seated people who are also looking up at, and pointing out, these clouds. Something is important about these clouds. What is it?

As in the sequence below, we look to the right-side medallion for explanation. And here we find a scene which provides an extremely close parallel with the “Dream-Vision of Constantine” episode below. The scenes look very similar, although here it is Charlemagne sleeping, and St. James who appears in his dream. St. James is telling Charlemagne to follow the Milky Way to Spain, and to free his shrine at Compostela from the pagans. This explains why Charlemagne and his courtiers in the opposite panel are so interested in the clouds in the sky. But it also explains a lot more than that.

Recall the discussion above of the St. Matthew—St. Michael—Christ-trampling-on-evil-beasts image conflation. We saw that the use of standard conventions or easily-recognized images in medieval art can often imply a wealth of symbolic meanings far beyond the specific context. The same thing is happening here. The fact that both Constantine and Charlemagne are depicted experiencing dream-visions does not mean that they both were somehow especially prone to this type of sleep-troubling experience. Supernatural visions appear to them in both cases telling them specifically to fight against the pagans. The image of Charlemagne is thus also imbued with the symbolic power of Constantine—the first Christian Emperor, after all. Both images participate in, and contribute to, the evocation of powerful symbolic meaning; they contribute authority and justification to each other. The level of implied meaning far surpasses the particular story in each case. And finally, it doesn’t take too much imagination to think of another important image of dream-vision in Christian art: the angel appearing to the three Magi, with instructions to “follow the star” to the birth-place of Christ. As we might imagine, artistic representations of the Dream of the Magi in medieval art<sup>9</sup> bear a great deal of similarity to the dream-vision conventions we are concerned with here. It is not that medieval artists, when they needed to depict a dream-vision, made use of the same old type of picture over and over again. But the repetition of conventional types conjures up powerful associations and deepens the levels of meaning to be read in any given image.

Back to the story. Charlemagne follows the Milky Way to Spain; we see him doing so in the central linking rectangle in this image cluster. In the upper left vignette we see him praying before a (victorious) battle against the pagans, which takes place in the upper right vignette. This battle scene (the successful storming of a city held by pagans) is another good example of medieval visual shorthand—only two soldiers are actually depicted engaging in battle here, but the rest we understand by implication. The specific identification of this city is not particularly important either; the architectural forms imply a typical medieval walled city, and this one city “stands for” the many other cities successfully taken by Charlemagne and his army during the Spanish campaign.<sup>10</sup>



On the next level up, we again find an isolated roundel which provides a transition to the subsequent tier of scenes and also provides a visual and narrative resting point in this ongoing story of courage and conflict. Here Charlemagne, on horseback and with raised-finger gesture, is directing the construction of a church.<sup>11</sup> The scene provides a respite from the business of battle, but also, and more importantly, reinforces the reasons for this warfare. Charlemagne's piety and Christian dedication are reinforced in this image and are paralleled in the other isolated roundel one stage below—Charlemagne's bringing of holy relics from Constantinople to Aachen.

The next tier of scenes (figure 6) also combines images of battle with images of piety. A Christian knight fights against a pagan king (lower left), and a miracle is depicted (lower right). This miracle—of the flowering lances—shows Charlemagne's soldiers asleep while their spears burst into flowers. This does not mean that their weapons became useless; it signifies that these soldiers will die as martyrs; they will lose their lives in battling for the Christian faith. (Martyrs are normally depicted in medieval art with some type of foliage, usually palm branches. This is another standard iconographic clue: a saint holding a palm branch is probably a martyr.) Finally, we are introduced to the great hero Roland, and the remaining scenes of the window focus on his activities. He kills a giant (upper left), and remains behind in Spain with a small but valiant group of warriors—the rearguard of Charlemagne's army. Charlemagne crosses the Pyrenees in the upper right panel here.

From the medieval epic *The Song of Roland*, we know what happens next. The rearguard is attacked, ambushed, and many lives are lost. The medieval audience certainly knew this, so the medieval artist left it out and concentrated upon the most thrilling and anguishing moment of the story—everyone's favorite part. Roland is depicted twice in the next single roundel. He tries to break his sword on the rock, and he finally blows his great horn, Oliphant, to summon help from Charlemagne. The fact that Roland is depicted twice in the same medallion, standing right next to himself, is another one of those common features in medieval art which may trouble the modern mind. What looks important *is* important, however; both of these scenes are important and are easily understood as separate episodes in a continuing narrative structure. Seen together, the images tell of Roland's bravery, and the appearance of the sanctioning hand of God in the sky adds a cosmic dimension to the imagery—making any question of historical or design coherency quite irrelevant in the infinite scheme of things.

Roland dies in the final large medallion on the upper left, and the sad news is brought to Charlemagne in the last scene on the upper right. These scenes are linked by the rectangular panel at the very apex of the window depicting Roland battling with the Saracen king. Obviously, this battle

preceded the death of Roland as depicted in the previous vignettes, and this chronological glitch doubtless partially contributed to the rearrangement of this panel during a restoration of the window in 1921.<sup>12</sup> Our diagram shows the window before this restoration took place. When one visits Chartres today, one will find a different panel located in the apex of the window—the rectangular panel depicting the celebration of Mass (in our diagram, correctly placed as the third central panel down from the top).

This depiction of a church service is identified as a rather problematic episode in the life of Charlemagne—the Mass of St. Gilles—in which an angel appears bearing a scroll upon which is written a sin committed by Charlemagne, as well as the pardon for this sin. This was a sin which Charlemagne found too horrible to confess, but for which he was granted forgiveness by the intercession of St. Gilles.

The exact nature of this sin is not clearly described in the early texts of the Charlemagne legend, although in the thirteenth century it was generally understood to have involved an incestuous relationship between Charlemagne and his sister, with the birth of Roland as the result. The placement of this panel as an introduction to the “Roland episodes” in the window thus makes logical narrative sense, while also reinforcing the themes of sacrifice and martyrdom, salvation and victory (over sin and evil) so dominant in the overall meaning of the window. The censuring angels flanking the upper panel of the battling warriors (Christian versus pagan) again reinforce the spiritual meaning of these carefully chosen “historical” episodes and images.

Finally, it is time to step back from this in-depth reading of details in the “Charlemagne window” at Chartres, and ask ourselves whether or not this process has contributed to our appreciation and understanding. Our previous situation—of appreciation combined with bafflement—has been replaced by appreciation plus knowledge, and a deep knowledge, at that. We have used our visual skills to read the symbolic shorthand of medieval art and have found a wealth and depth of meaning far beyond the surface level.

The “worst” thing that could happen to us now is that we may need more than the tourist’s 45-minutes-or-less to visit Chartres Cathedral. In fact, we may begin to feel that forty-five minutes is not even enough time to look at one window. And, with 175 more windows to look at in this one building (not all of such complexity, admittedly) we may begin to feel that even a lifetime is not long enough to read all that there is to be read in medieval art. We may become like the monks mentioned by St. Bernard: “. . . more tempted to read in the marble than in our books.”<sup>13</sup>

But might it not also be possible that in learning to read the visual language of medieval art, we might also be learning new ways of looking at our own visual language? What “clues” can we think of—which we *must* be

using, albeit unconsciously—when we filter, process, and cope with the bombardment of visual imagery in the twentieth century? How is it that we are able to “flip through” magazines? Change television stations so quickly with our remote control device? How can we sometimes do these things simultaneously? How do we “read” the images of the modern world?

There is no doubt that the visual language of the twentieth century differs radically from that of the Middle Ages. Our ways of looking, habits of perception, and familiarity with standard conventions are different as well. The richness of understanding that results from the patient and informed viewing of the art of the past will enrich our general visual literacy enormously. In learning to look carefully at the art of the past, we become more perceptive viewers of the art of the present. We will become informed *listeners* with our *eyes*, knowledgeable readers of the non-verbal languages of imagery which constantly surround us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> C. Davis-Weyer, *Early Medieval Art: 300-1150, Sources and Documents*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1971, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> A. Katzenellenbogen, *The Sculptural Programs of Chartres Cathedral*, New York, 1959.

<sup>3</sup> C. Davis-Weyer, p. 170. Letter of St. Bernard of Clairvaux to William of St. Thierry, c. 1125.

<sup>4</sup> F. Avril, *Manuscrits Normands XI-XIIème Siècles*, (exhibition catalogue), Rouen, 1975, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Manuscrits Normands*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>6</sup> R. A. B. Mynors, *Durham Cathedral Manuscripts to the End of the Twelfth Century*, Oxford, 1939; H. Swarzenski, "Der Stil der Bibel Carilefs von Durham," *Form und Inhalt, Kunstgeschichtliche Studien für Otto Schmidt*, Stuttgart, 1951, pp. 89-95.

<sup>7</sup> The traditional symbols for the Four Evangelists are: the man, or angel for Matthew; the lion for Mark; the ox, or bull for Luke; and the eagle for John. These symbols derive from references in the Old and New Testaments: Ezekiel 1:5-14, and Revelation 4:6-8. The symbols were adopted in the early Christian period as standard representations of the authors of the Gospels. See; J. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, New York, 1974, pp. 128-29.

<sup>8</sup> C. Maines, "The Charlemagne Window at Chartres Cathedral: New Considerations on Text and Image," *Speculum* LII/4, 1977, pp. 801-23, with extensive bibliography; see also: E. Male, *The Gothic Image*, New York, 1958, pp. 347-52; and S. Nichols, *Romanesque Signs: Early Medieval Narrative and Iconography*, New Haven, 1983, pp. 95-105.

<sup>9</sup> One of the most charming examples of the Dream of the Magi in medieval art is of course the early twelfth-century capital at Autun, attributed to the Burgundian sculptor Gislebertus. See: D. Grivot and G. Zarnecki, *Gislebertus, Sculptor of Autun*, New York, 1961; also E. Male, *The Gothic Image*, pp. 212-16.

<sup>10</sup> Maines, p. 811.

<sup>11</sup> The specific identification of this church is a matter of scholarly dispute. However, it does seem more than likely that this representation of "church construction" is another type of "generic" image—symbolizing not *one* church in particular, but *many* churches founded, enriched, or dedicated by the pious Charlemagne.

<sup>12</sup> Maines, p. 814 ff.

<sup>13</sup> C. Davis-Weyer, p. 170.

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Scale of Miles  
0 50 100 150  
**ENGLAND**

**“All Shall Be Well”:**  
*Julian of Norwich and her Times*

*Sister M. Patricia Dougherty, O.P.*

THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY was an age of transition and turmoil in Europe. Political and religious authority were under attack, and the general population suffered from plague, war and revolution. It seemed to many an era of helplessness and despair. In the midst of this confusion lived an English woman who offered a different perspective—one of hope and confidence. It is her life and writings which will be our starting point for the exploration of the turbulent fourteenth century.

About the woman herself, we know only what she has chosen to reveal through the writings she left behind—two texts entitled *Revelations of God's Love*. These two texts (one long and one short) were written in Middle English about the same time as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1390s) and are the earliest examples we have of written English by a woman. This “first English Woman of Letters”<sup>1</sup> was a mystic; that is, she had “an immediate knowledge of God attained in this present life through personal religious experience.”<sup>2</sup> When she was near death on the 8th and 9th of May, 1373,<sup>3</sup> a priest held a crucifix before her and she experienced fifteen divine apparitions over a period of hours and a sixteenth the

following day. Of the sixteen showings, five were centered on the passion and suffering of Christ, four on God (All-Sovereign, Creator), and two on the Blessed Trinity. The first chapter of the long text lists the revelations:

The first is about the precious crowning of thorns . . . the second . . . about the discoloration of his fair face . . . the third . . . that our Lord God almighty, all wisdom and all love . . . the fourth . . . the scourging of his tender body . . . the fifth . . . the fiend is overcome by the precious Passion of Christ . . . the sixth . . . the honorable thanks with which our Lord God rewards all his blessed servants . . . the seventh . . . the frequent experiences of well-being and of woe . . . the eighth . . . Christ's last sufferings and of his cruel death . . . the ninth . . . the delight which the blessed Trinity has in the cruel Passion of Christ . . . the tenth . . . Jesus displays his heart split in two for love . . . the eleventh . . . his dear mother . . . the twelfth . . . our Lord is all sovereign life . . . the thirteenth . . . the excellence of man's creation . . . the fourteenth . . . our Lord God is the foundation of our beseeching . . . the fifteenth . . . suddenly we shall be taken from all our pain and from all our woe . . . the sixteenth . . . the blessed Trinity our Creator dwells eternally in our soul in Christ Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

Upon recovering, Julian, aged thirty and a half, recorded her experiences (the short text), pondered them for the next twenty years, and then composed a lengthier account of both the revelations themselves and the significance she found in them (the long text). Thus, both texts refer to the same occasion but the longer version is enriched by twenty years of growth and meditation.

The woman is known as Julian of Norwich, but it is doubtful that Julian was her name. More likely, it derives from her attachment to St. Julian's Church in the prosperous medieval trading city of Norwich, England. Literally attached to the church, Julian lived as an anchoress or recluse in a small cell (called an anchorhold) adjoining the church's south wall—south so that the sun never reached inside it.

It is not known which St. Julian was the patron of the church—St. Julian the Hospitaller or St. Julian of Le Mans—but it is known that the small church was under the control of the Benedictine abbess of nearby Carrow. Because of the strong Benedictine influence in Norwich, some scholars think that Julian might have been a Benedictine nun before she became a recluse. The Benedictine story is told in a modern stained glass window in the Bauchun Chapel of Norwich Cathedral; the first scene depicts Benedict praying alone near a cave and the last portrays Julian at prayer before a



crucifix in her anchorhold.

The word anchorite is derived from the Greek *anachorein* meaning to withdraw and in early Christian times was synonymous with hermit, as can be seen in St. Benedict's *Rule* which labels the second kind of monks as "anchorites or hermits."<sup>5</sup> (The eremitic tradition is not just a medieval phenomenon.) By the late Middle Ages, a distinction arose: anchorites lived in enclosed cells while hermits retained freedom of movement. The fourteenth-century poem of social protest, *Piers Plowman*, used both anchorites and hermits as examples of virtue—particularly when they stayed in their cells. As the poem begins the author is clad as a hermit in sheepskin wandering over the countryside.<sup>6</sup>

An anchoress (anchorite is the masculine) was not, in England, associated directly with any religious community but lived alone in simplicity and was generally dependent upon alms for food and clothing.<sup>7</sup> On the continent, however, anchorites were "more likely to live in groups with some formal organization."<sup>8</sup> During the Middle Ages, these solitaries were held in high regard by other Christians for they lived what everyone thought was the best life. Thus, it was considered a point of pride for a community to have a recluse in their midst.<sup>9</sup>

Anchorholds were widely distributed throughout England.<sup>10</sup> In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they existed in rural areas but by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries they were generally located in towns, villages, or cities (such as London or York). In Norwich there were over forty anchorholds (as well as forty to sixty churches and over two hundred pubs).<sup>11</sup> And at St. Julian's, there are records of other occupants of the anchorhold both before and after the woman we call Julian. Records of other anchorholds in the Norfolk area include, for example, an anchorite contemporary with Julian attached to a Dominican church in King's Lynn (called Bishop's Lynn in the fourteenth century). Even today there are at least two recluses in Norfolk—one living on or near the grounds of the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham and the other living in the countryside.

