

Violent Embraces

Monastic Representations of the Old Testament

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Let us imagine ourselves entering the church of St. Lazare in Autun, Burgundy, famous for its last judgement in the tympanum over the entrance and for its capitals in the interior containing the most charming, romanesque scenes from the Old and New Testaments. All that is required in order to be able to appreciate this imagery is a bit of biblical information enabling us to recognise Adam and Eve exiled forever from paradise, the dreaming Joseph, the flight to Egypt, Abraham about to kill his son Isaac etc. And even if the visitor happens to be an art historian or a medievalist in the possession of full knowledge of the worlds of meaning contained by both the ensemble of the church's sculpture and the separate images, his first impression will not be dominated by his expertise. Momentarily, there is no more to the image than the historical scene as told in the Bible: the blessed and the damned coincide with the way they are portrayed in the Apocalypse, and Adam and Eve, the dreaming Joseph, the Holy Family on their way to Egypt and Abraham killing his son look somehow identical with their literary originals.

Let us next suppose our expert becoming a bit impatient, no longer able to suppress his learning. What would he like to tell us? From an art-historical point of view, he could teach us about the iconographical and iconological program of the sculpture, explaining both the intrinsic structure of the imagery and its wider meaning. Doing so, he approaches the realm of literary analysis, using, for instance, concepts such as allegory which were part and parcel of the medieval set of mind and may, therefore, help us to 'read' the picture. Interestingly, we rarely come across pictorial representations of that interpretative process itself. But it is worth mentioning one famous exception to this rule. In the churches

of St. Madeleine at Vézelay, also in Burgundy, and of St. Denis, near Paris, there is a capital called 'the mystical mill'. It represents two men at work at a mill, the one (commonly thought to be Moses) pouring grain into it, the other at the receiving end (commonly thought to be Paul) collecting the ground flour in a bag. The message is not difficult to understand: Paul or, for that matter, the New Testament in its entirety, is 'processing' the Old Testament through allegorization, thus bringing out the latter's true meaning. Now it cannot be denied that religious imagery in the Middle Ages is of a literary nature. The central position of the Bible in medieval culture makes it impossible to think otherwise. That being so, we face a paradox. Notwithstanding the unambiguously historical impression the biblical, Old Testament, scenes on the capitals make, once they have gone through the mystical mill, they seem to become scattered into a multiplicity of meaning. In fact, they look like falling victim to the whimsicality of the Christian-medieval interpreter. But, on the other hand, they belong to a well-organised system of exegesis which has been in place ever since the days of the New Testament itself and even before. Consequently, dealing with images as texts, or, embedding them in texts, inevitably narrows down the number of possible readings those texts can sustain. In one way or another they are bound to fall into place within a larger programmatic pattern. The incongruity of those two aspects, a certain arbitrariness on the one hand and a fixed pattern of explanation on the other, next raises the question as to the true meaning of the pictorial ensemble in the St. Lazare. Do those images convey to us what we naively think we see, or are they rather the source from which an unlimited proliferation of meaning springs?

The art historian Erwin Panofsky, for one, was a firm believer in the possibility of bridging the gap between image and meaning. Setting the image in a textual pattern, he explained its meaning as if analysing a text, or, indeed, as in the case of abbot Suger's description of his building concepts with regard to the new abbey church of St. Denis,¹ by looking for a text which might explain the image. There is no doubt that Panofsky's approach has con-

¹ E. Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*, second edition, Princeton 1979.

tributed greatly to our knowledge of the visual arts—he can rightly be considered one of the founders of the discipline of art history—, offering the art student a procedure how to ‘read’ the art-object. We would, however, be grossly mistaken if we took Panofsky’s way of reading the image too much to the letter. To illustrate this point, let us look for a moment at the fifteenth century Merode altar piece in the National Gallery, Prague.² On it we see the Virgin Mary in a room. When we have a closer look, the room turns out to be built and decorated in accordance with the description of the bridal room in the Song of Songs. So, Mary receives the angel Gabriel in an apartment which, besides being the wine-cellars into which the king introduces his bride, through its wooden roof, displays the distinct features of the lovers’ love nest: ‘Behold, thou are fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green. The beams of our house are of cedar, and our rafters are of fir’ (Cant. 1:16, 17). At the same time the wine cellars can be interpreted, in line with a long tradition, as the church, a tabernacle, a baptistery, an enclosed space with three windows in which the bride takes refuge and on whose door the bridegroom knocks: “Behold, he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice” (Cant. 2:9). Next we see the window in the enclosed room being open and through that opening the bridegroom enters announcing a new era: “For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone” (Cant. 2:11).³

