



Conrad Rudolph

*Violence and Daily Life: Reading, Art, and Polemics in the Cîteaux Moralia in Job* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997).

Abstract

The illuminated copy of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job* made at the famous reform monastery of Cîteaux in Burgundy around 1111 is one of the most familiar but least understood illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages. It is so well-known because of its striking illuminations of seemingly gratuitous violence and daily life. It is poorly understood because these have largely been taken at face value. This lack of comprehension has come about because of an unawareness on the art theoretical level of exactly how spirituality and politics operate in the artistic process in this particular manuscript and how this specific form of spirituality legitimized a very intimate and, at first glance, undisciplined attitude on the part of the artist toward his subject.

A copy of one of the most widespread and influential texts of medieval monastic culture, the Cîteaux *Moralia* has also been used by such scholars as Meyer Schapiro as evidence for the claim that the monstrous imagery of the Middle Ages was an imagery of "unbridled, often irrational fantasy," entirely independent of the text and of any specific meaning. Unbridled and irrational its images may be. But they are not independent of either the text or specific meaning. The brilliance of these illuminations and an undercurrent of thematic consistency that may be detected in them cry out from hiding, as it were, that, like an obscure event from Scripture, there is potentially another level of meaning beyond what has so far met the eyes of modern viewers.

Close analysis of these illuminations reveals a gradual transformation from conventional and textually unrelated images of the beginning of the manuscript (the famous frontispiece is an exception, having been added later) to largely unique and textually based ones further on, something that indicates a change in attitude toward the illuminated initial on the part of the artist only after production had begun, by no means part of the original conception.

More specifically, what seems to have happened was that after initially illuminating this patristic work in a conventional and unexceptional manner in the illuminations of the prefatory matter and Books One through Three, the artist began in the initials to Books Four through Seven to internalize Gregory's exegetical attitude--although only in a visually and conceptually incipient way. This happened, significantly, only after an important methodological statement in the opening passage of Book Four, the culmination of similar statements in Gregory's prefatory letter and Books One and Two: "He who examines the literality (*textum*) and fails to recognize the sense (*sensum*) of the holy word provides himself not so much with knowledge as he confuses himself with ambiguity." In Books Eight through Thirty-five the artist introduced visual complexity into his expressions of the literality and sense of the text, and combined this with an effective visual vocabulary of violence and daily life, both of which are in deep response to the text and the direct result of the artist's assimilation of Gregory's exegetical method into his work.

Indeed, the fundamental dynamics of the manuscript's conception and character indicate how the scenes of seemingly gratuitous violence and seemingly straightforward daily life are in fact the product of Gregory's demand that one "become" what one reads--in this case, the artist internalizing the exegetical method of Gregory himself. In the same way that Gregory found it acceptable to analyze a line or even a word of text out of context, according to modern sensibilities, so the artist was quite willing to do the same, often with reference to the contemporary monastic polemics of reform. The end result was the exegetical spiritualization of the first generation experience, the visual expression of Gregory's exegetical method. It is in this sense, that of Gregory's methodology--his urging the reader (in the *Cîteaux Moralia*, the artist) to go beyond the text to the "truer" sense of what was being read and to become what one reads--that one must view the initials of the *Cîteaux Moralia*. However, since the creative process is not to become but to cause to become, in using the *Moralia in Job* as a spiritual exercise the artist--or rather the monk-artist, a person who was one of the potential specialized readers of this text in a way that was typically not the case for secular artists at the time--transformed what he had read into artistic expressions of his own spiritual struggle and daily life, recognizing both "what was monstrous and what was beautiful," what pertained to the animal and what pertained to the human, and what pertained to both as embodied in the figure of the *semihomo* that is so common in the pages of the manuscript, *semihomines* being creatures that are part human and part beast and that are central to concept of spiritual violence that imbues the illuminations of the *Cîteaux Moralia*.

More than a straightforward analysis of these illuminations, this study also reveals a great deal about a number of art historical questions common to many other medieval artworks, shedding its light on such issues as the question of meaning in some monstrous and violent imagery of a seemingly ornamental character, the supposed direct observation of nature and daily life for their own sake, the apparent intrusion of the secular upon the sacred, and, inevitably, the role of the artist in all this. It does this despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that iconographically it is largely a unique work. And this leads to the issue of how a

unique illuminated manuscript like this might have come about in the first place: in this case the result of an unusually intimate relation between text and image, or more precisely, between text, artist, and image, that was fundamentally conditioned by contemporary monastic politics and polemics--the latter being gone into in detail and with very specific application to the initials. These issues, together with the questions of what, individually, the illuminations of the Cîteaux *Moralia* mean and why, as a whole, they appear in the text of this particular patristic work at this particular time of monastic reform constitute the core of this study.

Finally, the imagery of the Cîteaux *Moralia* is analyzed in light of medieval theories of *lectio divina*, *meditatio*, and progressing levels of spiritual advancement--securely placing it within this theoretical framework in a way that both reveals the basis of its conceptual attraction and its ultimate spiritual/political failure in the context of twelfth-century monastic polemics and artistic culture.

The key to understanding the illuminations of the Cîteaux *Moralia* consists primarily of three things, without even one of which it could never have taken its present form: the explicit and implicit methodology of the text of the *Moralia in Job* itself; the general vocabulary of violent spiritual struggle and the polemics of contemporary monastic culture; and the idiosyncratic element of the individual who responded to the first in the visual vocabulary of the second. The result was a series of initials of a creativity and exuberance not often found in manuscript illumination before or since. Perhaps the most violent illuminated manuscript of Romanesque monastic culture, it presents a visual exegesis of Gregory's text that is intimately bound up with Cistercian reform politics and polemics, and that provides an intriguing view into Cistercian self-conception at a decisive moment in their history.