Since Julian revealed nothing about her everyday existence, knowledge of her life as an anchoress comes from reading the *Ancren Riwele*, a popular guide for anchoresses written in the early thirteenth century. Life in an anchorhold centered on prayer but was also concerned with the outside world. It was not in order to escape from the trials and tribulations of the period that certain people retreated to one place for the rest of their lives, but, rather, it was a response to a calling to live more closely with God. English anchorites were under episcopal control and were questioned by the local bishop before entering their solitary life to ascertain if their call derived from their relationship with God. We do not know when Julian became an anchoress but it may have been shortly after her visions. If so,

she lived in her anchorhold for over forty years. Although we are unsure of her date of death, four wills in 1394, 1404, 1415, and 1416 leave various amounts of money for the maintenance of Julian and her servants. "An anchoress at St. Julian's" is also mentioned in a 1429 will but this anchoress may or may not be our Julian.<sup>12</sup> Presumably she was buried in the churchyard, though no trace remains.

In Norwich, a 1952 reconstruction of the anchorhold, built of flint (the common building material of Norfolk), lies against the south wall of the rebuilt church. A window in the wall (called a squint) allowed the anchoress to see the sanctuary and to assist at the sacrifice of Holy Mass.<sup>13</sup> In addition, there are two other openings in this cell—one looking out on the street and one opening into a room where her servant lived. The outside window now overlooks a peaceful garden. In the time of Julian the garden would probably have been a noisy, smelly pathway or thoroughfare for the busy merchants of the area since St. Julian's lies close to the river where trading (wood and cloth) and fishing ships docked and where herring and hides from a nearby tannery were dried.

The street access—covered with two curtains, a black one with a cut-out cross over a white one—allowed people to visit but not see the anchoress. Interactions with passers-by were a vital part of the social role a recluse played in a community because she would listen to problems and offer advice. Julian, according to a fifteenth-century contemporary, had a reputation for "good advice."<sup>14</sup> Thus, a recluse was a forerunner of modern day psychologists or spiritual directors or ombudspersons.

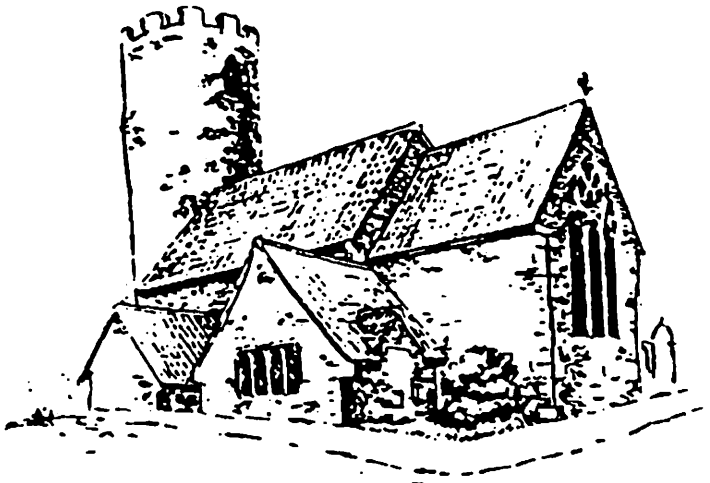


Figure 1. Drawing of St. Julian's Church, Norwich. The anchorhold is the A-frame structure with the window.

Julian's daily life included prayer, study, and some type of manual labor (e.g., sewing and mending church vestments or poor people's clothes). She wore plain but warm clothing—probably of coarse canvas.<sup>15</sup> Except on Fridays and during penitential seasons, she ate two vegetarian meals a day and drank beer. (The brewery was close to the church, and water was unsafe to drink.) Consistent with medieval medical practice, she was bled periodically—four times a year—to maintain health. A servant (two wills give the names of Julian's helpers as Sara and Alice) provided for her needs and discouraged frequent interruptions of her mistress' life of prayer and penance. Sara later became a recluse herself—attached to the Church of St. Giles in Norwich. Since the *Ancren Riwe* allowed a cat to live with an anchoress, pictures and stained glass windows of Julian (e.g., in the St. Savior Chapel of Norwich Cathedral) often include a feline companion. The cat would have served a useful purpose in reducing the number of rats which lived near the river.

Julian referred to herself as a "simple, unlettered creature."<sup>16</sup> This epithet has various interpretations: either she was illiterate or she did not know Latin. It was unlikely that Julian had been highly educated since the Church had control of education and its purpose was to prepare men for ordination—an event proscribed for women. But it is likely that she had some education from the Benedictine nuns of Carrow. Some scholars explain Julian's self-description as a rhetorical device which downplayed her writing ability and indicated that at the time of the revelations she was unskilled in writing.<sup>17</sup> Where and how she learned to read and write in the vernacular is unknown as is whether she wrote the texts in her own hand or dictated them.

Life during the time of Julian was anything but easy. Politics, religion and society were in turmoil. Chronic, prolonged hardships included insufficient harvest and famines, piracy from Scotland and the Low Countries (hence the twenty foot high wall around Norwich which was completed in 1342, the year of Julian's birth) and the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) between England and France. (Troops from Norwich participated in the famous battle of Agincourt in 1415.) The English won many engagements but were eventually defeated by the French troops led by the Maid of Orleans, Joan of Arc (1429-31). The war left England on the brink of bankruptcy and France with a ravaged countryside.

The bubonic plague or Black Death struck Europe in the fourteenth century and hit Norwich three times in the space of two decades (1349, 1361-62, 1369)—resulting in the loss of between one-third and one-half of the population. The clergy who attended and brought the sacraments to the sick and dying sustained an even higher loss. The results were fewer clergy available to work among Christians and a lessening of dependence on the Church for salvation. The psychological effect of these recurring epidemics



Figure 2. Window in St. Saviour Chapel, Norwich Cathedral. Note the cat.

was panic and fear because no one knew how they were caused or how they spread. (In one German town, a rumor blamed Jews for importing the disease; the result was a massacre of all Jews in the area.) The specter of death, pain and suffering also spawned the paradox of either greater religiosity or an "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die" attitude.

During the fourteenth century, social unrest among the peasants led to open rebellion. Increasingly aware of their underprivileged position and low wages, peasants revolted in Flanders in 1323-1328 and in France in 1358. In England in early summer 1381, peasant rebellion erupted in Essex and Kent, and the rebels, who included artisans and city dwellers, marched on London in mid-June. Leaders (such as Wat Tyler, "a tiler of houses," and John Ball, "a foolish priest"<sup>18</sup>) threatened the social and political order. They demanded of the teenaged King Richard II redress to such economic and social grievances as the stringent Statutes of Laborers of 1351, the heavy taxes which financed the Hundred Years' War, serfdom, and the unequal distribution of land and goods.<sup>19</sup> Similarly in June, "a great number of men rose in Norfolk and did great harm throughout the countryside."<sup>20</sup> They entered Norwich, murdered the Flemish weavers and burned the court rolls which had the entries of forced labor required of peasants. Disturbances lasted about two weeks in East Anglia. The warrior bishop of Norwich, Henry Despenser (1370-1406), repressed the rebellion. "He attacked the rebels . . . he captured many of them . . . made them confess and then had them beheaded for their evil deeds."<sup>21</sup> A contemporary account commends the bishop's actions:

Because they [rebellious peasants] had come to destroy the church and churchmen I dare to say that they deserved to perish at the hands of an ecclesiastic. For the bishop gladly stretched his avenging hand over them and did not scruple to give them final absolution for their sins with his sword.<sup>22</sup>

Part of the fabric of medieval life was religion. And yet the Roman Catholic Church of the fourteenth century was not a model of virtue and rectitude. On the international scene, the Babylonian Captivity of the Roman Catholic Church (also called the Avignon Papacy, 1309-1376, because the Pope and his court lived in southern France rather than in Rome and were viewed as being puppets of the French king) was followed by the Great Schism (1378-1415) in which two and then three popes simultaneously claimed to be the legitimate successors of St. Peter. On the local scene, bishops were appointed by the king and were more the king's servants than the Gospel's. Bishop Despenser, for example, was a military leader—ruthless and aristocratic—who was not well-liked by the monks of his cathedral chapter. In his entertaining descriptions of a corrupt friar and a worldly nun, Chaucer pointed out some of the abuses in the Church.

Cries for Church reform arose in England. The leader was an Oxford scholar, John Wyclif (ca. 1329-1384), whose followers attempted to reform a Church which wanted no reform. Called Lollards from the Dutch word meaning "mumbler of prayers" as well as from a pun on the English word for loafer, these merchants and ordinary people wanted a simple spirituality based on the New Testament, recently translated into English.<sup>23</sup> Lollards championed clerical poverty and supported the English Peasants' Revolt (1381), thus combining social and religious protest. They risked persecution because dissent from the religion of the realm implied dissent from the political order and was seen as subversive. In 1401, Parliament passed a law, "The Statute on the Burning of Heretics," which made Lollardy a capital offense. A Lollard's pit in Norwich was built outside the walls to enforce this law against heretics.

Julian's response to this age of violence, riots, Black Death, insecurity, multiple popes, and confused lines of authority was to concentrate on the positive power of God's love which created and sustained all things. In Chapter IV (short text), Julian provides a homey picture of an ordinary object which led her to a deeper understanding of reality:

He [God] showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, . . . round as any ball. I looked at it and thought: What can this be? And I was given this general answer: It is everything which is made. I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that it was so little that it could suddenly fall into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that he loves it, and third is that God preserves it . . . God is the Creator and the lover and the protector.<sup>24</sup>

This vision of a hazelnut (or a filbert) indicates Julian's attitude toward the created world—an attitude of respect. This positive stance toward the material is an important theme in her writings. Julian does not deny matter to get to the spirit but rather has an earthy approach to spirituality. Thus, she writes that body and soul are equally good because they are "clad and enclosed in the goodness of God," and refers to human nature as that "blessed nature which he [Jesus Christ] took of the virgin."<sup>25</sup> But Julian cautions humans not to set their hearts on created reality because the totality of creation is as small as a nut. It is the Creator who invests created beings with goodness, and it is the Creator in whom hearts will find rest. Matter will not suffice. She says in another chapter: "I wished them [the people at her bedside during her illness] to love God more and to set less store by worldly vanity."<sup>26</sup>

The image of God revealing his love through the hazelnut demonstrates the close relationship Julian had with God. Her direct knowledge of and communication with the divine is the essence of mysticism and the reason Julian qualifies for the title mystic. Over and over, Julian refers to God's revelations to her. In another passage, Jesus tells her that he alone is all that is necessary:

Again and again our Lord said; I am he, I am he, I am he who is highest. I am he whom you love, I am he in whom you delight. I am he whom you serve. I am he for whom you long. I am he whom you desire. I am he whom you intend. I am he who is all. I am he whom Holy Church preaches and teaches to you. I am he who showed himself before to you.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Julian's perception of reality prevents her from being troubled by the world situation. She was certain of what was truly important: "Our natural will is to have God, and God's good will is to have us."<sup>28</sup> Further, Julian was reassured by God that "All will be well."<sup>29</sup> Nearly six hundred years later, the twentieth-century poet, T. S. Eliot, used this comforting assurance in his *Four Quartets*.

Julian's emphasis on the positive love of God does not mean that she ignored pain or loss. She saw and felt the pain of Jesus' agony but also knew that the passion was the overcoming of the "fiend" (devil). She vividly described her anguish at experiencing the Passion of Christ in her mystical visions—she saw blood running down Christ's face.<sup>30</sup> "My spirit was greatly distressed as I contemplated it [second revelation], mourning, fearing, longing."<sup>31</sup> Not morbid interest but intense desire to understand led Julian to pause over the revelations and to describe in minute detail what she saw and to relate what she saw to her experiences. She almost relished the bleeding of Jesus:

The copiousness resembles the drops of water which fall from the eaves of a house after a great shower of rain, falling so thick that no human ingenuity can count them. And in their roundness as they spread over the forehead they were like a herring's scales.<sup>32</sup>

Her use of earthy metaphors (rain, herring) led her to understand the abundance and sufficiency of Christ's atonement for sin.

She was not afraid of emotions and was simple and affective. She experienced and expressed negative as well as positive emotions. "This revelation of Christ's pains filled me full of pains . . . caused me great sorrow and fear."<sup>33</sup> And, "God gave me again comfort and rest for my soul, delight and security."<sup>34</sup>



*Figure 3.* Detail of Despenser altarpiece.

*Photo courtesy of Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art.*



This vivid expression of intense emotion is characteristic of the change of values and attitudes during the fourteenth century from the symbolic to the realistic, from the God-centered medieval world to the human-centered Renaissance world. The artwork of the period illustrates this point in the simple and emotional appeal to viewers. Individuals with their emotions were depicted partly, at least, as a "reaction against excessive intellectualism."<sup>35</sup> New imagery of the fainting Virgin and the crowd at the Crucifixion supplants the earlier hierarchic and unapproachable imagery of Christ in Majesty or the Last Judgment. The swooning Virgin (figure 3) was frowned on by the Church because of the undue display of emotion by the Mother of God. (Of course, this realism is only a step away from hyper-realism or the depiction of extreme emotion through distortion and exaggeration which appears in the fifteenth century.) Besides the non-Biblical images (e.g., the Pietà), both plague imagery (e.g., the Dance of Death) and changes in tomb sculpture (e.g., dead and decaying effigies) demonstrate the impact of change and emotion in the fourteenth century. Many images derived from mystical literature (e.g., from the *Revelations* of the mystic Bridget of Sweden, 1303-1373). These images, called *Andachtsbilder*, were designed as vehicles for private meditation and contemplation.

In Norwich Cathedral stands a reredos of five panels believed by some to have been donated by Bishop Despenser as a thanksgiving offering for the "successful" end of the 1381 Peasants' Rebellion (figure 4). The Despenser altarpiece was discovered only in 1847 though it dates back to the late fourteenth century. Little is known of its earlier history, but it survived destruction by the iconoclastic Puritans in the seventeenth century because it had been used as a tabletop. Due to damage over the centuries, the upper parts were restored in 1958.

The scenes (Flagellation, Carrying the Cross, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension) are traditional, but Mary at the foot of the Cross overcome with suffering at the sight of her executed son as well as the pre-Crucifixion suffering of Christ are especially typical of late medieval concerns. These images inspire an emotional reaction on the part of the viewer just as Julian's visions (e.g., of the blood running down the face of Jesus) offer a means for the viewer to enter the scene for contemplation.

The emergence of the importance of the individual is another characteristic of the transitional fourteenth century and is seen in the very existence of Julian as a mystic. The direct apprehension of God was a personal experience and one that did not rely on the institution of the Church. Julian wrote that the visions were shown her "without any intermediary" and that there was "no created thing between my God and me."<sup>36</sup> She recognized that this direct relationship with God was a gift and that not everyone would receive this oneness with a "familiar" and "courteous" God. During this century of Church troubles, mysticism flourished. On the



Figure 4. Despensers altarpièce.

