Cross to Crucifix: Iconography of the Passion at Perrecy-les-Forges and Strasbourg

Kathryn E. Wildgen

The Gothic era -- roughly 1144 to 1500 -- saw a dramatic change in iconography, the manner in which the divine was portrayed. C. Stephen Jaeger describes the situation succinctly: "The move from hieratic stiffness to realism and plasticity that occurs in sculpture in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries poses a problem for the historian of art and of ideas. Whose hieratic rigidity of thought and feeling produced the stiffness of early Gothic? And whose humanism created the supple nuanced humanity of high Gothic? When a certain conception of the human figure is expressed in stone, where does it come from?"[1] The twelfth century was an especially important moment in western man's coming to consciousness, an event in the life of mankind as a whole as well as in the life of each individual according to Carl Jung.[2] Jung saw Christ as "the quintessence of the Self, for Western people at any rate."[3] According to Elaine Pagels, Jung read Valentinus' creation myth as "a mythical account of the origin of human consciousness," symbolized by a longing for

---

[1] C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950-1200* (Philadelphia, 1994), p. 331. Jaeger professes to know of no explanation for this phenomenon other than the one suggested by Willibald Sauerländer, who connects this change chronologically with Nicholas of Verdun (1180). But neither Jaeger nor Sauerländer can pinpoint the origins of, or inspiration for, Nicholas' style.

[2] C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections.* Trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York, 1989), p. 340.

[3] Gerhard Wehr, *Jung*: *A Biography*. Trans. David M. Weeks (Boston, 1988), p. 258.

light.[4] In the Introduction of William Anderson's *Rise of the Gothic,* the author cites the role of the Jungian collective unconscious in the creation of Gothic art at the time it made its first appearance.[5] Ernst Gombrich found parallels to the "emancipated" characteristic of the Gothic in ancient Greek art, encouraged by similar developments in literature.[6] In his discussion of high Gothic realism, Jaeger concentrates on the Wise and Foolish Virgins of Notre-Dame of Strasbourg, but the same could be said of representations of Mary and of the Passion.

In an article entitled "Veneration of the Cross," Patrick Regan, OSB writes that "Saint John's presentation of the crucifixion [is] the revelation of divine glory" whereas the Synoptics emphasize the suffering and death of Jesus.[7] Neil Forsyth considers the Gospel of John to be a "myth of a cosmic redeemer descending to save the world from the darkness into which it has fallen" and sees the Crucifixion as an ultimately triumphant episode in a cosmic struggle.[8] As a result of Saint Helena's finding of the wood of Christ's cross, veneration of the instrument of his death as a component of the liturgy of Good Friday originated in the eastern Church at Jerusalem and did not become part of the Roman

---

[4] Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*. (New York, 1979), p. 133.

[5] William Anderson, *The Rise of the Gothic* (New York, 1988), p. 7.

[6] E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*: *A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton, 1956), p. 130.

[7] Patrick Regan, OSB. "Veneration of the Cross," *Worship* 52, 1978, p. 6.

[8] Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton, 1989), p. 316.

liturgy until the seventh century.[9] In his discussion of the rise of individualism Colin Morris points out that the crucifix underwent a transformation in ca. 1000 changing from an assertion and celebration of the victory Christ won to a depiction of a dying man.[10] The twelfth century also "invented" the elevation of the host at Mass, an image and evocation of Christ on the cross.[11] At Le Paraclet, the abbey founded by Peter Abelard and then turned over to the nuns whose abbess was his wife Heloise, Cistercian-style "spirituality of refusal" was the rule: only silver used for chalices; and on the altar a simple cross of wood on which Abelard allowed, with some misgiving, a painted image of Christ.[12] Abelard was particularly instrumental in bringing Christ's suffering to the attention of Christendom. M. T. Clanchy asserts that Abelard and his colleagues were forced to indulge in psychology because analyzing language and the meanings of words involved the workings of the mind; in this, Clanchy points out, they looked back to Plato and forward to Jung.[13] In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, probably because of Cluny's immense influence, Frankish and Germanic practices were "given fresh expression in the Roman Pontifical of the Twelfth Century."[14] Regan demonstrates that veneration of the *cross* became, for various reasons, veneration of the *crucifix*, which is

---

9 Regan, p. 2.

10 Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* (Toronto, 1991), p. 139.