Now it is not particularly difficult to offer an iconographical analysis of this picture. In it elements from the Old and New Testaments have merged. The identification of Mary with the bride from the Canticle was a familiar interpretation ever since Rupert of Deutz’ Commentary on the Song of Songs written in the twelfth century, and it is even older if one thinks of the close association between Mary and the Church which dates from the patristic period. However, once we have acquainted ourselves with the

² This piece (a replica) was shown at the exhibition ‘The Bride in the Enclosed Garden’, organized by the National Gallery in the Convent of St. Agnes of Bohemia on the occasion of the festival ‘The Old Testament in the Arts’, Prague, September 1995. See the catalogue of this exhibition, *The Bride in the Enclosed Garden*, Prague 1995, illustration XII.

³ Martin Zlatohlávek, *The Bride in the Enclosed Garden*, Prague 1995, p. 65 (Czech edition).

symbolism of the different features in the picture, our analysis seems to have come to an end. Moreover, it also appears to impose a limit on the possible number of notions and connotations implied in the picture. Its very familiarity prevents us, for instance, to make too much of the erotic connotation suggested by the Canticle setting. And even though, in other pictures, explicitly erotic symbolism (such as Christ fondling Mary's chin) unmistakably plays its role, the spectator, in the meantime instructed as to the way he is supposed to read such pictures, realises that he should not get over-excited about the erotic suggestion of these gestures and symbols. As a result of his literacy, Mary's chastity and virginity are so overwhelmingly present in his mind as to make him stick to the innocence of symbolism rather than to the raw physicality of the Old Testament poetry.

By warning against taking the reading of images too much to the letter I mean that establishing the cognitive structure of the image does not mean that all is said and done. Panofsky's 'spiritual' predecessor Aby Warburg, for one, drew attention to the emotional and psychological dimensions, stating that 'the iconographic image is stored, coded passion that is perpetuated in a kind of determining collective memory and very strongly conditions (or completely governs) the artist's depiction of a particular motif.'⁴ Admittedly, insofar as Warburg was convinced of the possibility of describing the entire fabric of images as a continuous process of minting and re-minting dynamic symbol, he foreshadowed the formalistic and cognitive optimism of Panofsky. I myself believe that this picture of a collective, historical continuity in place since the days of Antiquity (so cherished by the Warburg scholars), is in urgent need of correction. The very notion of 'stored and coded passion', on the condition that it be isolated from the supposed continuity of art history, may bring to the surface the shortcomings of a merely cognitive approach. Applying that notion to the Merode altar, we have to admit that our acquired knowledge of the piece does not account for the 'stored and coded passion' implied in the scene. How do we explain the element of subdued calm so characteristic of this genre

⁴ This is how Norman Cantor summarizes Warburg's view in his *Inventing The Middle Ages*, New York 1991, p. 173.

of pictures? How do we explain that the very chastity of the Virgin, although not erotic in itself, if seen in connection with the enclosed garden, with the sleeping room and the bridegroom knocking on the door, cannot be called non-erotic either? In other words, just explaining the symbolism does not suffice. In order fully to comprehend the picture, we should have a closer look at the way its passion is coded and stored, or, in literary terms, at the way the different biblical elements (The Song of Songs and the New Testament Virgin) are woven together into one integrated piece. It is this integrity rather than the knowledge of the different constitutive parts that evokes the (almost erotic) emotion in the spectator.

More is at stake here than just an extension of Panofsky's views. I do not feel competent enough to make authoritative statements about the visual arts. However, the point I want to make in this paper concerning textual aspects of pictures both in the arts and in texts themselves asks for a different approach from Panofsky's. In my view it is the textual image in its entirety that demands assessment: it tells a story and contains a narrative. Consequently, in the case of the Merode altar, we have to account for the pictorial ensemble as such, put in textual terms, for what is going on between the bride and groom, alias Christ and the Virgin, in their garden, in their room. That story or message may be made up of different biblical elements but it does not coincide with any of them nor can it be explained (away) by dissecting from it the different biblical parts or symbols. What I am saying here seems to be stating the obvious. But the implications of my thesis are far from simple. Explaining, for instance, the relationship between the Virgin and the Canticle setting in terms of symbolism is not enough. Let me try to make this clear by quoting an example from modern art. Barnett Newman, in his famous set of paintings called *The Stations of the Cross* (in the National Gallery of Art, Washington), added a fifteenth painting to the fourteen stations of the Cross calling it *Be II*.⁵ He painted a red line in the left