Photo courtesy of Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art.

continent, there were Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, Henry Suso, John Ruysbroeck, and Catherine of Siena, and in England Richard Rolle (a hermit), Walter Hilton, and the unknown author of *Cloud of Unknowing*. In fact, mysticism was the "most pronounced 'new' development of the fourteenth century."<sup>37</sup> Because of the human weakness of the Church, the intermediary role of the Church was replaced by a direct approach between God and individual.

This direct apprehension of God brought suspicion of heresy on the individual. Such suspicion might account for Julian's insistence on being a faithful daughter of Holy Church. She wrote: "In everything I believe as Holy Church preaches and teaches."<sup>38</sup> However, Julian seems to be aware of the problems of the institutional Church when she refers to general problems rather than to specific ones. "Holy Church will be shaken in sorrow and anguish and tribulation in this world as men shake a cloth in the wind."<sup>39</sup> Her protestation of faithfulness to the Church should be noted in the light of the prevalence of Lollards in Norfolk. Lollardy was a capital crime and a dangerous corrupting influence; convicted individuals were burned in the Norwich pit. Julian's contemporary, Margery Kempe, was often suspected of Lollardy. It behooved Julian to assert her orthodoxy especially since she downplayed the importance of material goods and thus resembled Lollards who criticized the materialistic, wealthy fourteenth century Church. Julian never disassociated herself from the Church nor did she openly criticize or rebuke it for its abuses. She simply communicated directly with God rather than through an intermediary. Yet, she was puzzled about the difference between the Church's judgment of sinners which at times was "hard and painful" and God's judgment which was always "good and lenient."<sup>40</sup> She did not dwell on this discrepancy but rather concentrated on the everlasting love of God and the comfort offered by this understanding. "So I was taught that love is our Lord's meaning . . . In our creation we had beginning, but the love in which he created us was in him from without beginning."<sup>41</sup>

Julian's puzzlement over the possible discrepancy between God's judgment and the Church's is reminiscent of comments by Joan of Arc who, in her trial, confounded the inquisitor by her profession of loyalty to God.

Interrog: Do you submit to the judgment of the Church?

Joan: I submit to Our Lord, who sent me on my mission; to Our Lady, to all the blessed saints and the holy ones of Paradise.

Interrog: Then you do not submit to the Church?

Joan: As I see it, Our Lord and His Church are one, so there will be no difficulty there.

Similarly, Julian wrote: "I assented to all that our Lord had revealed to me on that same day, and to all the faith of Holy Church, for I consider them both to be one."<sup>42</sup> Two women separated by the English Channel and by about thirty years profess their allegiance to God and by inference to the Church because they insist that God and the Church are one. Neither woman was naive or blind to the abuses of the human institution and yet they kept their eyes focused on God. Each remains true to her experience of God and acknowledges that ideally the Church reflects God's life and love. Neither condemns the Church; both recognize a commitment to a loving God.

This emphasis on individual piety indicates another change during the fourteenth century—namely, the dissolution of the perception of a single Christian society. The ideal of a Christian commonwealth was replaced by individual, territorial states with individual church structures. Loyalty to France or to England, for example, was taking priority over the lofty ideal of a single Christendom promoted by the earlier Carolingians.

Julian's intended audience also reveals something about her era. She explained in Chapter Eight (long text):

In all this I was greatly moved in love towards my fellow Christians, that they might all see and know the same as I saw, for I wished it to be a comfort to them, for all this vision was shown for all men. . . . Everything that I say about me I mean to apply to all my fellow Christians, for I am taught that this is what our Lord intends in this spiritual revelation . . . that mightily, wisely and meekly you [might] contemplate upon God, who out of his courteous love and his endless goodness was willing to show it generally, to the comfort of us all.<sup>43</sup>

Her addressing the work to ordinary Christians ("even Christians") and not to church people or recluses is significant because women were forbidden to teach publicly by word or by writing and because the existence of a receptive audience is presumed. Although she would deny that she was teaching, her writing certainly does teach a way of looking at God.

As for a receptive audience, the fourteenth century saw the increase of lay (that is, those who were not clergy) piety. A devout and literate laity resulted in part from the program of religious instruction of some reforming bishops of the thirteenth century, in part from St. Francis of Assisi and his conception of the apostolic life, in part from the appeal of religion to those who suffered from the continual disasters of the fourteenth century, and in part from the diminishing number of clergy. Devotional and mystical literature as well as art was widely produced for this audience. Among the best known is Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* which was written ca.

1427 under the auspices of the “*devotio moderna*,” a lay spirituality movement in the Netherlands. Such literature and Julian’s writings encouraged laity to practice contemplative prayer and taught indirectly that the Church alone was not the only way to attain salvation. Further, contemplation was not the preserve of clergy and nuns but was open to all.

Some of the most beautiful chapters in Julian’s *Revelations* are those which discuss the image of a feminine God (chapters 58-63 of the long text). Perhaps her tender picture of a loving, nourishing God was one way for her to cope with the myriad of societal, political, economic, and religious problems. It was certainly a change from the image of a stern, punishing, damning God of thirteenth-century women mystics and previous traditional artistic and literary imagery.<sup>44</sup>

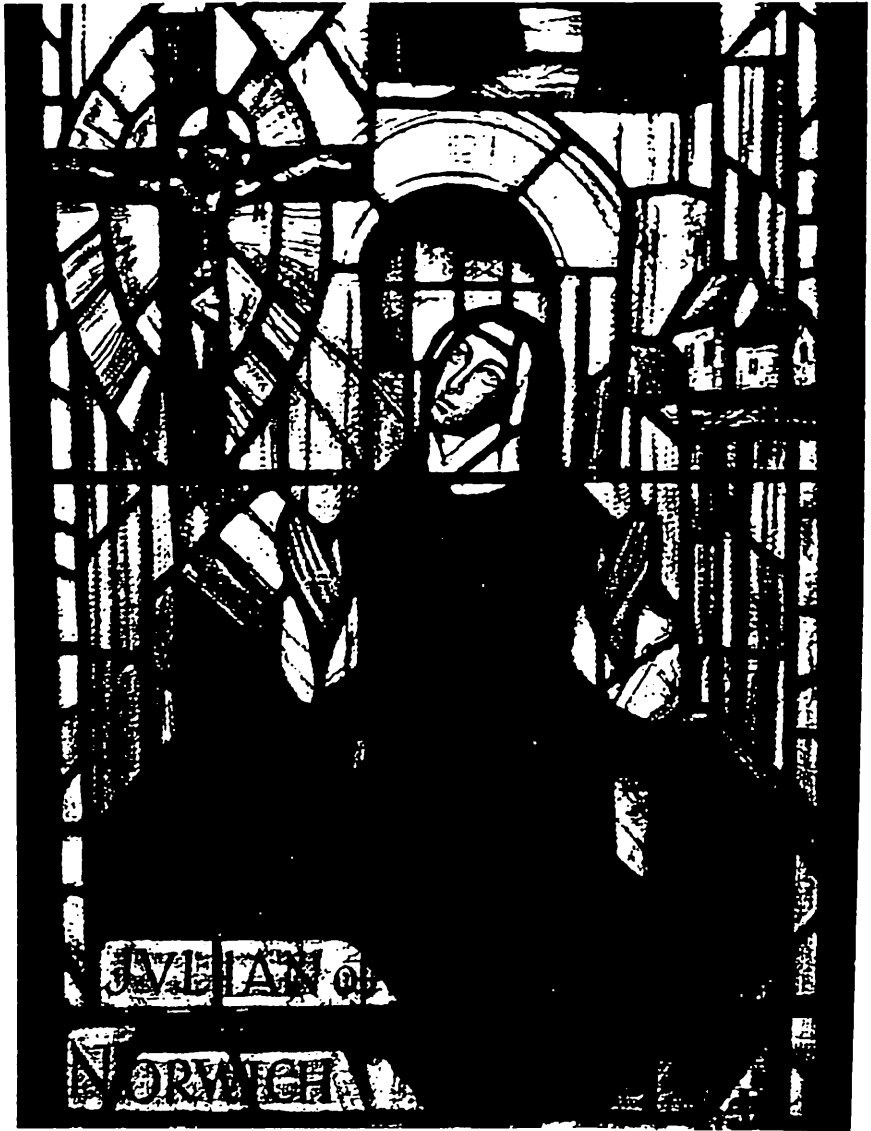
Julian is not the first to discuss Jesus as Mother or the Motherhood of God, but she certainly does so eloquently. This image can be found in the Old Testament: God “speaks of himself as mother, bearing Israelites in his bosom, conceiving them in his womb (e.g., Isa. 49:1, 49:15, and 66:11-13).”<sup>45</sup> The same image is found in the patristic period (second through fifth centuries) and then again in the twelfth century as a minor theme in such writers as Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1167), and Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109).

Julian’s discussion is intricately involved with her understanding of the Trinity which is present throughout her writings. She wrote: “And so in our making, God almighty is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord.” And, “As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms.”<sup>46</sup> This maternal imagery is indicative of the rise of affective spirituality and of the image of a God both loving and accessible to all.<sup>47</sup>

Julian used other images which were not specifically related to a motherly God but which reflected a feminine orientation. For example, she spoke of God as being “our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love, which is so tender that he may never desert us.” And, “We, soul and body, [are] clad and enclosed in the goodness of God.”<sup>48</sup> Julian also spoke of the soul being “knitted to our body” and that God “first knitted us and joined us to himself.”<sup>49</sup> This clothing imagery was more likely to come from a woman than from a man because during the Middle Ages it was the woman’s task to clothe her family. It is likely that Julian knew how to spin and perhaps did so in her anchorhold. An ordinary occupation for Julian provided access to a deeper reality.

Julian and her age of transition and turmoil and epidemics can provide twentieth-century readers with insight into how to cope with our own anxious age. Julian brought hope to her era by being a listener at her anchorhold window and by recording her reflections over a twenty-year

period. She did not offer instant knowledge or understanding but only patient compassion and love. This remarkable woman was not overcome by incessant calamities but drew comfort from the recognition of God's endless love and promise, "All things shall be well."



*Figure 5.* Lower right corner of the Benedictine window. Bauchun Chapel, Norwich Cathedral (1964). Note St. Julian's Church in upper right background.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Cambridge Medieval History*, in Anna Maria Reynolds, ed., *A Shewing of God's Love* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1958), p. xxii.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London, 1974), p. 952.

<sup>3</sup> Since no original of Julian's writings exists, it is an educated guess whether the viii of May was a xiii originally. Both are found in existing manuscripts. I use the 8th because that is the date ascribed by the Anglican Church for this saint and because it is the date used at St. Julian's in Norwich.

<sup>4</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 175-77. Unless otherwise noted, quotations of Julian are from this book.

<sup>5</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Cardinal Gasquet (London: Chatto & Windus, 1925), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. Derek Pearsall (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), I:30; III:140. Stability was a test for distinguishing between true and false hermits.

<sup>7</sup> An anchoress vowed "obedience, chastity, and constancy as to her abode." James Morton, *The Nun's Rule: Being the Ancren Riwle Moderized* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1924), p. 5. A hermit would also live alone but would live away from society in a remote place.

<sup>8</sup> Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> The peak period of the English recluse lasted from 1225 to 1400, but recluses continued to exist until the English Reformation of the sixteenth century. Reynolds, p. xliii.

<sup>10</sup> In Chester-le-Street, seven miles from Durham in Northern England, there still exists an unoccupied anchorhold of four rooms attached to the Church of St. Mary and St. Cuthbert which was completed in 1409. St. James' Church, Shere, in Surry, was mentioned in the *Domesday Book* and had an anchorhold attached to it in which Christine Carpenter, "the anchoress of Shere," was enclosed for the first time in 1329 and re-enclosed in 1332. The squint is still visible.

<sup>11</sup> An old saying is that Norwich had a church for every week of the year and a pub for every day.

<sup>12</sup> Louise Collins wrote that Julian died in 1410. *Memoirs of a Medieval Woman: The Life and Times of Margery Kempe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 53. And yet one version of a manuscript reported that "Julian . . . is a recluse at Norwich and is living yet in this year of our Lord 1413." Reynolds, p. xlv.

<sup>13</sup> The *Ancren Riwele* recommended that anchoresses receive Holy Communion only fifteen times a year. The reasoning rests on "absence makes the heart grow fonder" (i.e., too frequent reception might lessen the appreciation for the sacrament). Morton, p. 312.

<sup>14</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B. A. Windeatt (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), pp. 77-79. Margery Kempe, from Bishop's Lynn, wandered (after leaving her husband and fourteen children) through England and to the pilgrimage sites of Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostella, and Rome looking for a deeper relationship with God. She visited "Dame Jelyan" in the first decade of the fifteenth century. Margery dictated her story near the end of her life; her autobiography provides the modern reader with a colorful and detailed account of life in late medieval England. Louise Collins wrote a good biography of this eccentric woman.

<sup>15</sup> Morton, p. 317.

<sup>16</sup> Colledge and Walsh, p. 177.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, in R. B. Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), pp. 138, 371.

<sup>19</sup> This peasant rebellion of 1381 was in part the result of the decrease of population from the Black Death and the accompanying shortage of labor which raised wages—a fact that Parliament attempted to counter by strict regulations about labor. It is interesting to note that during the London insurrection, Richard II visited and confessed to an anchorite before meeting with the rebels at Smithfield (where Wat Tyler was killed). *Anonimalle Chronicle* in Dobson, p. 163.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>22</sup> *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, in Dobson, p. 238.

<sup>23</sup> "The word *lollard* probably derived from the Middle Dutch *lollaerd*, mumbler (of prayers) which had already been applied to the followers of certain religious movements; it was deliberately confused with the Middle English *loller*, a loafer, and, by way of a pun, with the Latin *lolia*, tares." May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), fn. 3, p. 517. By the sixteenth century, possession of a Bible in the vernacular was grounds for suspicion of heresy. Using such a Bible was seen as doubting that the Church was *the* interpreter of the Word of God. In part, this was an accurate deduction because both Martin Luther and John Calvin taught that individuals could interpret the Bible and encouraged reading the Bible in the everyday language of the people.

<sup>24</sup> Colledge and Walsh, pp. 130-31. This vision of a hazelnut was cited by Elizabeth Goudge in *Gentian Hill*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185-86.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.



- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 223.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 186.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 151-53, 149, 225, 229, 231.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 129.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 194.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 188.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 208-09.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 205.
- <sup>35</sup> W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 251.
- <sup>36</sup> Colledge and Walsh, pp. 181, 182.
- <sup>37</sup> Jill N. Claster, *The Medieval Experience: 300-1400* (New York: New York University Press, 1982), p. 374.
- <sup>38</sup> Colledge and Walsh, p. 192. See also pp. 135, 148, 163, 233, 234, 235-36, 301, 316, 343.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 226.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 256-57.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 342-43.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 163.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 190-91.
- <sup>44</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum studied the nuns of Helfta and discusses their view of God in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 125.
- <sup>46</sup> Colledge and Walsh, pp. 295-96.
- <sup>47</sup> For me the image of God as Mother is particularly appealing because I first became acquainted with this mystic shortly after the death of my mother.
- <sup>48</sup> Colledge and Walsh, pp. 183, 186.
- <sup>49</sup> *Revelations of Divine Love: Juliana of Norwich*, trans. M. L. del Mastro (New York: Image Books, 1977), pp. 185, 187.