11 Ibid., p. 142.

12 Raymond Oursel, *Évocation de la chrétienté romane* (La Pierre-qui-vire, 1994), p. 353.

13 M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Cambridge MA, 1999), p. 105.

14 Regan, p. 8.

actually a subversion of the meaning and the spirit of the original ancient rite. The core of his thesis—and a foundation of this text—is as follows:

> This shift in devotion from the wood of the cross itself to a naturalistic representation of the crucified Christ corresponds to the collapse of the symbolic universe of the Middle Ages and the advent of secular, humanistic thought which would eventually issue in the Renaissance.[15]

It is noteworthy that the same dynamic was at work in the transformation of the Romanesque *Sedes Sapientiae* into the Gothic Madonna and Child, an image of mother/child bonding. As Raymond Oursel puts it, during the Romanesque period, the "Queen of Heaven" held her hands away from the body of the child she had borne in her womb as if she dared not caress or even touch him, an attitude which reflects upon the Romanesque appreciation of the virtue of deference.[16] Hans Belting refers to the "stiff and haughty" Romanesque Madonna, replaced by the "emotive, approachable image of the Virgin" and the image of the "tender embrace of Mother and Child" in the thirteenth-century West.[17]

As is true of all "shifts," devotional or otherwise, this one has a complex history, one that is, in the parlance of psychotherapy, overdetermined. It is also the case that any discussion of "change" must be nuanced with a realization that generalizations are usually flawed,

---

[15] Ibid.

[16] René Laurentin and Raymond Oursel, *Vierges romanes: les vierges assises* (La Pierre-qui-vire, 1988), p. 100.

[17] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1994), p. 23.

including, perhaps, this one. To the oft-expressed notion that Gothic art tends towards realism, Jurgis Baltrušaitis would remind us that "the Gothic Middle Ages do not evolve exclusively towards order, realism, the Latin West. The period also has its surreal side, its artificial and exotic aspects. A more tormented era, inhabited by monsters and fabulous creatures, is reconstituted and developed within the evangelical and humanistic Middle Ages."[18] The key word here is "surreal," a term much in vogue in the early twentieth century when the Surrealist movement posited the superiority of dreams over consciousness as a means of finding the super-real, or surreal, truth about one's world and one's self.

The *Didascalicon* of Hugh of Saint-Victor "appeared at a time when centers of education had moved from the predominantly rural monasteries to the cathedral schools of growing cities and communes; when education in the new centers was becoming specialized, hence unbalanced, according to the limited enthusiasms or capacities of particular masters; and when, in response to the flowering of secular life, learning itself was making secularist adaptations."[19] The year 1140 seems of particular importance in this issue; around that time "a page is turned. In the civilization of the book the monastic page is closed and the scholastic page opens."[20] Jerome Taylor suggests 1140 or 1141 as the year of Hugh of St. Victor's death. He furthermore considers significant "Hugh's early contact with the canonical movement,

---

[18] Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Le Moyen Âge fantastique: Antiquités et exotismes dans l'art gothique.* (Paris, 1993), p. 293; translation mine.

[19] Jerome Taylor, trans. and ed., *The* Didascalicon *of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts* (New York, 1961), p. 379.

[20] Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's* Didascalicon (Chicago, 1993), p. 81.

which sought to make available to men living in the world the life of primitive Christian perfection…formerly confined to the monasteries" and Hugh's "interest in a view of 'philosophy'…directed to all men…"[21] 1140 is important in the history of European religious architecture as a moment in the dawn of the *opus francigenum*, work in the French style as defined and determined by Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis. It was on 9 June 1140 that the westwork at Saint-Denis was dedicated. In *Évocation de la chrétienté romane* Raymond Oursel writes of the "conflict" of 1140 in terms of the differences that characterize two important edifices whose construction was simultaneous: the aforementioned abbey church of Saint-Denis and the abbey church of Fontenay. He evokes "two vessels, two mindsets, two approaches to God symbolized by their elevations."[22]

