

An Architecture of the Self:
New Metaphors for Monastic Enclosure

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Much of the language that regulates monastic enclosure is filled with clearly stated prohibitions and explanations; it is the language of denotation and prescription. However, the language of connotation, or metaphor, perhaps more accurately reflects the shape of monastic life as it moves from early eremitic origins to the cenobitism of the ninth century and later. When the change in monastic lifestyle, from an emphasis on denial of the self and chastisement of the body to affirmation of one's spiritual powers, is articulated, often architectural metaphor becomes a key to the new dimensions of spirituality offered within the monastery.

Either from the hermit's cell, or from the communal monastic enclosure inscribed by metaphors of containment, descriptions of monastic life gradually appropriate the more spacious metaphors of public areas to describe the contemplative's interior life. The metaphors of monastic life, with time, soar to become a castle, a series of dwelling places all contained within the soul, to become, even, a garden. Descriptions of early cenobitic and eremitic life are both shaped by the metaphors of imprisonment; they graphically image withdrawal from the evil of the world and posit a focus on the practice of restraint. The metaphors of liberation that appear from the twelfth century onward free the monastic from the confining community or cell by offering an increasingly psychological interpretation of that physical space where the monastic meets the divine. I propose for this paper a survey of metaphors that will highlight the changing attitudes toward monastic enclosure from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries.

i. My Body, My Prison: Harlots and Habits

In the wonderfully disturbing accounts of women eremites of the fourth to sixth centuries lies early evidence of monastic enclosure as metaphor of confinement and punishment. Benedicta Ward's *Harlots of the Desert* [1](#) offers several accounts of "bad" women who atone for their previous offenses by "choosing" to live in extreme physical deprivation. One of Ward's examples is drawn from the *Life of St. Thais, the Harlot*, who, at the advice of her confessor, is walled up in a monastic cell, denied visitors, consolation, and even nourishment, except for what can be dribbled through a tiny slot to her in the wall. There, in darkness, in her

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own excrement, she passes a period of years, denied the right to pray to God with any words but those acknowledging her depravity.[2](#) The story of Thais, common among the desert fathers, was brought to audiences of cloistered nuns through the tenth-century play written by Hrotswitha of Gandersheim.[3](#) And what comforting message might Hrotswitha's audience of cloistered religious have gathered? Very little about the love of God, but much about that prison of depravity--not the monastic cell, but the body. The simplest way to deny this prison was to bury oneself or rather, one's gender, by isolation in a desert cell, or safe confine within a single sex community.[4](#)

This erasing of gender seems to be a goal of both male and female monastics and is related to the conventional definition of monastic life--not mere celibacy, but the denial of sexuality itself. In writing of the Pachomian monks, a religious desert community of the late fourth century, Peter Brown suggests that the monks' habits of life and dress were chosen deliberately to reflect such restraint:

in their long robes bound by leather thongs, a symbol of the binding nature of monastic vows . . . members . . . were called upon to make their bodies act as landmarks of an unbreakable, but largely imperceptible, frontier: their continence spoke to the world at large of the integrity of their monastery--a garden enclosed, a fountain

sealed.⁵

Paradoxically within monastic confines, however, monks and nuns enjoyed the liberty of escaping from their bodies. C.H. Lawrence associates liberty with the cenobitic life, particularly "as the special result of virginity and chastity, which freed [them] from sensual desires and from ties to the secular world."⁶ A lived metaphor of containment better expresses this paradox than a merely rational assent to regulation.

ii. The Cenobitic Circle: *Regula Magistri*

With the discovery of the anonymous ninth-century document *Regula Magistri*, collected in Benedict of Aniane's *Codex Regularum*,⁷ the images of confinement housing the harlot women and clothing the men are replaced by another image of regulation: that of the group itself. The images of both the physical body and the monastic community suggest metaphors of physical enclosure. Benedict's compendium of monastic rules describes an enforced confinement, where male cenobites must guard against evils not of the world from which they have so effectively withdrawn, but of those within. For the monks, the vessel of containment is not the cell, but the chaste and chastening body as a living cloister:

when some sin rises from the root of the heart and sees that its exit is blocked by the enclosure of the outside, namely the

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mouth and the teeth, returning again to the root of the heart [that sin] perishes there as a miscarriage and is dashed upon the rock while yet young instead of being born of the tongue and growing up to be punished.⁸

Unlike the restricted solitude imposed on women hermits doing penance, the *Regula Magistri* for monks asserts the values of cenobitic over eremitic lifestyles. Further, in a personifying of monastic architectural space, the monks serve as each other's restraint, as in this regulation of sleeping accommodations:

The beds are to be arranged in order in a circle within a single room, as is done in a dining room. Let [the] abbot have his bed in the center of the circle, so that by seeing to the silence and reverence of everyone around him, he may, as a careful and solicitous shepherd, watch over the whole flock of his sheep fathered into one sheepfold.⁹

In fact, the desire for individual space is perceived in the *Regula Magistri* as a temptation. The monks' need for discipline and submission to authority is so crucial that any separation from the communal life of the order is perceived as a reflection of personal self-interest and waywardness. Here is a description of monks who violate the cenobitic rule of living:

They live alone or two or three together, without a superior, on an equal footing and moving about as they please. . . . It is not God who provides cells for them . . . but their self-will. Individually on their own authority, each one for himself alone, they assume the title of abbot. . . . They think that in their cell they are perfectly observant of every law and all the justice of God.¹⁰

The *Regula Magistri* in fact uses the isolation of contemplative eremitic life as punishment in cenobitic life. Detailed descriptions of the harshest punishments include the practice of excommunication--whether from the common table, or the oratory. In some cases, fallen monks are relegated to the status of novices in the oratory, allowed only to attend services, not to participate in them by speaking the prayers. By punishing with solitude and silence, the *Regula Magistri* validates the order of hierarchical and communal lifestyle over the self-indulgent practices of eremites.¹¹ Here is quite a contrast from the saintly hermits favored in the literature of earlier centuries. But this emphasis on the communal nature of monastic life undergoes a radical transformation in the next centuries.

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iii. Like a Fish Out of Water:

*De Quadripartito exercitio cellae*¹²

This twelfth-century account of Carthusian monastic life narrated by a monk identified as Adam marks a return to

the trend advocating the joys of the cell rather than of the community--part of a twelfth-century reform movement that used a "back to basics" approach to bring monastic life more in line with its rule. The four parts of the *Quadripartito* deal with spiritual reading, meditation, prayer, and manual work. Based on Guigo's *Consuetudines Cartusiae*,¹³ *Quadripartito* argues that the Carthusian monk's life of solitude and silence is modelled on Christ's sojourn in the desert. The narrator claims that the monk who lives in his cell lives in heaven (*cella, caelum*). Another startling image is that of the fish out of water: the life of the cell is as essential to the interior life as water is to fish. The fish called the allec dies when pulled from the water; so too the monk who is snatched from his cell. The author notes that the same letters that comprise the name of the fish also comprise the letters of the word for cell: the palindrome allec, *cella*.¹⁴

The monk living in this Carthusian cell must share his limited space with a variety of images, including the *aula caeli*, or gate of heaven, which perpetual solitude constitutes. And this tiny space is also described the author as a heavenly garden.¹⁵ In accounts of twelfth-century monastic life, images of fertility abound, but only as they are circumscribed by the cell. Reformers who advocated return to the strict observance of St. Benedict's *Rule* also found themselves using a language of verdant fertility to describe the effects of this restraint. Reformer Philip of Harvengt, writing *De institutione clericorum* (c. 1140), claims that the *Rule* has "been recalled to the truth of the letter." Yet that "letter" allows for this surfeit of metaphor:

[the monks] are seen to flower again and . . . are restored to their pristine state by the new sun and warmed by favoring breezes When the new dew had fallen the claustral region flowered again. In the cloisters, as in trees, a rare fruit grew ripe.¹⁶

Whether or not the image of eremitic or desert isolation was always intended to be metaphorical rather than literal,¹⁷ it is evident that by the twelfth century, the notion of "desert places" as the place for following the monastic way of life relinquished literal for metaphorical reality. By late in the century, not only the geographical isolation, but the physical restriction of the monastic cell itself begins to dissolve forever.

The monastic imagination of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries abandons its walls for a new connotative definition of solitude. Giles Constable describes this as "an increasing tendency . . . to stress the importance

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of internal solitude, the hermitage of the heart, rather than of external solitude and isolation."¹⁸ A monk of the period, Garner of St. Victor, comments on this psychological state of solitude:

Of what use is solitude of the body if solitude of the heart is lacking? For he who lives far away in the body but who involves himself in the tumults of worldly desires by the disturbances of human conversation is not in solitude, whereas he who is physically oppressed by crowds of people and yet who suffers in his heart no disturbance of secular cares, he is not in the city To build solitude is to expel the disturbances of earthly desires from the hidden place of the heart and to seek the love of inner quiet. . . .¹⁹

And suddenly, the prison image of the monastic cell has been abandoned; the interior, psychological space has moved out beyond the monastic walls and become a flowering garden, but not without its iron-spiked gate.

iv. Back to the Garden: *The Orchard of Syon*²⁰

Neither a code of monastic rules nor an account of the spiritual of life of eremites, the *Dialogo* of St. Catherine of Siena, originally published in 1378, was translated into English, retitled *The Orchard of Syon* and published in 1519. The translation was made for the Bridgettine nuns at the double monastery of Syon in Barking, England. The text's history is particularly interesting. Its early sixteenth-century translator added the introductory apparatus of the orchard image as well as the new title. So the original fourteenth-century work by Catherine was actually reshaped by translators of the sixteenth century, who placed this spiritual treatise in the midst of a carefully tended metaphor.