## **Some Thoughts About Art, History, And the Search for Truth**

*Wood Lockhart*

IN HIS ESSAY ON PLATO and the computer, Philip Novak has addressed the question of the proper place of philosophy in a world which seems dominated by technological concerns. He has also written persuasively of the role of philosophy as a discipline within the more narrow confines of the Dominican College curriculum. As an art historian who believes that some of the concerns of art history are akin to those normally assigned to philosophers, I share with him a desire to re-establish the relevance of philosophical inquiry—not only to undergraduate education, but also to the larger world outside our college borders.

In particular, it is the inquiry into the nature of reality and the consideration of what it means to say that something is real which seem to me to be tasks shared by the disciplines of philosophy and art history. That these are tasks which traditionally have been assigned to philosophers is obvious, but what is probably less clear is the degree to which they should be concerns of the art historian. Just what is art history anyway? Is it merely the illustration of historical events? Is it, as I suspect many students (and more than a few colleagues) suppose, only a somewhat glorified version of

“art appreciation?” The answer is not a simple one. Certainly it is hoped that in studying art history one will develop an appreciation of the visual arts, but the relevance of the subject to a liberal arts education goes far beyond the ability to recognize and enjoy specific examples of painting, sculpture and architecture. Art history is more than just art appreciation because it is a discipline which is dependent upon an understanding of the historical and cultural context in which works of art have been created. When and where a work of art was produced, together with the ideas and values of the society from which it came, have everything to do with the style of that work—with the way it looks and the reasons for which it looks that way. Art with a capital “A”—the art which is the subject matter of art history—is more than just the personal expression of an individual artist: it is an expression of the spirit of the age in which it was created. To understand such art and to appreciate it fully, it is necessary to attempt to see it not only through our own eyes, but also through the eyes of those who produced it. What was the conception of reality at the time when the work was created? What was man’s understanding of the universe, his place within it, his relationship to God? What constituted truth? In short, how was reality defined? These are the sorts of questions which must be considered if one is truly to comprehend the meaning of a work of art, and it is in attempting to answer them that the art historian enters into the realm of philosophical inquiry.

For many beginning students of art history, the art of the early Middle Ages is particularly challenging and difficult because it seems to bear little relationship to their own conceptions of reality. It is, in fact, an art which is decidedly “unrealistic.” When first encountering a work such as the early medieval depiction of St. Matthew from the illuminated manuscript known as the Gospels of St. Willibrord (figure 1), I have no doubt that many students suspect that it is less an expression of the spirit of the age than it is evidence that the unknown artist was simply incapable of “making it look right.” Certainly, with the extreme stylization of the human figure, the flattening of the spatial context in which the figure is placed, and the decorative rather than naturalistic use of color, the work displays an almost blatant disregard for fidelity to the world of natural appearance. Does this mean, however, that the artist was less skilled than painters whose work more accurately reflects the visible world, or does it perhaps express a concept of reality which could not be depicted by “realistic” rendering?

In considering this question it is necessary to reflect upon the nature and function of medieval art in general and of the illuminated manuscript in particular. Put in the simplest way, it may be said that the primary purpose of art in the Christian world of the early Middle Ages was the glorification of God, and that the principal artistic form of such glorification was the illuminated manuscript. As the term suggests, manuscript illumination

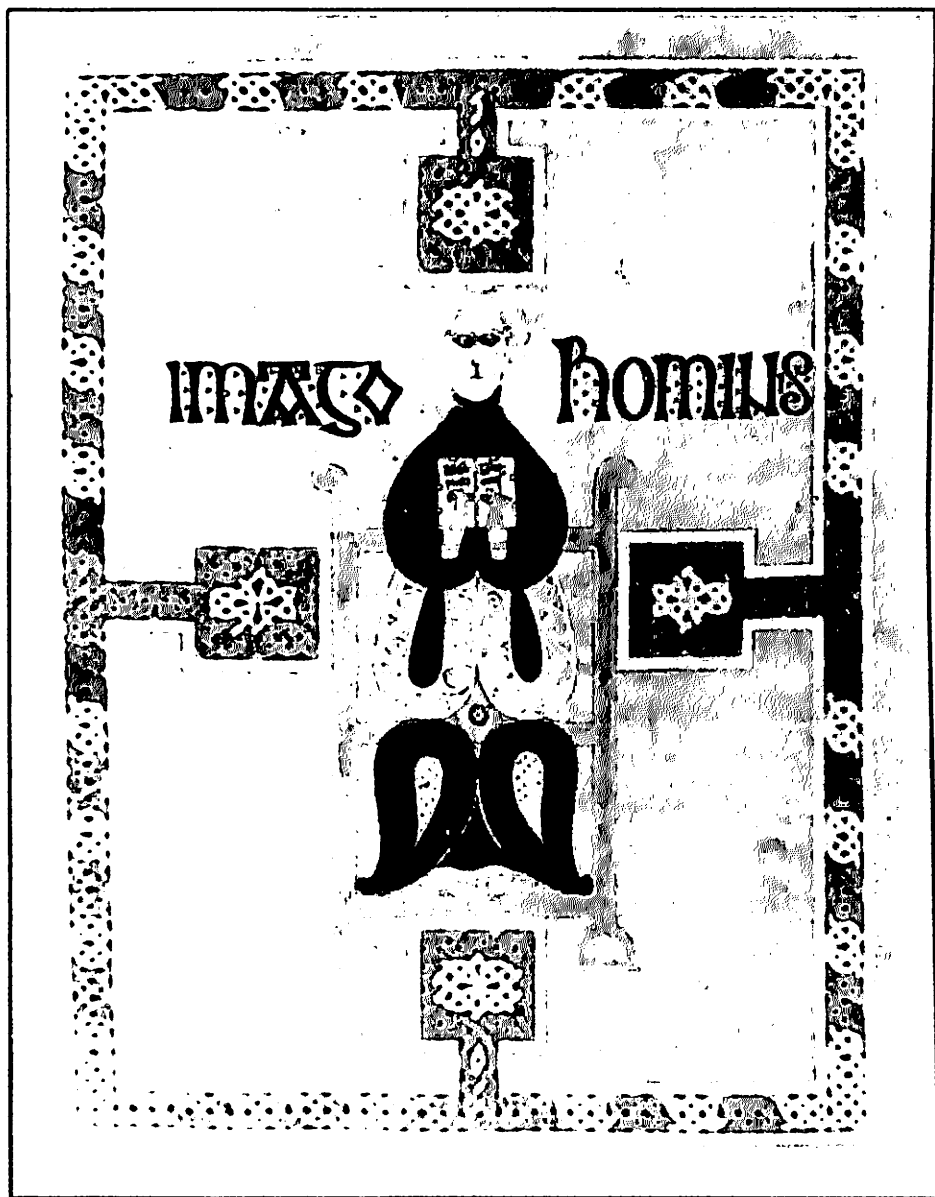


Figure 1. Symbol of St. Matthew, *Gospels of St. Willibrord*, ca. 690

was intended to illuminate (to celebrate and shed light upon) the written word, and in the monastic scriptoria of the seventh and eighth centuries the written word was synonymous with the Word of God as found in the Bible. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of "the Word" to the artist-monks of the early Middle Ages, for they took quite literally the pronouncement of St. John that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The supernatural world of God, not the physical world of man, was where reality was to be found, and it was the Word which represented that which was real and that which was true. In seeking to illuminate the Word and to celebrate the reality which it represented, medieval artists did not try to imitate the natural world but sought rather to relate their art to the written text as it appeared on the flat page. To put it another way: if reality resides in the Word, and the Word is to be found on the page of a book, then it is to the two dimensional page with its written text that the artist's forms must relate if they are to have any relationship with what is real. It would not have occurred to the anonymous artist of the St. Willibrord Gospels that anyone might think that, in his effort to create a convincing depiction of what is real, he was attempting to imitate faithfully the forms of the natural world or to place them within an illusionistic setting of three dimensional space. Rather than seeking to reproduce what he might see before him in the natural world (human figure, chair, book), he sought to create forms which would be understood as visual symbols for a supernatural reality which had nothing to do with the world of appearances and could only be understood in terms of the Word of God.

If we could look at the painting of St. Matthew through early medieval eyes, we would recognize at once that we are not looking at a "portrait" of St. Matthew, but rather at an intentionally two dimensional symbol for him and for the Gospel which bears his name. Such a symbol would have been instantly recognizable to the Christians of the Middle Ages who would also have understood that "medieval art was before all things a symbolic art in which form is used merely as a vehicle of spiritual meaning."<sup>1</sup> In our particular example, the St. Matthew symbol—the image of man (*imago hominis*)—is further identified by the written title and by the introductory words of the Gospel which appear on the book held in front of the figure. Understood as symbol, whose purpose is to take the viewer's thoughts from the physical world and to focus them on the reality of the Word of God (as found in the text of the Gospel), the entire composition may be seen as a powerful and convincing reflection of the artist's concept of what is real. Taken as a whole, it is a composition which truly does illuminate the words of the Gospel by reminding the viewer that it is only through those words that he will come to know the truth.

The figure of St. Matthew is but one of the paintings from the Gospels of St. Willibrord—a Gospel book which contains some of the very best examples of the art of the early Middle Ages and represents a high point of the Hiberno-Saxon manuscript illumination produced in the monasteries of Ireland and Northumbria during the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Dating from the last decade of the seventh century, the work was named and probably produced for St. Willibrord, a Northumbrian missionary who journeyed to northern Europe to convert the Frisians in 690. Also known as the Echternach Gospels, the book has been attributed by some scholars to the monastery which St. Willibrord founded at Echternach (Luxembourg) in 698, but stylistic relationships with other Gospel books suggest that it was painted in Northumbria (northern England), possibly at the holy island of Lindisfarne.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the symbol for St. Matthew, the book contains full page symbolic compositions to illuminate the texts of the Gospels of St. Mark (lion), St. Luke (calf-like ox) and St. John (eagle). The beginning of each Gospel is further illuminated by decorated letters which repeat the interlace motif found in the decoratively framed border surrounding the symbol of St. Matthew. These decorated letters—the design of which shows the influence of pagan metal work<sup>4</sup>—serve to focus attention upon the written text and to reinforce the emphasis upon the divine Word as the primary determinant of what is real.

In her essay on Celtic Christian Ireland, Sister Barbara Green has given us a vivid picture of the culture which produced the early medieval Hiberno-Saxon manuscript illuminations. She is, I think, also quite correct when she suggests that “Irish art is more conceptual than representational” for it seems clear that the artist-monks of the seventh and eighth centuries sought to depict that which they considered to be real in terms of idea (concept) rather than in terms of natural appearance. In our example it is the idea of the chair upon which St. Matthew sits that is depicted rather than the actual appearance of that chair. Every element within the composition is treated as a separate and independent concept, and the forms which are chosen to symbolize those concepts are related to one another in terms of two dimensional pattern rather than by any system which might suggest a three dimensional spatial context. Such patterns, however, are far more than just attractive decoration and design. Taken together they are images which reflect the artist’s concept of reality—a reality which is not to be found in the physical world of man and nature, but rather in the divine Word of God as transmitted through the written text of the Gospels. What at first glance may seem evidence of an artist’s inability to handle problems of representation and spatial organization is seen upon closer examination to be a conscious effort to reject the appearances of the natural world and to depict instead symbolic images of the supernatural world of God as revealed in the written Word.



*Figure 2. Madonna and Child, Book of Kells, ca. 800*



As Sr. Barbara has stated, "the most famous, ornate and highly sophisticated" of the Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts is the Book of Kells. Produced at least one hundred years after the Gospels of St. Willibrord, the Book of Kells nevertheless shares many stylistic characteristics with the earlier work and lends considerable support to the thesis that there is a direct relationship between artistic style and the prevailing conception of reality in any given society or culture. Although more elaborate than the illuminated pages of the St. Willibrord Gospels, the paintings in the Book of Kells are still blatantly two dimensional (flat) and decorative, giving evidence of the same lack of concern for the depiction of objects and events within a convincing three dimensional setting. This is not to say that the scenes within these marvelous paintings are unrelated to reality, but rather that they are, like those in the earlier book, based upon a system of design which reflects a belief that reality lies beyond the world of natural appearances.

Over six hundred years separate the art of the early Middle Ages from the art of the Renaissance. The differences between the *Madonna and Child Attended by Angels* from the Book of Kells (figure 2) and a painting of the same subject by the fifteenth-century Italian artist, Masaccio (figure 3), are dramatic, and a student might well assume that those differences represent six hundred years of improvement in technique. But is that actually the case? Certainly the figures in Masaccio's painting are more "realistic" (naturalistic) than those from the Book of Kells. In contrast to the flat forms of the early medieval work those of Masaccio's *Madonna Enthroned* seem to have weight and substance and exist in a spatial context which has depth as well as height and width. The two angels seated at the feet of the Virgin are particularly convincing as they seem to project both back into the pictorial space and forward into the actual space inhabited by the viewer. Such "realism" is in marked contrast to the art of the early Middle Ages, but does it thus follow that the six hundred years which separate Masaccio's painting from the Book of Kells represent six hundred years of improvement in the ability of artists to make things "look right?" I think not, and would suggest instead that the changes in style which are evident in the two works are reflective of fundamental changes in ideas about what constitutes that which is real.

The style of the St. Willibrord Gospels and of the Book of Kells is consistent with a world view which was widely held throughout the early medieval monasteries of Ireland, Scotland and Northumbria. As long as the physical world was understood as only a pale reflection of what was real, there was no incentive to devise artistic means to reproduce it. As long as it was believed that all truth and knowledge had the Word of God as the ultimate source, there was no reason for an artist to concern himself with the imitation of the way things appear in the natural world. Truth was to be found in the divine Word, and as the purpose of art was to illuminate and



Figure 3. Masaccio, *Madonna Enthroned*, 1426

glorify that Word, artists needed only to relate their work to the two dimensional context of the page upon which the Word was written. It was not until man began to look at the physical world as evidence of God's presence and began to believe that one might come to know the truth and to understand the meaning of reality by a study of that world that it became necessary to develop a system which would accurately represent what he saw.

As anyone who has studied the Italian Renaissance will know, the forces which brought about the "rebirth" were many and complex. Changes in political, economic and social organization were accompanied by changes in philosophical and theological ideas as the world view of medieval man gave way to one which was less God-centered and which placed a new emphasis upon the dignity of man and upon the importance of human activity in the natural world. These changes did not take place overnight, and the corresponding changes in art which are evident from our two Madonnas did not occur without many intervening steps. Nevertheless, the two paintings are dramatic evidence of a changed conception of reality. That Masaccio's work may look more "realistic" to us today is not to say that it is more real, but rather that our conception of reality is closer to the Renaissance world view than it is to that of the Middle Ages.