Contemporaneous with the opening of the scholastic page of text is the exodus of images from the cloister to the front gates. There was a profound change in the very nature of those images from hermetic, bizarre—and sometimes disturbing—signs to the familiar, friendly, recognizable faces of Mary, the Apostles and various local saints, each with his/her attribute displayed as a name tag, welcoming, urging folks into the sanctuary. Almost overnight, it seems, images moved outdoors and became much easier to behold because they were larger and closer to the viewer, attractive, and more comprehensible. This is a gross generalization because there is, in Gothic art, a profusion of images which are weird; Jurgis Baltrušaitis has catalogued a wealth of them in *Le Moyen Âge fantastique* and affirms the Orient as their point of origin. But, with the exception of scenes of the Last Judgment, the element of vicious attack, of intense physical pain, of punishment is not nearly so prevalent in Gothic religious art as in Romanesque. Romanesque

---

[21] Taylor, p. 381.

[22] Oursel, p. 378.

basilicas, with the notable exception of Saint-Lazarus at Autun, are usually abbatial buildings while the major Gothic monuments are cathedrals; the monastic page gave way to the scholastic text in more ways than one. Romanesque art was by and large created for monks; and if the general public worshiping at a monastic church did not understand or appreciate the images hovering at the summits of columns, the monks did, and that was what mattered. People contributed to abbeys for the saints buried or enshrined there and for the miracles worked at their behest, not for aesthetic gratification. But with the growth of towns and of civic pride the faithful desired a beautiful place to call their own and some influence in the decoration. The guild and trade windows at Chartres make that clear. Saint-Lazarus and Saint-Denis are, perhaps, poor examples to choose to illustrate my point; the two churches are virtually of the same generation and are the opposite of the usual case: Saint-Lazarus is a Romanesque basilica-turned-cathedral, never an abbatial building, and Saint-Denis was constructed as an abbey church in the Gothic style. The change from the monastic page of stone to the secular is best illustrated by two churches situated at the architectural extremes of the Middle Ages: the abbey church of Saint Peter and Saint Benedict at Perrecy-les-Forges in Burgundy and the cathedral of Notre Dame of Strasbourg.

The crucifix during the Romanesque period is relatively rare in monumental sculpture; when Jesus' death is depicted, there is a standard set of characteristics present. Foremost is the utter lack of concern on the part of the artist with realistic depiction of a suffering man. The general serenity of Jesus' face, his eyes often open with no trace of suffering, no wounds and no blood even in paintings are standard features of the crucifixes of this era. The crown of thorns is either absent or replaced with a kingly crown. He is frequently fully clothed, his feet splayed in ballet's first position rather than nailed to the beam. His hair is in the traditional "Jesus" style, parted down the middle and tucked behind

his ears. His feet are not crossed one over the other, Saint Helena notwithstanding, and there is generally no “INRI” nailed above his head. His pose is hieratic as befits one supremely confident of his triumph. The Jesus of the “Descent from the Cross” at Silos, for instance, could be asleep so serene and peaceful is his face. In short, the Romanesque crucified Jesus is Johannine, confident of his mission and its ultimate success.

The church at Perrecy-les-Forges is a good place to start for several reasons: portions of the sculpted lintel are relatively well preserved and accessible to the viewer; and the work is among the earliest Romanesque still remaining whose iconographic programme can be discerned. Perrecy belonged to Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire at Fleury, although it was a distant priory.[23] At Fleury the Galilee or narthex/porch played an important “role of symbolic burial” in the liturgy of Holy Week.[24] At Perrecy the Passion is the theme of the lintel, including the capitals on either side of it, from the sleep of the Apostles at Gethsemane to the presentation of Jesus to Pontius Pilate. There is no depiction of Christ’s crucifixion or indeed any of his physical suffering: no beating, no scourging, no crown of thorns, no carrying of the cross. The dominant theme is that of Jesus’ moral pain occasioned by one apostolic failing after another. One of the titular saints at Perrecy is Saint Peter, whose state of mind during the whole sequence of events surrounding Jesus’ death is a principal theme of this iconographic scheme. The programme follows most closely the Gospel of Luke, which alone mentions several aspects of Peter’s relationship with Jesus at the end of Christ’s life. Peter’s first appearance at Perrecy is during the scene at Gethsemane in which he alone of the apostles is turning to look directly at Jesus, who is depicted at the moment

---

[23] Éliane Vergnolle, *Saint Benoît-sur-Loire et la sculpture du XIe siècle* (Paris, 1985), p. 12.