5 For an elaborate interpretation of this set of paintings, see R. Stecker, *The Stations of the Cross: lema sabachtani von Barnett Newman*, Bochum 1993. For a philosophical/hermeneutical discussion of Newman, see Renée van de Vall, *Een subliem gevoel van plaats. Een filosofische interpretatie van het werk van Barnett Newman*, Groningen 1994.

margin which, unlike the straight black line in the right margin, was so subtly touched by the painter's brush as to have become rough along the edge suggesting that it is on the brink of breaking out of its linearity without really 'falling out of line'. Thus it electrifies the white canvas, purposely left empty, between the red and black lines. Panofsky, for his part, considered this kind of painting barbarous. Quite unjustifiably so. An exchange of letters between the two men about what Panofsky wrongly assumed to be a lack of culture on Newman's part proves this point very clearly.⁶ Undoubtedly to Panofsky's surprise, Newman turns out to be a well educated man (he went to Yale etc.), thoroughly familiar with the world of learning from which Panofsky derived his artistic and intellectual criteria. The problem lies with Panofsky rather than Newman. It is Panofsky's overkill of expertise that prevents him from appreciating forms of art without an identifiably cognitive program. However, in my view Newman's *Stations of the Cross* is not unlike the Merode altar piece in that, with regard to the linearity of the painting, the lines drawing the Canticle room or the enclosed garden, create a simultaneousness of different elements, Old and New Testament ones, and thereby a special type of tension and suspense that cannot be explained away by identifying them separately. Just as a red and a black line are, in a sense, incompatible, but do tell a dramatic story through their configuration in Newman's painting, so Mary finding herself in a lovers' room with the invisible Christ knocking on the door or sitting in an enclosed garden, turns into something or someone new. In their new capacity, she and her bridegroom await description. Or are they perhaps ineffable, at least linguistically, miraculously both falling out of and staying in line like Newman's red line in the left margin of his *Be II*?

What I try to argue is that something non-referential is underlying whatever meaning of whatever image. Accordingly, images make sense, not only within a wider setting or, in a more reduced shape, within their own figurative bounds, but also, or, rather, primarily, if, Newman-like, reduced to their bare selves. It is my considered opinion that this law also obtains for medieval art. Of

⁶ See Beat Wyss, *Ein Druckfehler, Panofsky versus Newman: Verpasste Chancen eines Dialogs, Schriften des Warburgarchivs*, Köln 1993.

course, this statement asks for further argumentation and that is what I intend next to proceed to.

Let us then re-enter the church of St. Lazare. Once our eyes have become adjusted to the darkness and we have made our tour around the complex of biblical scenes on the capitals, it appears on our way out that we have overlooked a tiny little sculpture high up the column in the middle of the closed entrance door. It represents Jacob's fight with the angel. Because of its high and obscure position it is hardly visible, whilst its being at some distance from the main capitals in the nave of the church lends it a touch of loneliness. Admittedly, it is easy to sum up different iconographical meanings of the scene: it may be about the fight between vice and virtue, or, in line with Augustine, it could be about the tension between the church and the synagogue, Jacob's sinew representing the Jews, or, in a more psychological vein, we may be witnessing here the interior struggle of man with himself. But let us momentarily leave all those text-based interpretations aside and focus on the bare scene and setting. One is struck by the historical potential of it as if one is present at a re-enactment of the biblical story itself. The relative darkness of the spot out of reach for the beams of light shining through the windows evokes the night at the Jabbok whereas the near invisibility of the sculpture caused by the remoteness of the capital heightens the sense of Jacob's loneliness in his fight with the stranger, until dawn. If one muses on about further implications such as the unknown identity of the man (angel, Yahweh), one suddenly realises that this violent nocturnal struggle inside the church (on the column in the entrance door) materially supports the enormous—and more universally violent—drama of the last judgement in the tympanum outside. Of course, in the absence of any iconographical proof, these loose romantic impressions are wholly and subjectively mine. Unlike the mystical mill, Jacob's fight with the angels is not known iconographically to represent the reading and rumination of Scripture, let alone to support the Apocalypse.