Could the early medieval artist have painted more like Masaccio if he had wished? The answer to that question is difficult at best. Certainly there are examples in medieval art of life-like details which suggest that the artist has attempted to imitate the outward appearance of objects in the natural world, but, with few exceptions, medieval art is virtually lacking in examples of a convincingly rendered three dimensional spatial context. There is no evidence to suggest that the medieval artist was bothered by this, and indeed, ample evidence to the contrary—that the illusion of empty space separate from the objects which it enclosed was something to be avoided. It is only when the medieval view of reality began to be modified by an increased attention to the natural world that artists began to feel the need of developing pictorial techniques which would suggest that the world of natural appearance was something to be studied and reproduced.

The artist who is usually given credit for the first convincing attempts at imitating the world of natural appearances is Giotto—a fourteenth-century Italian painter who is known as the father of Renaissance art. But if it is Giotto who takes the first steps toward an art which is in tune with the changes taking place in the rest of western civilization, it is Masaccio who must be considered as the first painter to master the technique of linear perspective—the scientific and mathematical way of creating the illusion of three dimensional space on a flat surface. Born in 1401, Masaccio lived only twenty-seven years, but in that short span of life he made significant

contributions to directing the art of painting towards a new naturalism based upon direct observation of the natural world.

Masaccio's art, like that of the painters who followed him, was based upon an understanding of the rules of linear perspective which had first been demonstrated by the architect Filippo Brunelleschi in 1425. There is still much scholarly debate as to whether Brunelleschi invented linear perspective or simply rediscovered it after its abandonment by artists during the Middle Ages, but there is no disagreement as to his role as the one who introduced it to the Italian Renaissance.<sup>5</sup> Brunelleschi's experiments with the principles of linear perspective grew out of his desire, as an architect, to provide his clients with a visually accurate depiction of what a building would look like before it was built. Essentially a means of creating the illusion of three dimensional space, linear perspective allowed for the construction of a "realistic" spatial continuum in which separate objects could be depicted in accurate relationships to each other as they appear to the human eye.

The key to unlocking the secret of linear perspective lay in Brunelleschi's discovery of the vanishing point—the point in space at which parallel lines appear to converge. The concept of the vanishing point may be easily understood if one imagines oneself standing on a railroad track (or on a long, straight highway) and observing that, as they recede into the distance, the parallel rails (or sides of the highway) seem to come together at a single point. In the theory of linear perspective this point of convergence is called the vanishing point. Medieval artists, with their conceptual approach to depicting reality, had no interest in the vanishing point because they *knew* that parallel lines do *not* converge at a single point even though they appear to do so. The reality of the highway is that its edges are always parallel and never come together. To the medieval mind the fact that the sides of the highway appear to come together in the distance was simply evidence that appearances had little to do with truth or with what was real. To the Renaissance artist of the fifteenth century, however, the laws of optics and geometry which governed those appearances were considered to be equivalent to the same laws with which God governed the universe.

Although we do not know for certain how Brunelleschi came to understand the significance of the vanishing point, there is convincing evidence that his discovery resulted from experiments with mirrors.<sup>6</sup> If one stands in front of a mirror and observes the objects which are reflected there, it soon becomes evident that all lines (edges of objects) which are perpendicular to the surface of the mirror will, if projected far enough back into space, appear to converge at a point which corresponds to the position of one's own eyes (as are also reflected in the mirror). The eye position of the observer (the one standing in front of the mirror) is thus seen to be directly related to the vanishing point at which all parallel lines appear to converge.

Probably working with mirrors in just such a manner, Brunelleschi made the discovery that the key to depicting objects as they appear to the human eye lay in constructing a picture so that all lines which are meant to appear perpendicular to the surface and receding back into space converge (if extended) at a single point in the distant background. When a picture is so constructed, if the viewer positions his eye directly opposite this point (the vanishing point) the painting will appear to reproduce exactly that which would be observed by the eye of the viewer if the scene were actually taking place before him (figure 4). It was this understanding of the significance of the vanishing point which allowed Brunelleschi to formulate the principles of linear perspective and to apply them to his own architectural experiments. The result was a convincing depiction of natural space in which objects appear to be seen from a fixed viewing point and to become smaller the farther they are from the eye of the viewer.

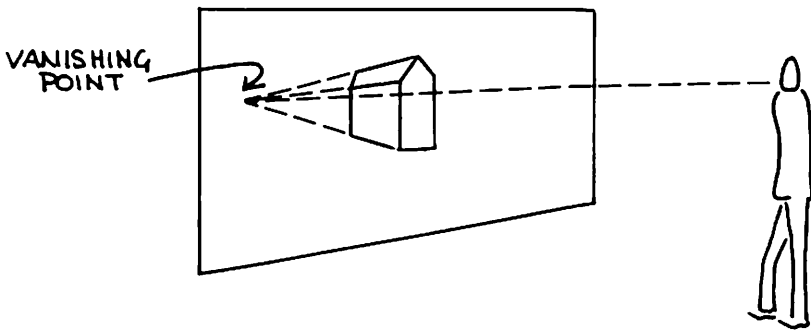


Figure 4.

Such a system of pictorial construction was completely consistent with the changing view of reality which had been slowly evolving during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The love of nature and the belief that the natural world offered evidence of God's manifestation of Himself is implicit in the writings of St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226).<sup>7</sup> The influential thirteenth-century Franciscan philosopher Roger Bacon (ca. 1220-1292), believed that God's master plan for the universe could be understood in terms of the laws of optics and geometry and that the application of those laws to the observation of natural appearances would lead to the revelation of truth.

And for the sake of all things in general let us recall to mind that nothing can be known concerning the things of this world without the power of geometry . . . because we can understand nothing fully unless its form is presented before our eyes, and therefore in the

scripture of God the whole knowledge of things to be defined by geometrical forms is contained and far better than mere philosophy could express it . . .<sup>8</sup>

The changing beliefs about the relevance of the natural world (and the laws which govern it) to an understanding of ultimate truth brought about the need for a new way of depicting that world which went far beyond the requirements of the early Middle Ages. No longer would the abstract and symbolic imagery of the Hiberno-Saxon manuscript illuminations be sufficient to express a concept of reality which had been fundamentally altered. The value now placed upon the natural world and the growing belief that man stood at its center demanded that a method be found for its depiction in a manner which would be convincing to the eye as well as to the mind. Thus, I think it is fair to say that Brunelleschi's discovery and application of the principles of linear perspective do not represent an "improvement" over the techniques of the medieval artists so much as they represent a uniquely appropriate means of accurately reflecting the changing beliefs about what constitutes that which is real.

Although Brunelleschi's ideas about linear perspective were developed in response to his own needs as an architect, they were immediately recognized as having revolutionary implications for the arts of painting and sculpture. It was Brunelleschi's young friend Masaccio who was the first to apply the principles of linear perspective to painting, but those principles were soon taken up by virtually every serious artist who came in contact with them. Masaccio's most accomplished use of linear perspective is found in a large fresco of *The Trinity* (figure 5) which he painted for the Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. So convincing is Masaccio's illusion of a deep space "behind" the surface of the wall that many students, when first seeing a slide of this painting, mistakenly assume that they are looking at a photograph of a sculptured crucifix placed in a deep niche which has been hollowed out of the wall. When one actually encounters the fresco in the Church of Santa Maria Novella, the illusion is even more pronounced because Masaccio has fixed the vanishing point at the viewer's eye level (just below the foot of the cross) and the scene appears exactly as it would if one were standing in front of a small chapel and not in front of a flat painting. The kneeling figures at either side of the "chapel" are fully life size and those within are slightly smaller as indeed they would appear if they were actually located in the space which seems to exist behind the surface of the wall. So accurately has Masaccio represented the spatial context of the scene that we can actually determine the dimensions of the barrel-vaulted chamber in which the Crucifixion appears to take place.

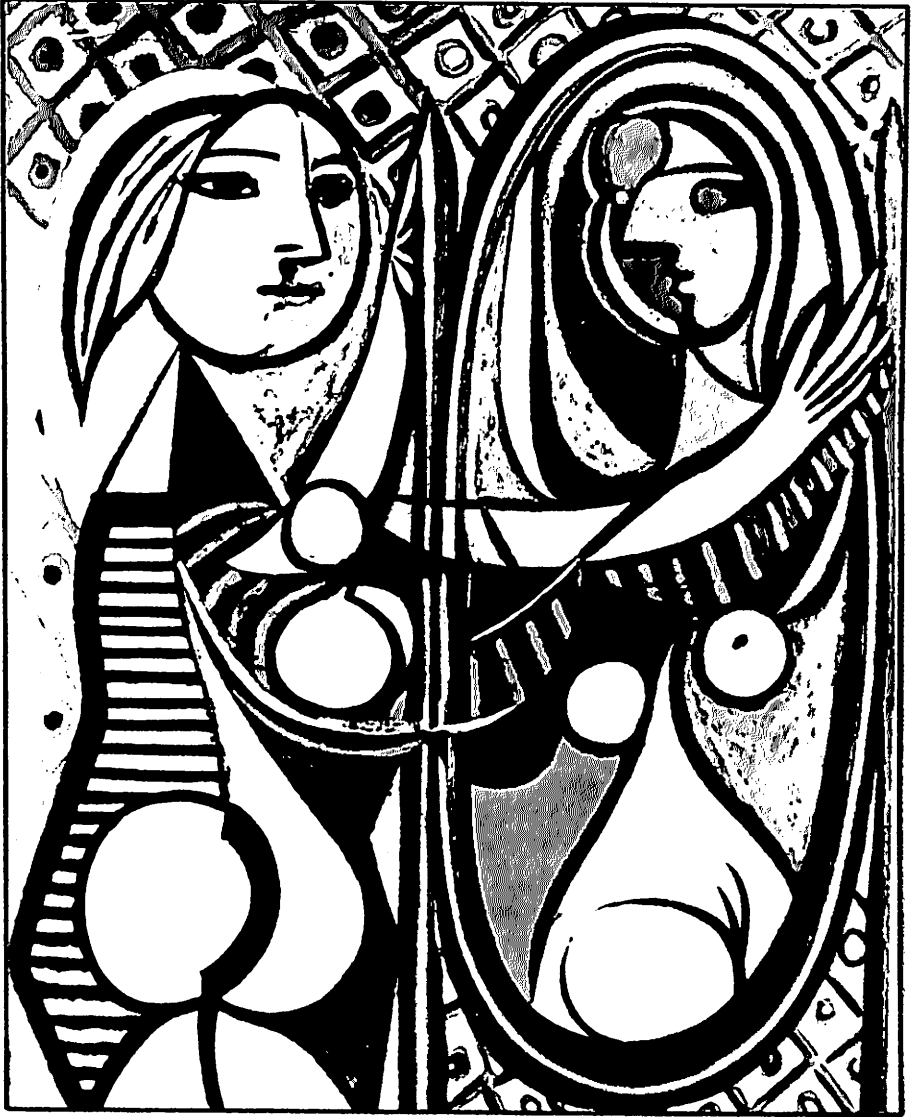


Figure 5. Masaccio, *The Holy Trinity*, 1428

Masaccio's painting is important not only for what it tells us about the Renaissance belief that reality could be found in an earthly setting, but also for what it tells us about the place of man within that setting. In the Hiberno-Saxon manuscript illuminations of the early Middle Ages, an accurate depiction of earthly space was deemed unnecessary because ultimate reality was not to be found in the physical world. Man as an individual counted for little in the early medieval conception of the universe, and the earthly space which man inhabited was of little concern to the artist. Masaccio's painting, however, reflects the Renaissance belief that God's presence in the natural world not only makes it real, but also elevates man's status within it. Using linear perspective to emphasize the importance of human observation in the search for truth, Masaccio also includes two figures in his composition which cannot be found in any biblical account of the Crucifixion. The kneeling figures at either side of the painting are, in fact, Florentine contemporaries of Masaccio—the donors who provided the funds for the fresco. Their presence in the composition, together with the implied participation in the scene by all who view it, is further evidence that man now sees himself in a new and decidedly non-medieval relationship with God and with what is real. Just as the idea that God manifests himself in the natural world was responsible for the desire to depict that world accurately, so too the belief that there is a relationship between being real and being human brought about the desire to depict human activity in an earthly setting which corresponded to that which could actually be seen. It was the principles of linear perspective which allowed Masaccio and those who followed him to construct a pictorial arena for human activity by creating the illusion of a coherent spatial setting. To put it another way is to say that a convincing depiction of human activity is dependent as much upon the spatial setting in which that activity takes place as it is upon the artist's ability to copy accurately the human form. The rules of linear perspective provided the artists of the Renaissance with the means to create that setting.

The principles of linear perspective were to govern painting for almost five hundred years. Not until the early years of our own century did artists begin to challenge systematically the idea that paintings composed according to the rules articulated by Brunelleschi in 1425 represented the last word in pictorial truth. In the interim, although styles had changed to reflect changing ideas and values, the underlying assumptions about the nature of reality and of man's place in the scheme of things were such that linear perspective continued to serve the artist as a valid means for depicting the truth. Even the abandonment of the belief in an earth-centered universe did not cause man to doubt that reality was still to be found in the visible world and that pictorial truth in art involved the representation of things as they might be seen by the human eye. The concept of the





*Figure 6. Pablo Picasso, Girl Before a Mirror, 1932*

vanishing point, with its attendant implications that reality can be observed and understood from a fixed point of view, served the cause of pictorial truth as long as it was believed that reality was absolute and unchanging. When this belief was shattered in the early years of the twentieth century it was inevitable that the principles of linear perspective would be called into question as a valid means of depicting the real. Just as the medieval method of composition did not serve adequately to reflect the Renaissance conception of reality, so too does linear perspective now seem inadequate to define a reality understood in terms of Einstein's theory of relativity or Freud's ideas about the existence of the unconscious.

The abandonment of linear perspective by artists in the twentieth century was no less significant (nor less intentional) than was its adoption by artists in the fifteenth century. Although it might be tempting to assume that a work such as Pablo Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror* (figure 6) is the product of an artist less skilled than one trained in the principles of linear perspective, such an assumption would be mistaken. That Picasso had understood those principles and mastered their application is evident in his early *First Communion* (figure 7)—a painting done in 1896, when he was only fifteen years old. *Girl before a Mirror*, painted thirty-six years later, is clearly, therefore, not the work of an incompetent charlatan, but rather a work composed according to a different set of pictorial principles. The distortions of the female figure on the left are not evidence of lack of ability, but are the result of a conscious decision to depict the figure from more than one point of view at the same time—a decision which is completely consistent with a post-Einsteinian understanding that time and space are interdependent and that the reality of any object is that it has multiple identities which exist simultaneously. Similarly, the fact that the image in the mirror is not a literal reflection of the figure standing before it suggests that the visible, rational and conscious may represent only part of what is real and may even obscure the truth which lies beneath the surface of appearances. In short, Picasso abandoned linear perspective because it no longer seemed capable of providing a means to depict the truth.