[24] Ibid., p. 36.

of saying: "Could you not watch one hour with me?" Jesus is bracketed by Peter and the Consoling Angel, who is situated around the corner and out of Peter's line of vision. While all three Synoptics mention Peter, Luke alone mentions the presence of the angel. Luke alone relates Jesus' address to Peter at the Last Supper regarding his particular responsibility as leader of the other apostles: "'Simon, Simon! Look, Satan has got his wish to sift you all like wheat; but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers.'"[25] Jesus is the fulcrum of this scene in which the apostles and the angel are depicted at right angles to one another and is an integral part of both portions. Gethsemane and the Consoling Angel are sculpted on a capital or extension which leads directly to the continued narrative of the lintel. We see Peter again, brilliantly imaged in an iconographically charged carving on the lintel. He is placed slightly off-center, to the viewer's right, the arena of the damned in Last Judgment scenes. His body is much larger than those of other personages in this Passion Play, even that of Jesus. But it is the torsion of Peter's body that is so striking. In this one image is presented all of Peter's self-doubt, all of his shame at fulfilling Jesus' prophecy of triple denial, which had followed directly Christ's aforementioned prayers for Simon that his faith not fail. It is the imaged version of the words: "He went out and wept bitterly," mentioned in all three Synoptics, not in John, but especially of the words in Luke alone: "and the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter…"[26] He carries a sword because Jesus, again solely in Luke, had told the apostles to sell their

---

[25] Luke 22.32.

[26] Luke 22.61.

cloaks if necessary and buy weapons.[27] Peter's face is turned back in the direction of his previous image so he is essentially gazing at himself in both instances. At Gethsemane he looks in the future to his denial; at the dwelling of the Chief Priests he faces the past as he remembers his oath never to desert his Master, which he has just done three times. Finally Christ is facing Pilate as he was facing Peter in the Garden. In between we see—with some difficulty because of the condition of the stone—the Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus, Christ before the High Priest, Peter's remorse and the movement towards Pilate's palace. And there this brief portion of the gospel story ends.

The difference between the Passion at Perrecy and that at Strasbourg is dramatic, and one may legitimately wonder what caused such a change in style and content of Passion iconography. I believe that the following observations are useful in suggesting a possible response to this query. During the course of the twelfth century more and more emphasis was placed on Jesus' humanity, possibly in reaction to various heresies which denied the human nature of Christ. In the thirteenth century extremely precious relics of the Passion were brought to Paris and placed in the hands of King Louis IX of France,

[27] Luke 22.36. In an unpublished dissertation "The Romanesque Architecture and Sculpture at Perrecy-les-Forges" (Univ. of Michigan, 1994), Masuyo Tokita Darling asserts that Saint Peter is depicted at the moment of cutting off Malchus' ear, a thoroughly plausible suggestion. This event is also related by Luke. Darling also finds problematic the identification of the character most critics of Perrecy identify as Pontius Pilate. Darling identifies the lintel and extensions scenes as follows: the Gethsemane, the Betrayal, the Arrest of Christ, Peter cutting the Ear of Malchus, Christ before an unidentified person on the lintel, and another unidentified scene on the right extension, p. 178.