This being the case, it is all the more surprising to find the scene of Jacob's fight with the angel in the preface to Rupert of Deutz's commentary on the Song of Songs. Now, obviously, this scene from Genesis has as little to do with the Song of Songs as my suggestion with regard to the church of St. Lazare that the

nocturnal fight between Jacob and the angel in fact supports the Last Judgement. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, those speculations, though perhaps not necessarily true, somehow imitate the medieval mind at work. This much can be said already: the very same author who is to be held responsible for Mary's appearance as the bride from the Song of Songs in the Merode altar piece, also contributed to the elements of violence, love and imagination that went into the making of that picture, the serenity of its surface notwithstanding. As for Rupert, he does indeed present his reading of the Canticum as a fight:

Whosoever fights with a man not unlike himself or battles with someone in a contest, needs bodily strength, just as an athlete if victorious rightly deserves the laurel. Even more, whosoever dares to fight with God and to bring violence to the kingdom of heaven, is in need of a different and better strength, i.e. a strength of mind. For of what use could bodily strength be here since 'God is spirit'. And just as he who adores God, ought to adore Him 'in spirit and truth', so he who fights Him, ought to fight no less in spirit and truth. We have a praiseworthy example of such a strength in our father Jacob about whom Scripture says: "And when Jacob had risen at dawn, after he had sent over the brook all that he had, he stayed behind alone. And behold, a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he said to him: 'Let me go, for the day breaketh.' He replied: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' And blessing him he said: 'If you have prevailed against God, how much more will you prevail against men!'" According to this example that man lets himself be overpowered by the other man as often as the investigating and faithful mind encircles the Word of God in order to extort out of it the blessing of the Holy Spirit. That blessing is the true and useful understanding of Scripture's secrets marked by God to be recognised by reason in order to prevent Scripture to be grasped in an easy way because jewels should not be given to the swine. And that man (c. q. God, Scripture) is not overcome the kind difficulty that would make him desist, until he be grasped, although the word of God somehow flees and orders that it be released. Therefore, o mistress, you who have given birth to God, true and immaculate mother of the Eternal Word and of the man Jesus, armed not with my own but with your merits I wish to fight with that man, that is, with the word of God, in order to extort my

commentary out of the Song of Songs which itself could as well be called [The Song of] the Incarnation, to the praise and glory of that same Lord, to the praise and glory of your blessing.⁷

The intertwinement of motifs in this passage is quite remarkable. First, it is full of traditional themes such as the conviction that the reading of Scripture should not be too simple an enterprise. The latter's indirectness and occasional obscurity only serve to incite the lazy and sinful mind to action in order to get hold of the secrets and mysteries hidden under the surface level. Further, the imagery in which this cliché is wrapped is extremely intricate and dense. As a result, it is quite impossible to disentangle dramatic notions such as violence, overtly present in Jacob's story and all pervasive in the entire passage, from the hermeneutical application of that scene to the act of reading. We can observe the author's efforts to grasp his God by reading and commenting on the Song of Songs, to be as strong and intense as Jacob's 'hold' of the angel / God and his demand for a blessing. Admittedly, this opening image of Rupert's commentary, though unique in its use of the Genesis scene as representing the interpretation of Scripture, has its roots in earlier writings such as Prudentius' *Psychomachia* in that a biblical scene functions as an allegory, thereby inevitably becoming 'programmatic'. Yet it is not entirely out of tune with our dreamlike musings in the church of St. Lazare about Jacob's lonely fight supporting the violence of the last judgement in the tympanum. This dreamlike quality manifests itself even more openly when Rupert proceeds to tell us about his earlier attempts to embark on this project. Sweet dreams he had and solitary visions about the nicest of subjects an author, in fact he himself, could write about: Mary giving birth to Christ as reflected in the Song of Songs. However, embarrassment with regard to those visions had prevented him from revealing his project to his fellow monks who, so he feared, might ridicule him like Joseph's brothers by saying: *Ecce somniator* ('look, there goes the dreamer' Genesis 37:19).