To suggest that Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror* reflects a twentieth-century conception of reality which has been influenced by the findings of Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud and a host of other contemporary thinkers is not to say that Picasso was trying to paint in terms of their ideas. Rather, it is to support my contention that when man changes his conception of reality then art will change as well. Significant changes in style such as those which resulted from the adoption of linear perspective in the fifteenth century and its abandonment in the twentieth century are not arbitrary or accidental. Such changes are a reflection of a changed conception of reality and can best be understood in terms of the prevailing beliefs of the time and place in which works of art have been created.



Figure 7. Pablo Picasso, *First Communion*, 1896

I began this essay by suggesting that the study of art history, like that of philosophy, is a study of ideas and values. Great works of art cannot be separated from their cultural and historical contexts and are, in fact, an expression of the same ideas and values by which those contexts are determined. To divorce a work of art from its own time, and to attempt to see it only with one's own eyes and in terms of one's own experience is to rob that work of much of its meaning. To view a medieval manuscript or a Renaissance fresco without taking into account the beliefs which determined the world view of the artists who created them is to assure that such works will never be fully understood or appreciated. Yet, if it is true that a work of art may be better comprehended by an understanding of the context in which it was created, it is also true that works of art can tell us as much about the times in which they were created as those times can tell us about them. Not only a reflection of the spirit of the age, art is also an important determinant of that spirit. A civilization defines itself by its art as well as by its words and actions, and if we are truly to understand the spirit of any age, we must be conversant with the forms as well as with the contents of its ideas and values. I remember a wise professor who once said, "show me your painting, your sculpture, and your architecture and I will understand your conception of the world." What he meant by that, I think, is that art has to do with beliefs about truth and about what is real. Pablo Picasso—arguably the most important painter of the twentieth century—put it somewhat differently when he said that "art is a lie which tells us the truth," but his statement is evidence of a similar conviction that art is far more than just an arbitrary expression of self. Art is, in essence, a language—a unique visual language through which man is capable of communicating his deepest beliefs. Like the philosopher, the artist is a seeker of truth, and although he speaks to us in a language which is nonverbal, his message often provides profound revelations of what is real and what is true.

It is, in part, the role of the art historian to interpret and teach the language of art—to help the student master the grammar and syntax of painting, sculpture and architecture and, in so doing, to acquire the ability to "listen" to what the artist has to say. The development of such visual literacy leads to much pleasure and enjoyment. As I have tried to argue from the beginning of this essay, however, there is a greater purpose to art history upon which the discipline stakes its claim to a valid place within the liberal arts curriculum. That purpose, I believe, is to share in the philosopher's search for truth and in the never-ending inquiry into the nature of reality. It is through such search and inquiry that we not only come to understand the past, but ultimately and more importantly, that we come to know ourselves.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Emile Male, *The Gothic Image* (New York, 1958), p. 22. Although it deals primarily with the religious art of the thirteenth century, Male's book gives valuable insights into early medieval aesthetics and should be considered a basic text for the understanding of medieval symbolism.

<sup>2</sup> The term "Hiberno-Saxon" is used to describe early medieval art which displays the stylistic characteristics of both the Irish (Hibernians) and the English (Anglo-Saxons). Although some of the most famous of the monastic scriptoria were located in English Northumbria—Jarrow, Wearmouth and Lindisfarne—the work produced there shows clear evidence of familiarity with the Irish manner of manuscript illumination.

<sup>3</sup> The work closest in style to the Gospels of St. Willibrord is the Book of Durrow which was produced about the year 680. For the evidence that both works (now in the Bibliotheque Nationale) may have been produced at Lindisfarne, see George Henderson, *Early Medieval* (Baltimore, 1972). Probably it is pointless to make too much of whether a specific work was produced in Ireland or England for as medievalist Carl Nordenfalk says, "The Gospels of St. Willibrord and the Book of Lindisfarne, the most perfect of all the Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts, embody, together with the Books of Durrow and Kells, a national style common to Ireland and Northumbria." See Carl Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (New York, 1977), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Although produced in Christian monasteries, the paintings of the illuminated manuscripts are heavily influenced by the pagan designs of earlier Celtic, Pictish, and Anglo-Saxon art. This is not to say that the designs themselves are pagan, but rather that the world view of the artist-monks was conditioned by a heritage of pre-Christian belief and imagery.

<sup>5</sup> There is considerable evidence that a form of linear perspective was known and used in the ancient world. Roman wall paintings, for example, show a clear understanding of some of the principles later articulated by Brunelleschi. Brunelleschi's role in the introduction of linear perspective to the Italian Renaissance was first attested to by the architect Filarete writing in the early 1460s and later confirmed and amplified upon by his biographer, Antonio Manetti, in the 1480s. For a good discussion of these points see Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr., *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> See John White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (London, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> St. Francis' beliefs about the relationship between God and the natural world are best expressed in his "Canticle of the Sun," written about 1225.

<sup>8</sup> *The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon*, trans. Robert Belle Burke (Philadelphia, 1928), 1: 234. The original Latin text is found in *The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon*, ed. John Henry Bridges (London, 1897), 1:211.

## **The Many and The Best** *A Search for the Aristocratic in a Democracy*

*John Savant*

AMERICA'S PRE-EMINENCE IN WORLD AFFAIRS has been one of the most significant features of our century. Culturally, however, America has been accused of promoting much that is mediocre: the fast-food chain, the disposable convenience item, the tooth-rotting soft drink, the spiritually vacuous "soaps," the cosmetized youth culture, the instant whatever. In the world of ideas, we are generally perceived as preferring the practical to the profound. At the Second Vatican Council, for example, our bishops were reported to have contributed more to its communications technology than to its theological deliberation. Our values are said to be more quantitative than qualitative, acquisition taking precedence over appreciation, concrete accomplishment over historical wisdom, practical know-how over refined sensibilities. Many might concur with our own H. L. Mencken who said, "You'll never go broke underestimating the taste of the American public."

While we might object that those buying into this mediocrity have some soul-searching of their own to do; and while we might point out that America has, indeed, fostered ideas of significance, produced work of

enduring quality in the arts and literature, and given a number of great men and women to history, we must also admit that the above charges have some basis in fact. To the extent that they do, they call our attention to one of the radical (and generally unheeded) problems inherent in democracies: *if rulership is to abide in the common man or woman, in the average person, then the "average" is likely to become the standard of national life and culture.* For citizens of a democracy, this is a serious issue, for none of us is pleased to believe that our culture is mediocre, that the "average" is a national norm.

It is the purpose of this essay to examine this issue—its implications, its possible resolutions. In doing so, I would like to do what the traditional humanist does: I would like to step back. A fundamental argument for the study of the Humanities is that they preserve the wisdom and experience of the tribe, thus giving us something by which to measure, understand and direct our lives. As William J. Bennett explains, "the Humanities tell us how men and women of our own and other civilizations have grappled with life's fundamental questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended? What is courage? What is noble? What is base? Why do civilizations flourish? Why do they decline?" (*To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*, 1984). Among other implications, one that stands out in this definition is that the past and the unfamiliar ("other civilizations") and the present and familiar ("our own") are significantly related, can help explain one another.

To derive what we can from this relationship, we'll engage in that mind-play so characteristic of liberal study wherein thought and literature from the past, remote and recent, shall be brought to bear on the question before us. If truth is, as St. Augustine points out, forever partial in our experience—forever discovered, modified, forgotten, expanded—then wisdom indicates that we not equate our general assumptions with the "last word," with absolute truth; that we "play," rather, with the evidence before us, much as the scientist does with new combinations or the poet with new forms and relationships. This is serious play, of course: one must read carefully, assess the evidence of the ages, think long and honestly. The closed or bigoted mind—the mind of the extremist and the fanatic—cannot tolerate such play, either assuming it already has all the truth or fearful of that which it does not have. But it is such play that thinkers like Aristotle or St. Thomas would place among the highest of human activities, even when ancillary to the contemplation of divine mystery. "We see now in a glass, darkly," says St. Paul. But we *are* meant to see, to search that imperfect mirror for whatever may enlighten our lives.

Our play in this essay will have to do with aristocracy and democracy, with concepts of freedom and equality, with the function of tradition and the arts, and, especially, with the question of leadership and the moral



quality of life. You may find that this play challenges some of your fondest assumptions, that it raises questions you had not considered before, that it points to difficulties you had not associated with democracies. We shall also consider possible resolutions to the problems raised, or, perhaps, ways of living in creative tension with them. In any case, if this "serious play" provokes you to devise your own responses or proposals, it shall have done its humanistic work.

We begin with Homer, who, we must note, composed for the aristocracy of his own day. His was a literature meant not only to enhance their social positions by providing them with heroic ancestry, but also to represent and endorse that behavior and those virtues critical to the survival of Greek society. In Book Seventeen of the *Odyssey*, the hero, disguised as a beggar, walks the final miles on his long journey home. In Odysseus' twenty year absence, his kingdom has come to suffer from the loss of its leader: his household is besieged by arrogant suitors seeking both his property and his wife; his son, the rightful heir, lives in daily peril; his countrymen are too wrapped up in their own affairs to get much involved; and many of his servants have fallen in with their abusive new masters. One of these, the goatish goatherd, Melanthios, insults the "beggar" aiming a vicious kick at his thigh. Odysseus' companion, the loyal swineherd, Eumaios, cries out in dismay, "let heaven bring him [Odysseus]/to rid the earth of these courtly ways/Melanthios picks up around the town—/all wine and wind! Bad shepherds ruin flocks!" (244-47).

In another epic poem, composed some fifteen centuries later, the Germanic warrior-king, Beowulf, deserted by all but one of his retainers, has slain his last dragon and himself succumbed in the struggle. Confronted with the hero's death and the absence of any heroic society to succeed him, "a grieving woman keened a dirge in Beowulf's memory, repeating again and again that she feared bad times were on the way, with bloodshed, terror, captivity and shame" (Ch. 43).

Some seven centuries later, Geoffrey Chaucer depicts, in his *Canterbury Tales*, an exemplary cleric in the country Parson. This man takes his vocation seriously. Aware of his exalted position and its attendant responsibilities, he explains his high personal standards and his sense of pastoral mission in a telling metaphor: "If gold rust, then what will iron do?" (Prologue).

Chaucer's countryman, John Milton, addresses the same issue a few centuries later, this time, however, deploring the clerical corruption of his day. In his poem, *Lycidas*, he denounces those who, unlike Chaucer's Parson, have lost their sense of spiritual mission:

Blind mouths! That scarce themselves know how to hold  
A sheep-hook, or have learned aught else the least  
That to the faithful herdsman's art belongs!

What each of these poets over this twenty-five hundred year span addresses is the fundamental social question of leadership. Whether king or cleric, the leader's role would seem to be critical to the well-being of the larger community. And for each of these poets—even for the republican Milton—those who lead do so sustained by societies essentially aristocratic; that is, by societies whose systems of hierarchy, rank and privilege were fundamental to the ordering of the community.

Ideally, I see aristocratic societies as those in which the heroic and the kingly merge, where the leaders are those who exemplify *aristos*—that is, “the best.” In such societies, rulers and their noble retainers are expected to manifest, *in their own persons*, the best that their societies have achieved, devised or learned in thought, manners, morality and taste. The very leisure and opportunity afforded by their freedom from concerns of money or social status make the acquisition of these manners and tastes possible. Theoretically, at least, aristocratic behavior should reflect and sustain a standard, should infect and inform the life of the entire populace from least to greatest. It was the violation of such function that led Eumaios to exclaim, “bad shepherds ruin flocks!” Certainly it was this aspect of aristocratic leadership as moral responsibility that provided some basis for the Christianization of Europe, for conversion to that creed whose spiritual leaders were seen as “*servi servorum Dei*” (servants of the servants of God)—an ideal that had a later secular counterpart in the code of chivalry, itself an aristocratic institution.

Homer gives us some idea of what this “best” was for his own society. Odysseus, the most resourceful of leaders, risks his life for his men and his society. His expedition to Troy, though to some degree this great individualist's indulgence in wanderlust and adventure, can also be seen as a defense of a social principle—the principle of hospitality violated by Paris' abduction of the Greek noblewoman, Helen. What is certain is that, within the context of this extraordinary mission, Odysseus comports himself as one of the “best” of the Greeks—as a true aristocrat. His entire sojourn, moreover, becomes a study in contrasts between his civilization and barbarism, between what he considered the best and the worst in human behavior, human institutions, human language and arts.

Consider some examples: In the *Iliad*, a grotesque and garrulous com-moner, Thersites, publicly (and with some truth) criticizes King Agamemnon's leadership. Odysseus is quick to chastise him—“You shall not lift up your mouth to argue with princes”—and strikes him sharply with his sceptre (II. 250). What is important in this scene is that Thersites' fellows, though they share his resentment of the King, praise the action taken by Odysseus; indeed, they value it beyond his more conspicuous military accomplishments: “Come now, Odysseus has done excellent things by the thousands, / bringing forward good counsels and ordering armed encoun-

ters;/but now this is far the *best thing* he has ever accomplished" (Italics mine). And what has he accomplished but to endorse, vividly, the imperative of leadership! We with our democratic sentiments might naturally condemn this action as arrogant and abusive. It is important for us, reading historically, to understand, however, that for the ordinary soldiers beholding the event, another principle—the principle of social function and value—is uppermost. Though Odysseus outstrips the King in almost everything but his wealth; though he has more than once saved the King from folly; though he is braver and more intelligent and certainly more congenial to the popular imagination, he acts, throughout the *Iliad*, to advance the principle of leadership over personal considerations. It is no anomaly, therefore, that in the hierarchy of his accomplishments, the men see this as his most significant public service, his "best" moment.

Odysseus, of course, brings exceptional and distinctive personal gifts to this service: a disciplined intelligence, a courageous heart, a tireless imagination. Aristocrat that he is, he uses these gifts both for his own recognition and the welfare of his people. Manifest always in the pitch of battle, they also express themselves in that most distinctive of human endowments, namely, language. The Trojan Antenor, recalling Odysseus on diplomatic mission, notes how his unassuming manner served merely to underscore his power as a speaker: "Resourceful Odysseus . . . would just stand and stare down, his eyes fixed on the ground beneath him,/nor would he gesture with the staff backward and forward, but hold it/clutched in front of him, like any man who knows nothing./Yes, you would call him a sullen man and a fool likewise./But when he let the great voice go from his chest, and words came/drifting down like the winter snow, then no other mortal man beside could stand up against Odysseus" (III. 216-223).

Readers of the *Odyssey* delight, and rightly so, in the hero's ingenuity as story-teller, in the quick wit of this man who could devise an escape from the Cyclop's cave. But I have always been especially taken by the ready and gracious speech in which the ship-wrecked adventurer, naked and clotted with seabrine, disarms the young girl who discovers him on the shore of Phaiacia. He indulges in no conventional assurances or avuncular flattery, but employs, rather, a tone of parental admiration and a singularly apt metaphor: "If you are one of earth's inhabitants,/how blest your father and your gentle mother,/blest all your kin. I know what happiness/must send the warm tears to their eyes, each time/they see their wondrous child go to the dancing." He has now established his credentials as one who perceives the virtues of family (and, hence, his status as a civilized man). Next, the metaphor—that one extra gesture that sets him above the merely competent diplomat. Before the young Nausicaa, in the first blush of her womanhood, he turns to poetry: "So fair, one time, I thought a young palm tree/at Delos near the altar of Apollo—/I had troops under me when I was there/

on the sea route that later brought me grief—/but that slim palm tree filled my heart with wonder:/ never came shoot from earth so beautiful./So now, my lady, I stand in awe so great,/I cannot take your knees” (VI. 150-168). How graceful, yet how judicious a speech! Armed with the most apt of metaphors, he touches her heart even as he lets her know that he has been a man of substance, command and breeding; of suffering and experience. Indeed, he presents himself as an aristocrat of the word, one who, in an awkward moment, employs the best of language.