an event which would have made the laity all the more conscious of the suffering involved in the scheme of salvation. Furthermore, while scholars of scripture may know by heart which evangelist described what, most Christians—even those who read the Bible frequently—conflate the events related in the New Testament into one big story and have no idea in whose gospel certain events are described. Another type of conflation involves Lazarus. There are two people so named in the New Testament: the wretched beggar in the parable of the Wicked Rich Man, a fictional character, and Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, whom Jesus raised from the dead. The historical Lazarus was confused with the beggar, who suffered from a skin disease, and thus the former became the patron saint of lepers. Confusion or blending of the gospels was also the case in the Middle Ages, even more so than in today's generally literate society. This conflation is a rather apt description of the *Diatessaron*, a continuous gospel narrative or harmonization of the four canonical gospels, composed in the second century by the Syrian Tatian, a convert and disciple of Justin Martyr. Tatian's work may be a Syriac translation of a much older work. According to Matthieu Collin, this tradition of harmonization of the four gospels served as catechetical basis for the laity in the Middle Ages.[28] And the spirit of the *Diatessaron* seems to be the guiding principle on the west central tympanum at Notre-Dame de Strasbourg. As much narration as possible is crammed into the space allotted: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the Betrayal and Arrest including Peter's assault on Malchus' ear and Jesus' healing of same, insults to Jesus at the home of the high priest, the Scourging, the Crowning with Thorns, the Carrying of the Cross, the Crucifixion in the center, the burial with a suggestion of the Resurrection (the sleeping

[28] Dom Angelico Surchamp and Frère Matthieu Collin, *Évangile roman* (La Pierre-qui-vire, 1999), p. 11.

soldier), the hanging of Judas, Jesus' descent into Hell, his appearance to Mary Magdalene, his post-resurrectional appearance to the apostles, and, finally, his Ascension. Moreover events are depicted there which do not show up in any gospel, i.e. Christ's descent into Hell; and legends, that of Christ's cross resting above Adam's grave, are given equal footing with historical fact. In short, the theology of Strasbourg is popular, that of Perrecy, monastic. The emphasis at Perrecy is on the wounds inflicted on Jesus by those who loved him, not by those outside the apostolic circle. At Strasbourg the only apostles depicted as somehow lacking are, of course, Judas (twice) and Thomas. The real villains are the Jews, depicted in crass anti-semitic stereotype. The iconography at Perrecy is sparse and simple, and because of that, intensely moving.

The principal physical difference between the sculpture at Perrecy and that at Strasbourg is the difference between relief images and statues in the round. This process whereby the human figure emerges fully from a chunk of stone is a peculiarly apt visual representation of the process known in Jungian psychology as individuation. Individuation involves becoming fully the person one is meant to be, a process that is life-long and begins at birth. First an infant must realize that s/he is separate from the mother and continue in this discovery until full autonomy is achieved. The movement from scratching an image on stone, to low-relief, then high relief, carving, to sculpture in the round mirrors the individuation process extraordinarily well. Jung's own process of individuation took place in a tower he constructed at Bollingen and surrounded with stone carvings, thus functioning as both architect and stonecarver. His fascination with stone was lifelong and intense; the stone carvings around the tower are intended to be manifestations of his inner being. Jung's distinction between the inner- and outer man may be visually illustrated by comparing a human figure in relief with a fully emancipated statue in the round. An

answer may be suggested to the questions posed by C. Stephen Jaeger and cited in the opening paragraph of this study by recalling that the twelfth century is the century of the discovery of the individual and carving human images more realistically and individualistically is a logical result of this discovery. As Jaeger points out in his discussion of the Wise and Foolish Virgins at Strasbourg, each woman has a unique face and her own style of clothing.

In her dissertation cited above, Masuyo Darling notes the Perrecy lintel sculptor's "forward-looking style and…innovative choice of Passion scenes."[29] She also recognizes the "absence of timidity in his execution" and "suggests that he was not copying a readily usable model for the Passion iconography."[30] Finally she points out that "the iconography was an important requisite which the sculptor must have understood within his capacity and translated into visual form.…the visual perception of the viewer would be a reaction to the expressive power of the forms themselves, even before he or she fully understood the layered meanings of iconographic messages."[31] These remarks describe and explain the irresistible attraction Perrecy holds for me.

The developing psychology of the individual laid down in the twelfth century is the foundation for this change in the manner of imaging the human figure. Why this occurred in the twelfth century and what happened to encourage this interest are questions that will have to be answered elsewhere and by another author.

---

[29] Darling, p. 150.

[30] Ibid., p. 179.

[31] Ibid., p. 152.