All things considered, we have good reason to assume that Rupert's use of Jacob's fight in the Introduction to his commen-

⁷ Rupertus Tuitiensis, *Commentaria in Canticum Canticorum*, (H. Haacke, ed.), *Corpus christianorum, continuatio medievalis* 26, Turnhout 1974, pp. 4, 5.

tary contains some passion. However, although not entirely traditional and routine-like, the way this passion is coded is relatively simple. All the more disappointingly, the reader is struck by the total lack of passion in the commentary proper. Once Rupert has established his code, i.e. the identification of the Canticle bride with the Virgin Mary, all hermeneutical energy and creativity seem to have gone. The entire exercise is about turning the two juxtaposed figures he is dealing with into one. No fight, no violence, no risk of getting wounded in the process. What here happens, is precisely the opposite of the tension between the red and black lines in Newman's painting. Whereas Newman defends the emptiness between the two lines, thus bringing out the dramatic potential in both the painting itself and the spectator, Rupert, in contrast, uninterruptedly goes on to fill in the details with the help of the simplest of exegetical programmes. It will be left to the visual arts to work more economically by leaving the Virgin in the enclosed garden without further comment, still in the possession of some coded passion.

Rupert was a Benedictine. That order was not, and had never been, known for its restraint in artistic and literary matters. It was on this issue that the Cistercian monk Bernard of Clairvaux took his Benedictine colleagues to task. As for him, he wanted no images in his churches, barrenness being the key word to both the imagination and the material way of life. Accordingly, the columns of his churches were not adorned with biblical scenes. Emptiness surrounded the monk, *incurvatus in se*, who was kept sufficiently busy restoring in himself the paradise lost. Paradoxically, the very same absence of programmatic imagery enabled him to consider this desert not only as the enclosed garden of the Canticle but also, in its very emptiness, as the playground of love-games at once peaceful and violent.

It is against this backdrop that we should read the following passage:

Fight with the angel lest you succumb (Genesis 32:24), for the kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force (Matthew 11:12). Or, is this not a fight: 'My beloved is mine, and I am his (Cant. 2:16)? He reveals his love; may he also experience yours. For the Lord your God tempts you in many things. Often he draws back from you and turns his face away, but not

in anger. When it happens it is a test rather than a rejection. The beloved has held you; may you hold your beloved too; hold him and act vigorously. Your sins have not overpowered him; may his punishments fail to overwhelm you and you will be blessed. But when will all this happen? When dawn comes, when the day is about to break when Jerusalem will have established praise on earth. It is written: behold, a man wrestled with Jacob until the morning. Make me hear your mercy in the morning, because I put my hope in you, o Lord. I shall not be silent, neither shall I give you silence until the morning, nor shall I fast. May you [reader, listener] truly be found worthy to pasture, but among the lilies. My beloved is mine and I am his; he is the one who pastures among the lilies (Cant. 2:16).⁸

At first glance this passage from the Sermon on the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, can be explained with the help of the literary equivalent of Panofsky's iconographical program. As a matter of course, Bernard both knew and applied the fourfold scheme of historical, allegorical, tropological and anagogical meaning. And in this passage also, vestiges of that technique are abundantly present. The allegorical / tropological meaning of the lovers' fight—more about that combination later—is evidently, in line with traditional exegesis, the struggle between vice and virtue, sin and grace. It would be a big mistake, though, to think of the Old Testament imagery as a mere illustration of that point. Here again, as in Rupert's preface, Jacob's fight, the (New Testament) violence applied to the kingdom of heaven and the Canticle, figure together. But how much more Newman-like does Bernard's treatment of this cluster look than Rupert's! How much more spatial dimensions are built into the scene so as to heighten the suspense of Old Testament drama! Rather than belonging to the series sculptures in the nave, Bernard's account of the Genesis scene resembles the remote and solitary men high up the column of the church of St. Lazare the real impact of whose fight is as yet unaccounted for. *Luctare cum angelo* / 'fight with the angel': out of the blue Bernard intersperses his present variations on the Canticle text 'My beloved is mine and I am his' with dark shades from the

⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo in nativitate beatae Virginis Mariae, S. Bernardi opera* V (J. Leclercq and H. Rochais, eds.), Roma 1968, p. 286.

Old Testament story. That text, or, rather, that fragment of text, can be compared to Newman's frame of red and black lines. *Via dolorosa*, violence is in the air, albeit contained within the framework of a story, or, rather, the suggestion of a story. In the same way that Newman pictures the red margin of *Be II* as on the brink of falling out of line and heading in the direction of the black line in the right margin so as to suggest containment as well as distancing, so Bernard mentions but three words from the Genesis story (*luctare cum angelo*) just to return to the actual quotation ('It is written: behold, a man wrestled with Jacob until the morning') later on (as through the white canvas) and finally to rejoin the Canticle cry: 'My beloved is mine and I am his'. Through that very device he has framed the lovers' embrace.