Beyond these qualities of Odysseus, there abides one even more fundamental and, from an ideal point of view, aristocratic: an enduring sense of reverence; a respect for those forces and mysteries within and beyond us which wise men have learned it is folly to ignore. It is this quality which should keep the aristocrat, or any person, aware of his or her humanity, of those flaws and propensities and contradictions which make us at once so interesting and so unpredictable; of those twists of circumstance and nature that make our lives so perilous and exciting. And it is this quality above all that explains Odysseus’ safe return to Ithaka. His men, in a moment of avarice and envy, open the satchel of winds that blow them off course and into misery; later, unable to endure the pangs of hunger, they eat the forbidden cattle of the Sun-god, thus sealing their doom. In contrast, Odysseus, admittedly curious, nevertheless takes precautions when approaching the land of the treacherous Sirenes, and has himself lashed to the mast before listening to their haunting song. This man, who speaks to the gods as familiars, is also most obedient to them—and of his entire crew, he alone survives! In this obedience, and in his concern for his family and his people, he manifests something of that virtue the Romans were later to call “*pietas*.”

The classical exemplar of this virtue is Virgil’s Aeneas—the champion who places the destiny of Rome before all personal considerations, including love; who, in the person of his aged father and the ancient gods, bears his tradition and culture into the future; who fights for and ensures the perpetuation of those values that would make Rome pre-eminent among nations. In taking leave of his beloved Dido, we see something of this noble Trojan’s “*pietas*,” his subjection of personal gratification to a larger mission—in this case, the founding of Rome: “And good Aeneas, longing to ease her grief with comfort, to say something to turn her pain and hurt away, sighs often, his heart being moved by this great love, most deeply, And still—the gods give orders, he obeys them; he goes back to the fleet . . .” (IV). Now Odysseus, by way of contrast with Aeneas, might be called our literature’s proto-individualist. Nevertheless, it is some aspect of this quality of “*pietas*” in him that preserves his aristocratic privilege from pride and abuse, that directs it towards higher communal ends by keeping the hero ever mindful of his humanity. For example, when asked by King

Alcinoos to recount his adventures, he begs first to be allowed to eat, explaining, "there is no part of man more like dog than brazen Belly crying to be remembered . . . Belly must be filled." Though addressed by Athena as her near-equal in scheming, though the (unwilling) lover of the goddess, Calypso for seven years; though rescued by the direct intervention of the sea-deity, Ino, this hero longs for the simple comforts of mortal men and women. Concluding his remarks on hunger, he tells the King, "Rough years I've had; now may I see once more/my hall, my lands, my people before I die" (VII. 224-5).

This aristocratic poem, then, is far more than a simple tale of adventure or even a catechism of tribal virtues. It is indeed a paean to civilization. We are struck, for example, by the sharp contrast between the cannibalistic Lystragonians and the gracious household of King Menelaos, which we see through the dazed eyes of Odysseus' son, Telemachus, and his companion.

The young men gazed in joy before they entered  
 into a room with polished tubs to bathe.  
 Maidservants gave them baths, anointed them,  
 held out fresh tunics, cloaked them warm; and soon  
 they took tall thrones beside the son of Atreus.  
 Here a maid tipped out water for their hands  
 from a golden pitcher into a silver bowl,  
 and set a polished table near at hand;  
 the larder mistress with her tray of loaves  
 and savories came, dispensing all her best,  
 and then a carver heaped their platters high  
 with various meats, and put down cups of gold.

(IV. 49-60)

If what this passage describes seems to be aristocrats living the good life, it must also be seen as the embodiment of graciousness and courtesy, of those manners that give form and security to civilization. It is also an expression of a cultural striving for the "best," beginning with the humble larder mistress and including all the servants and craftsmen who represent, as surely as the king himself, that society's sense of its best self, of its highest humanity. There is also a paradox here that, in keeping with the focus of this paper, should give pause to citizens of less rigidly structured societies: the class distinctions implicit in the scene described, can beget, interestingly, a sense of freedom and a striving for excellence. The very definition of roles and stations, precluding as they do the distractions of ambition or the anxieties of uncertain identity or social standing, *liberate* individuals at all levels to dedicate themselves fully to the task at hand, to the pursuit of the 'best' in those endeavors proper to their social functions.

Though we may regret the limited possibilities such societies held out to

their citizens, especially those on the lower rungs, we cannot help but admire the grace and quality made possible by the aristocratic system. And, in keeping with our larger theme, we must ask how such quality in manners and craft might be achieved in a democracy where no such institution as aristocratic succession exists to help perpetuate standards and culture; where tradition is supplanted by the fluctuation of individual taste and preference, or, worse yet, by the machinations of those who influence standards primarily for reasons of profit and personal gain.

The *Odyssey* offers a further encomium to civilization in the contrast between the loutish Kyclopes and the citizens of Phaiacia. The former "neither plow/nor sow by hand, nor till the ground." They "have no muster and no meeting,/no consultation or old tribal ways,/but each one dwells in his own mountain cave/dealing out rough justice to wife and child,/indifferent to what others do" (IX. 163-171). It may be significant that Odysseus, as if tainted by their barbarity, is here least prudent himself, boastfully revealing his name to the monster he has just blinded—an action that brings upon him much of his later trouble. How different the *Kyklopes'* island from that of the Phaiacians: Approaching their palace, Odysseus beheld "the brazen threshold of the great courtyard./High rooms he saw ahead, airy and luminous/as though with lusters of the sun and moon,/bronze-paneled walls at several distances,/making a vista, with an azure molding/of lapis lazuli. The doors were golden. . . . and silver were sculpted hounds flanking the entrance way . . ./undying dogs that never could grow old" (VII. 79-94). Further on, he discovers maids in waiting, maids grinding corn or weaving at the loom. Outside, "he saw an orchard/closed by a pale—four spacious acres planted with trees in bloom . . .", winemakers at their work, vegetable gardens plotted for the seasons, and a sophisticated irrigation system. Having won the confidence of King Alcinoo and his Queen, Arete (whose name means "excellence"), Odysseus proceeds to enjoy the fruits of civilization. His host recalls his ancestry and recounts it proudly. His people exult in the beauty and grace of their work and play—in their dance and sport and, especially, in their seamanship (even their names revealing their functions). Homer does note their propensity for the surly and suspicious traits of insular folk, but it is their civilization that restrains their rougher impulses and reveals their distinctive humanity. And it is all this that Odysseus has fought to preserve for his own society, all this that he now struggles to restore to his own kingdom. In the hero's absence, civilization has suffered. The aristocrat now returns to restore "the best."

What we see in Homer we see in almost all epic literature: the hero is an aristocrat. Despite his idiosyncrasies or flaws, he represents "the best" (or, ideally, should do so) in the eyes of his people. The poets who give us Odysseus or Aeneas or Beowulf or Roland or Arthur give us leaders who are

extravagantly generous (a Germanic synonym for "king" was "ring-giver"), eager to fight for their people, mindful of tribal tradition, and respectful of the gods (who, in some sense, embody all the above). Their deeds and speeches are presented in poetry that exploits the highest resources of language. Its attendant imagery reflects a loving attention to all that circumscribes their lives, a respect for the finely wrought object, the well told tale, the well crafted tool or weapon or statue. They are aware that their arts transcend time and their own mortality ("dogs that could never grow old"). They delight in the lore of navigation or warfare or farming or hunting. Their poetry evokes the deepest human feelings, the loveliness or pathos of human events: funeral rites, marriage banquets, harvests, trials, religious rituals. Their settings often reflect the magnitude of nature and natural forces, the terror and exaltation of battle, the majesty of tribal function, the refinements of court life. In language, manners, moral, art and tradition, then, the ideal aristocratic hero embodied and was associated with all that was the best.

It is likely that aristocracies fell because they deserved to fall; because the human propensity for self-aggrandizement and security led them to evolve readily into, or even begin as, power cliques. It is likely they fell because they were infected with those abuses of power and position, those repressions of others' needs and talents, that eventually gave rise to the great populist revolutions. But in their finest hours, and in their abiding principles, aristocracies have sustained and promoted "the best." It is no historical accident that many of the greatest artistic, legal, philosophical, political, even religious developments have received impetus, direction or patronage from those institutions known as patrician, genteel, noble or aristocratic. It was the tyrant, Peisistratos, who elevated Greek drama to the level of State function; the Greek "litourgos" who, out of his wealth, provided theater for the general public. It was where social patterns had already been established, where tribal traditions and hierarchies ran deep, that the religion of universal brotherhood, Christianity, found its first seeding grounds. It was the patronage of kings and queens, of prelates and nobles, that supported the work of Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare; of the court schools; of Renaissance artists. Indeed, one cannot read Homer or the bardic poetry of Germanic, Celtic and other aristocratic traditions without noting the close relationship between artist and ruler, art and society. In such societies, then, it was the aristocracy—that body of people whose inherited privilege entailed exposure to the very best in training and tradition—whose charge it was to perpetuate their highest perceptions of human behavior and social order.

What history tells us, of course, is that aristocratic societies never realized their highest ideals nor long sustained their virtues without some taint, some decline from excellence; that, indeed, many so-called aristocra-

cies functioned to secure the most self-serving, repressive and brutal of leaders. Aristocratic succession does not ensure aristocratic behavior. The consequent unrest of distressed peoples and radical changes in western society sounded the death-knell for aristocracies. With the onset of broader trade and travel, the spread of education and literacy, the rise of science and technology, came the emergence of the middle class and, with it, of more representative and participatory forms of government—a process continuing into our own times. It is a process that leads to questions central to this paper: with the loss of aristocratic forms and traditions, whence shall our leaders arise? what will determine the values they endorse? what ends will their leadership serve? how will it shape and affect the moral quality of their societies? To put it more briefly, in the absence of a cultural and moral aristocracy, how can we ensure the highest cultural and moral standards in our public and private lives?

This is a good question for students of the Humanities. It is inherently historical, referring as it does to earlier political forms and cultures; it is speculative, insofar as it invites analysis based upon certain principles or assumptions about human nature; and it is eminently practical, for it has everything to do with our being citizens of the world's foremost democracy.

One of the most perceptive and prophetic students of our democracy was a nineteenth century French political philosopher who visited the young American republic in 1831 and subsequently published *Democracy in America*, a book hailed as one of the most insightful and sobering studies of democratic societies in general and of America in particular. Richard D. Heffner, in his Mentor edition preface to this work, calls Alexis deToqueville “a master prophet and political scientist [whose] generalizations concerning politics, religion, government, art, and even literature in democratic America are amazingly shrewd and perceptive in their way” (Introduction 16).

Toqueville, himself a member of the deposed aristocracy, was aware that the historical tide had turned irrevocably towards democracy. He was also aware that, despite its abuses, aristocracy had served as the vehicle of those traditions and standards necessary for sustained cultural identity and quality. Moreover, he was aware that, despite its grandiose rhetoric and exuberant optimism, democracy had its own inherent dangers generally unheeded by its advocates. Toqueville visited America shortly after the rise of Jacksonian democracy, a period in which “American political thought and institutions underwent the most profound transformations as political control was rapidly shifted from an older aristocracy of education, position and wealth to the ‘common man,’ the average American” (Heffner 10). This rise of the average citizen Toqueville attributes to what he considers the most distinctive feature of American society, namely, its “equality of



condition." But, in contrast to the prevailing perception of this condition as our chiefest blessing, his "classic study thoroughly rejects American's magical equation of equality with freedom, of democracy with liberty" (Heffner 11). Toqueville was among the first to point out that this very equality of condition was fraught with dangers of which Americans, and the world generally, were unaware. His argument, in its broadest terms, goes something like this:

When "equality" becomes the general and primary object of a people's striving, its most natural and immediate expression, given the absence of a previous tradition, is likely to take concrete, material forms—the tangible acquisitions and accomplishments of which I spoke in my introduction. The very notion dismisses the role of an aristocracy, in the absence of which, cultural symbols are likely to be quantitative rather than those more subtle qualitative expressions of taste, manners and bearing that were the charge of aristocratic traditions. For example, one would assert his or her value or distinction, not through language or refined speculative or historical sensibilities, nor through graceful behavior, nor even selfless and heroic gesture, but rather through accumulation of wealth, acquisition of goods, or tangible commercial and political achievement. Personal worth and identity, then, will tend to be assessed more in terms of such material and concrete norms than in those of a spiritual or aesthetic or philosophical nature. And the energies and motivations of such cultures are likely to be directed towards the pursuit of wealth and material accommodations. (Chaucer may have had something like this in mind when, in the *Canterbury Tales*, he depicts the guildsmen's wives assuming that their merely dressing like noblewomen will warrant the attendant courtesies.) Aristocratic societies, Toqueville reminds us, ensured perpetuation of traditions through perpetuation of family name and lands and history—a result primarily of that system known as "primogeniture" wherein the eldest child inherited virtually the entire family estate. In democracies, however, with their constant redistribution of wealth and estates, their volatile rises and falls in fortunes; with their consequent dependence upon individual and fluctuating values, preferences and tastes, the perpetuation of commonly esteemed standards and values is rendered most difficult. The average citizen, therefore, will tend to express his "equality of condition" not in manners or behavior or in refined sensibilities but in the only ways certain of common and immediate recognition among his or her peers: material acquisition ("her salary is in six figures"), tangible accomplishment ("they own three auto agencies") or ostensible power ("he sits on four corporate boards"). What all this implies is that the national ethic, generally, espouses *individual* over community goals; prefers exertion and action over reflection or sensibility; relegates intelligence and talent to predominantly practical ends; and, at all levels, endorses the agency of *wealth* either as motive, as vehicle, or as symbol of accomplishment.

In such an ethos, wealth and position become ends in themselves whose means are material and practical. This contrasts interestingly with the idealized aristocratic mode in which wealth and position are *conditions* instrumental to the pursuit of “the best.” This may explain the observation I once read that an aristocrat will sustain a loss of fortune with more grace and equanimity than one who has recently risen from poverty to wealth: for the former, the loss is incidental to purpose; for the latter, the very end of striving has been obliterated.