The point I want to emphasise is that in this passage, as indeed in Bernard's entire oeuvre, a schematic reading does not suffice. Even worse, it is precisely the pictorial nature of Bernard's writing that would seem to suffer from a restricted, programmatic interpretation. The power of the fragmented text *luctare cum angelo* is so strong that, first, it evokes in the reader's and listener's mind the dramatic setting of the entire Genesis story of Jacob's fight with the angel without that story being told in so many words—it is, however, the privilege of an image to narrate *pars pro toto*, in a contracted manner. Next it permeates its tropological (moral) amplification in order finally to come to rest in the telling of the story proper, right from the beginning: *Ecce vir luctabatur cum Jacob usque mane*.

There are further complications. Although in this particular passage Jacob's fight functions as a framework, the wider context is dominated by the Canticle text 'my beloved is mine and I am his'. So, in the battle scene that frame is, as it were, condensed into another scene, held together by another frame. But that Canticle verse was, in turn, also quoted only in part just to meet its other end after the occurrence of Jacob's fight: 'My beloved is mine and I am his: *he is the one who pastures among the lilies*'. And even that is not the end of the story, since Bernard completes this sequence of fragmented texts by adding the first part of the next verse: 'until the day break' (*donec aspiret dies* Cant. 2:17), thus hinting back at the Jacob scene and, in a sense, retelling it. How do we make sense of this kaleidoscopic ensemble of texts and images? In Bernard's sermon the scenes of (Can-

ticle) love and (Genesis) violence have merged to such a degree as to become almost indistinguishable. Further, like Newman's, Bernard's technique of condensation creates a large open space. That space consists of the whiteness of the lilies that represent the Virgin Mary. For it is she who is the main object of the sermon and who dominates it as the majestic opening line indicates: 'Heaven embraces the presence of the fertile Virgin, the earth worships her memory.' Now, unlike Rupert's tireless efforts to depict Mary as the bride from the Canticle and unlike Mary figuring as such on the Merode altar piece, Bernard's is a much more subtle and abstract approach. He generates the virginal power of Mary, by locating her in the centre of his piece in which the contours of different biblical persons can be discerned without, however, identifying her with any of them. In terms of the Canticle imagery, she is indeed no person at all. Rather she settles down in Bernard's discourse in a non-figurative way: *inter lilia* (amongst the lilies). Both the lovers and the combatants are supposed to pasture in her presence, that is, amongst the lilies, that is, embracing one another in the margin of the painting contracted into one single image of fighting and kissing. In turn, however, they are themselves embraced by the virginal power surrounding this violent embrace: the figureless white of the lilies: the inexpressible beauty of virginity.

So far we have been oscillating between the visual arts and literary imagination, explaining the one with the help of the other. Taking our point of departure in the subdued calm of the Merode altar piece with its recognisable features of both the Virgin and the Canticle setting, we gradually entered the world of Bernard's wild, if not violent imagination. This very wildness raises the question whether literary imagination may be at greater liberty to manipulate (biblical) imagery than its visual counterpart, restricted as the latter seems by the limitations of material form. I have no straight answer to this question. Of course, generally speaking, both in the literature and the arts of the later Middle Ages New Testament persons such as Jesus and Mary increasingly dominate the Old Testament setting in their 'historical' appearance. The Virgin's presence in the enclosed garden and the bridal room on the Merode altar as indeed in all late Medieval art testifies to this. Similarly, the Canticle bridegroom crying out to his bride

'You have wounded my heart with love' reveals himself increasingly in the shape of a blood stained Jesus. But one is tempted to say that this very personal presence limits the freedom of the artist's and, for that matter, the spectator's and reader's, imagination. This is not to deny that, under the surface of Mary's calm, the violence of love and sorrow does make itself felt. There is plenty of it, and even more overtly so in pictures of her wounded son Jesus. These, however, are no longer Newman-like images. All persons involved occupying their assigned place in the picture, there is no more empty space between the red and black lines as in Newman's Stations of the Cross, no more blanks as in Bernard's rendering of the Virgin's non-figurative presence amongst the lilies.

This being so, one question remains unanswered. If Bernard's text, in spite of its use of traditional exegetical schemes, is not basically structured along those lines, how do we analyse and describe its shape and dynamism? How are we to account for the way the whirlwind of (biblical) images—blowing into our face from all different directions: Genesis, the Canticle, the New Testament, you name it—cohere and together constitute a meaningful narrative?

In order to get some grip of this matter, let us once more return to the dark, nocturnal scene of the two fighting men in the church of St. Lazare. Entering the church we had overlooked it. But when we were struck by it on our way out, its impact was no less strong for all that. In a similar manner, this very same story emerges suddenly and briefly—as if in a split second—at the end of Bernard's Sermon on the Lord's Passion. That sermon starts out rather undramatically by relating the Lord's passion to the three virtues: patience, humility and love. Towards the end, however, the course of narrative events takes a dramatic turn. Praising the hypothetical man / monk who is able to incorporate Christ's virtues into his own life to the point of carrying his own dead body—dead because of sin—towards the grave, slowly walking because of its weight, Bernard suddenly sings a lighter tune. It sounds like the end of Mahler's fourth symphony which, as unexpectedly as the last movement of Bernard's sermon, has the soprano sing a celestial song:

We taste the joys of heaven / and care not for earthly life [Wir geniessen die himmlischen Freuden, D'rum tun wir das Irdischen

meiden...] ... There's no music, no music on earth, which can be compared with ours [Kein' Musik ist ja nicht auf Erden, Die uns'rer verglichen kann werden...]

Or, to put it in Bernard's words:

If we walk under that burden, how do you think we will run [notice: a Canticle theme] after we have put that burden down? How will we fly? Surely, on the wings of the wind. The Lord Jesus embraced us through our labour and sorrow. Let us, in turn, adhere to him in mutual embraces through justice, that is, through his very own justice, by directing our actions to justice, by bearing suffering because of justice. And let us say with the bride: 'I held him, and would not let him go' (Cant. 3:4). Let us also say with the Patriarch: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' What then is there left except the blessing? What else may one expect after the embrace except the kiss? If I thus adhere to God, what could prevent me from exclaiming: 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth'?⁹

Clearly, there is no way of explaining this passage in a Panofsky-like manner. Admittedly, this is my opinion and it goes against the development of this theme in the art of the later Middle Ages. As a matter of fact, we find the picture of Christ being wounded by love in a stained glass of the cruciform corridor of the Cistercian monastery in Wienhausen in Northern Germany (around 1320–1330). We can see how the crucifixion complements the figures of the virtues with inscriptions (*iustitia, pax, misericordia, veritas*). The scene in the middle of the picture of the piercing of Christ's heart with love shows Christ embracing Love with his wounded right hand, and Love holding him with her right hand. The iconographical message is clear: 'Christ is crucified by the virtues whilst love personified wounds his heart, as indicated in the Canticle; "you have wounded my heart with love."¹⁰

Yet Bernard speaks a different language and offers, by consequence, a different picture. It does indeed contain coded pas-

⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Feria IV Hebdomadae Sanctae, De Passione Domini, Sancti Bernardi opera* V (J. Leclercq and H. Rochais eds.), Roma 1968, pp. 66, 67.

¹⁰ Martin Zlatohlávek, *The Bride in the Enclosed Garden*, Prague 1995, p. 60 (Czech edition).

sion. That code is, however, much more Newman-like, much less programmatic, much wilder, much more barbarous. His images are welded together, seemingly at random, into a multilayered drama rather than being presented in a set order of either a narrative or a pictorial nature. First there is the lightness of the Song of Songs by which this passage is framed: the running (*currere*) referring to the running of the girls to the bedroom of the bride, the wings of the wind, and, finally, the kiss. Then, right in the middle of the Canticle playfulness, more archaic Old Testament imagery emerges. In one and the same breath the bride crying out 'I held him, and I would not let him go' is overlaid by the image of the struggling Patriarch: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' Thus darkness, struggle, wounds and blood—these being the elements that constitute the theme of the sermon on the Lord's passion—are reintroduced in the shape of a nocturnal embrace. This is more than programmatic (interpretation of) painting, sculpture or, for that matter, schematic exegesis can achieve. The very fact that this nocturnal scene cannot be disentangled from the blessing and the kiss it elicits from the unknown bridegroom turns the entire scene into one violent embrace. Included in the Canticle verses 'You have wounded my heart with love' and 'I held him, and I would not let him go' Jacob's cry somehow brings back the raw physicality of Old Testament poetry. Ultimately, it is the lightness of Bernard's text that offers us a glimpse into the heart of darkness.