Toqueville notes another aspect of aristocratic privilege in the freedom from the very striving, the devotion to work, which makes possible democratic man’s “condition of equality.” “We do not find [in democratic societies], as amongst aristocratic people, one class which keeps in repose because it is well off; and another which does not venture to stir because it despairs of improving its condition. Everyone is in motion: some in quest of power, others of gain. In the midst of this universal tumult—this incessant conflict of jarring interests—this continual striving of men after fortune—where is that calm to be found which is necessary for the deeper combinations of the intellect?” (164). Reflecting upon the American obsession with work in the pursuit of the symbols of equality, Toqueville makes a particularly disturbing observation: “Nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests, in a word, so anti-poetic, as the life of a man in the United States” (181). If a clue to a society’s quality of life is the manner in which its citizens use their leisure, we might well wonder the extent to which our leisure uses enhance “the deeper combinations of the intellect.”

Despite such observations, this young philosopher did not write to condemn democracies. Convinced that they were the inevitable expression of history, he was concerned, rather, that western nations (including his own), exulting in slogans about freedom and equality, understand the true nature of this new system—its limits, its possibilities, its dangers. A passage in his introduction to *Democracy in America* reflects his own ambivalent sentiments, but also his commitment to this new order of human society:

On the one hand were wealth, strength and leisure, accompanied by the refinements of luxury, the elegance of taste, the pleasures of wit, and the cultivation of the arts; on the other were labor, clownishness and ignorance. But in the midst of this coarse and ignorant multitude it was not uncommon to meet with energetic passions, generous sentiments, profound religious convictions, and wild virtues. [And further on] I can conceive of a society in which all men would feel an equal love and respect for the laws of which they consider themselves as the authors; in which the authority of the government would be

respected as necessary, though not as divine; and in which the loyalty of the subject to the chief magistrate would not be a passion but a quiet and rational persuasion . . . The people, well acquainted with their own true interests, would understand that, in order to profit by the advantages of society, it is necessary to satisfy its requisitions. (131)

This passage brings us to the critical dilemmas of democracies: individual benefits, he points out, are linked to the "requisitions" of society. But this same individualism, when obsessed with "equality," begets a form of self-interest prone to ignore the communal requisitions. In a chapter entitled "Individualism in Democratic Countries," he says, "Selfishness blights the germ of all virtue: individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run, it attacks and destroys all others, and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness. . . . Individualism is of democratic origin, and it threatens to spread in the same ratio as equality of condition" (193).

He further asserts that this individualistic ethic will tend to isolate citizens in a democracy, and concludes, "not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart" (194). Toqueville's predictions here would seem to be born out in the modern American literature of alienation, in the words of popular songs that exclaim, "I did it *my* way" or "I want to be Me"; in such admiring phrases as "she's her own person" or "he's a self-made man"; and, sadly, in those lonely masses who huddle up to late-night radio talk shows for solace and community.

The consequences of this pursuit of equality are many. On the positive side are the realization of those talents and dreams which, in more rigid systems, might never have come to fruition; the development of free institutions for the greater dissemination of learning and culture; the respect for work and the dignity of the worker; and, especially, the sense of optimism and opportunity which is so distinctively American. This same passion, of course, can and does lead to petty envies (keeping up with the Joneses); to that leveling in taste and quality resulting from a consumer ethic which panders to the broadest possible market. Without the example of such standards as an aristocracy might endorse, Toqueville notes, "the general mediocrity of fortunes, the absence of superfluous wealth, the universal desire of comfort, and the constant efforts by which everyone attempts to procure it, make the taste for the useful predominant over the love of the beautiful in the heart of a man" (169). He concludes that the result of all this will be a decline in workmanship and design, a concern for

appearances over substance (the Ford that's made to *look* like a Rolls), and the constant pursuit of novelty.

The last, and greatest, danger of the pursuit of equality Toqueville sees taking form as "the omnipotence or despotism of the majority." Arguing against the romantic notion that men and women collectively represent more wisdom and virtue than they might individually, he says, "A majority taken collectively is only an individual, whose opinions, and frequently whose interests, are opposed to those of another individual who is styled a minority. If it be admitted that a man possessing absolute power . . . may misuse that power by wronging his adversaries, why should not a majority be liable to the same reproach. *Men do not change character by uniting with each other*" (italics mine) (114).

The acquisitive instinct, however, stimulated by the pursuit of equality, will tend to generate a self-serving majority. Ironically, Toqueville sees the very individuals whose interests it serves submitting their thinking and values to a majority tyranny in return for its protection. Identifying this as a loss of moral freedom within the very texture of political liberties, he warns, "If ever . . . institutions of America are destroyed, that event will be attributed to the omnipotence of the majority which may at some future time urge the minorities to desperation, and oblige them to have recourse to physical force. Anarchy, then, will be the result, but it will have been brought about by despotism" (121).

Reflective Americans are aware, of course, as was Toqueville, that respect for and preservation of our Constitution is the greatest safeguard against the rule of the mob, the tyranny of "King Numbers." Our concern in this essay, however, is not so much with the political implications of democratic rule but with those that are cultural and related to the quality of our lives. In this matter, a contemporary political philosopher, Claes Ryn, offers some provocative insights. In his study, *Democracy and the Ethical Life*, he explores the issue of majority rule in its ethical and qualitative implications.

An ethical theory of democracy will not be satisfied with stating . . . that democracy is a form of government in which public policy rests on the will of the great mass of the people as opposed to some privileged elite. While this principle has something to contribute to a theory of popular rule, it evades the question *whether democracy has to foster a certain quality of popular will*. (italics mine) (10)

Dr. Ryn here addresses the very question we have associated with the aristocratic charge, with the quality of national life. What he means here is that mere satisfaction of majority interests is not enough to guarantee that quality. He goes on to argue for something beyond mere system, beyond the

rule of numbers: "An ethical theory of democracy looks for more in the celebrated principle of majority rule than the idea that a numerically superior portion of a people is entitled to a greater influence over public decisions than a numerically inferior one." So restricted a perception of democracy, he argues, reduces it to a "mere form" with "no reference to the quality of will which democracy is supposed to articulate." And he concludes that what limits such perceptions is "their failure to relate popular government to man's transcendent moral destiny" (10, 11). But is not this transcendent consciousness the very charge traditionally ascribed to aristocracies? Is it not what Homer implicitly advocated in his comparison of barbarism to civilization? Is it not what the traditional hero struggled to defend—something more than power or security or wealth? Is it not a matter of identity, of cultural quality—a system of myth and manners, of history and heroes; of geography and craft; of arts and values and beliefs that set a society apart? Is it not the grounds, in the words of Dr. Bennett, of what is to be loved, to be fought for, to live and die for?

The question before us, then, is how, in a democracy, to perpetuate this sense of a "transcendent moral destiny." How, in other words, do we motivate our compatriots to live for something more than two cars in the garage, a full pantry, a comfortable retirement? Lacking any institution so committed by privilege or common expectation, where are we to turn? If, as Toqueville asserts, democratic citizens are primarily engrossed in pursuit of those practical and material symbols indicative of "equality," they are not likely to be concerned with "transcendent moral destiny." Or, rather, abstracting this dimension from the fabric of ordinary life, they are likely to reserve it for religion—but religion now seen as separate from the rest of life, as leisure or family or work are seen as separate aspects of our lives. Some have called this compartmentalization of modern life a form of cultural schizophrenia, a far remove from the life of the medieval Christian or the golden age Athenian for whom every act was, at once, religious, political, cultural, and personal. In any event, given our individualistic and departmentalized ethos, Dr. Ryn's question is pertinent: "How can moral values be promoted and maintained by a form of good based upon popular consent?" (13).

If the common denominator is material security, the common vehicle of equality material acquisition, then our symbols are likely to fall short of transcendent significance. Symbols, though, are critical to cultural identity and ought not to be relegated to chance or individual whim—or the impulse of a random majority. And again, we ask, who, in a democracy, should determine and sustain the symbols of our highest humanity? With each repetition, it seems, the question becomes more urgent and more difficult.

The answer may lie, interestingly enough, in that very individualism

which, as Toqueville points out, can so easily lead to destructive self-interest and alienation. I would like to argue, however, that the freedom and opportunity democracies make possible can also foster a productive and creative individualism—one that is both paradoxical and unceasingly vital. It is paradoxical because based upon the principle that *only in community*, that is, only in the context of *otherness*, can human individuals express their talents, realize their distinctive personal identities; it is a vital individualism in that, at every turn, the responsible citizen must maintain a delicate balance between self-expression, self-realization, and the demands of the larger human community. We have here a paradox and a tension not much in favor with a culture dedicated to individual rights, to personal gratification. A study of any serious literature, however, will show how individuality and social function are inseparable, and indeed, are basic to the classic and enduring human drama. As Allan Bloom says in *The Closing of the American Mind*, "Man is ambiguous. In the tightest communities, at least since the days of Odysseus, there is something in man that wants out and senses that his development is stunted by being a part of the whole rather than a whole itself. And in the freest and most independent situations, men long for unconditional attachments. The tension between freedom and attachment, and attempts to achieve the impossible union of the two, are the permanent condition of man" (113).

It is this same tension and paradox that Ryn refers to when he says that "social life must indeed be regarded as a *trans-subjective existence*" (italics mine) and concludes, "'private' and 'social' are inextricably related. Paradoxically, self-discovery is a communal, cultural process" (45). In other words, it is only within the context of otherness that the self can express its unique distinction, only within the frame of community that one's gifts and energies can be applied and assessed.

Think for a moment how our popular ethic flies in the face of this reality. Scholars of American literature like R. W. B. Lewis show how the isolate frontiersman (later become the lonesome cowboy and still later the unattached hero of detective and adventure fiction) has become a cultural type. In contrast with traditional champions who lived *for* their societies, note how the American hero generally moves *away* from society to the wilderness (Natty Bumppo, Grizzly Adams), how the surly private eye is always on the *outs* with the police, how the successful executive is a stranger in his own kitchen or bedroom.

Our relentless individualism, it would seem, has moved in the direction that Toqueville feared it might—towards apartness and alienation. And yet, as Ryn asserts, individuation is a cultural, communal process "in which the testimony of many . . . is tested against immediate experience" (45). That is to say, our particular and distinctive acts, when performed within a context of community, establish their value and significance against a

norm at once transcending individual whim or impulse while defining the individual agent. The classic expression of this reality is enacted in Homer's *Iliad* when the sulking hero, Achilles, discovers he can be no hero apart from service to his society. Following the death of his dearest friend, the result of his own refusal to fight, he laments, "I was no light of safety to Patroklos, nor to my other companions, who in their numbers went down before glorious Hecktör, but sit here beside my ships, a useless weight." Then, recognizing the distinctions and burdens of individual gifts, he adds, "I, who am such as no other of the bronze-armored Achaians in battle, though there are others also better in council. . . ." And he concludes, ruefully aware that one is distinguished as an individual precisely as he serves the larger community, "I stayed too long out of the fighting" (XVIII 118, *passim*).

What this study of one man's painful individual realization may suggest is that, in the absence of a traditional aristocracy, individuals—or groups of individuals—may have to be the source of "transcendent moral vision" for their societies; but individuals *not* seen as entities in pursuit of private, predominantly material goals, but as moral persons committed voluntarily to the common weal, to the pursuit of the best for their societies—and in so behaving, achieving a measure of self-realization and public recognition.

How, realistically, is this to be accomplished? We know we cannot invest this responsibility in government, for governments, as executive systems, tend to endorse efficiencies rather than qualities. In the critical matter of education, for example, governments are likely first to think of budgetary limitations before pedagogical ideals. Furthermore, governments, whether aristocratic or democratic, strive for self-perpetuation, generally accommodating other considerations to this end. Indeed, one of the functions of aristocracies, as Toqueville points out, was to temper the absolutist tendencies of monarchies. What entity, then, might function in a democracy to temper the leveling and quantitative propensities of centralized government? Religion, certainly, must work towards the highest spiritual ends; but the very pluralism which democracies safeguard limits the influence of religious teaching and practice amid a populace embracing various or no religious convictions. Education, likewise, in its purported and generalizing objectivity, eschews those more substantial positions which might encourage a distinctive public moral voice. Again, we come to the question: whence, in a democracy, are we to derive our leaders? What transcendent ends and values will direct and motivate them and those whom they lead?

For Toqueville and Ryn, the answer is similar: at the level of political structure, both see constitution and law as tempering the self-serving, individualistic impulse, and its collective counterpart, the tyrannical majority. More importantly, at the ethical and cultural level, both see the formation of voluntary public interest associations, distinct from govern-

ment, as our major safeguard against mob rule, against the leveling of tastes and values and standards, against the impersonalization of bureaucracy, against the dulling of the common moral sensibility.

The existence in America of so many societies with concerns that are both special and public attests to our recognition of this need: the ACLU, the Sierra Club, societies concerned with the aged and the handicapped; minority organizations, service clubs, associations promoting the arts and sciences, historical and cultural organizations, Common Cause, and countless more. They would seem to substantiate Ryn's conclusion that "the democratic ideal is not to do away with leaders, *but to make them as numerous as possible*" (italics mine) (201). Toqueville's resolution represents a slightly different emphasis. Near the end of his book, he says, "I firmly believe that an aristocracy cannot again be founded in the world; but I think that private citizens, by combining together, may constitute bodies of great wealth, influence and strength *corresponding to persons in an aristocracy* (italics mine). By this means, many of the greatest political advantages of an aristocracy would be obtained without its injustice or dangers. An association for political, commercial or manufacturing purposes, or even for those of science and literature, is a powerful and enlightened member of the community, which cannot be disposed of at pleasure, or oppressed without remonstrance; and which, by defending its own rights against the encroachments of the government, saves the common liberties of the country" (308).

Such organizations, of course, are made up of individuals who might find, in serving them, the agency of their own individuation and self-realization. In this context, however, self-realization takes place not in some isolate expression of "rugged individualism" or in some romantic remove from the society of one's fellows, but in the pursuit of the common weal, in the preservation of those standards and ideals which, formerly, were the charge of aristocracy. Such commitments, because they transcend individual interests, can be directed to what Ryn calls our "transcendent moral destiny" and to what Toqueville meant, I believe, by "the greatest political advantages of an aristocracy."

Allan Bloom, lamenting the reductionist proclivities of modern psychology and modern education (wherein data replaces wonder, anatomy replaces eros, and "values clarification" replaces moral sensibility) asserts, "Without the great revelations, epics and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside" (60). No government can, of itself or by mere legislation, rectify this decline. Only individuals, committed and in consort; only those multiple leaders whom democracies are uniquely designed to foster and develop, only such moral agents—free and informed by a vision of "the



best,"—can redeem democracies from the greed, mediocrity and violence that ever threatens freely structured societies.

We have, in this paper, taken democracy rather severely, perhaps even unfairly, to task. We have warned against those facile, self-serving slogans that would blind us to the grosser implications of "equality" and to the dangers of freedom uninformed by a transcendent moral vision. On balance, we must conclude, therefore, by asserting that it is also, and pre-eminently, in democracies that individual men and women, informed and morally committed, can most effectively sustain and perpetuate the values and traditions that make a society human—and in so doing, realize, as well, their fullest individuality.

If democracies have within them the seeds of anarchy and their own dissolutions, they are also uniquely disposed, when safeguarded by a constitution such as our own, to empower those natural and multiple leaders who can give to history and the world an aristocracy not of blood but of the spirit.

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