The Orchard of Syon is a remarkable illustration of what has become of the prelapsarian garden of Eden metaphor. This garden has been cultivated, planted, subjected to the strictures of rule and order. Here, the meditants are instructed to choose alleys or pathways within the text, depending on what shape they wish their meditation to take.

The Orchard of Syon is divided into seven parts, five chapters in each part, with thirty-five alleys in which the sisters may read, or, metaphorically, walk. Because there appears to be no set order to the way in which they might choose to plan their meditations, the metaphor images the paradox of freedom within restraint. Catherine's book offers the ecstatically dictated account of her visions. A document closer to the literature of mysticism than of regulation, Catherine's work expands, the twelfth century tiny cell, emphasizing solitude and silence, to a place of conver-

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sation (dialogue) and spiritual fertility (the orchard image). *The Orchard of Syon* offers

Goddis techinge, [given] bi the persone of God the Fader to the intellecte of the glorious virgin, Seint Katerine of Seene, . . . whiche was write as sche endited in her moder tunge when sche was in contemplacioun inrap of spirit, and sche heringe actueli and in the same tyme tellinge tofore meny what oure Lord God spake in her.[21](#)

The Orchard offers both interpretations of scripture and summaries of Church dogma. Doctrinally, there is nothing new here, but structurally *The Orchard* builds a new monastic world: its form presents us with an interactive text, the author in conversation with God, rather than in relationship to a rule or to a superior who administers that rule. Moreover, through the fertile garden image added by the medieval translator, *The Orchard of Syon* creates a framework very like the monastic space, which allows freedom only within enclosure. The physical body also comes to be associated with this enclosed space, since mankind is

maner of orcherd . . . maad with swete fruyt. Natheless the gardener of this orcherd, which is fre chois, may make this orcherd wielde if he wille . . . if he sowe thereynne . . . his owne propre love.[22](#)

v. Castles in the Soul: Teresa's *Dwelling Places*

Teresa of Avila's writings range from her literal accounts of the founding of convents in *Foundations* (1576, 1580) to the mystical text of the inward dwelling of God in *The Interior Castle* (1577).[23](#) Of the numerous literal enclosures or religious houses for women that Teresa establishes, she writes,

No one but those who experience it will believe the joy that is felt in these foundations once we are enclosed where no secular persons can enter, for however much we love them it is not enough to take away this great consolation in finding ourselves alone.[24](#)

Elsewhere, she borrows the "nun out of her cloister is like a fish out of water" metaphor that we found in the *Quadripartito*. But when these nuns are fish out of water, they seem to carry their own cell with them--in the form of their veil. In fact, Teresa extends the cloister to the bodies of her individual nuns, who veil themselves whenever going into or dealing with the public. Of this source of protection--or portable cloister--Teresa remarks, "The world is so full of novelty that were it

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not for the veils we wear over our faces, these crowds would be a great trial. But with these veils, we can put up with them."[25](#)

But by far the most interesting metaphor of enclosure is that which defines the space within. In *Dwelling Places*, the working title for the text that came to be called *The Interior Castle* (1577), Teresa details the seven places or stages through which the individual ascends to perfect contemplation of and union with the divine. In a vision where the castle metaphor of the book is revealed to her, Teresa sees

a most beautiful crystal globe like a castle . . . and in the seventh [place], which was in the center, the King of Glory dwelt in the greatest splendor . . . Outside of the castle all was darkness, with toads, vipers, and other poisonous vermin.[26](#)

The outer wall of the castle, the body, must be quickly bypassed in order to enter the dwelling places which, according to editors Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, reflect the diversity of ways and depths of the individual's spiritual capacities. Teresa speaks of many dwelling places within dwelling places "below and above and to the sides, with

lovely gardens and fountains and labyrinths."[27](#)

In the seventh and ultimate dwelling place, the most interior of the rooms of the castle, Teresa finds the quiet and intimacy of the cell where "God alone and the soul rejoice together in the deepest silence."[28](#) The encounter with the divine is also described as a spiritual marriage from which Teresa adamantly dismisses the body image that we had earlier seen denigrated in monastic writing:

In the spiritual marriage, there is still much less remembrance of the body because this secret union takes place in the very interior of the soul, which must be where God Himself is, and in my opinion there is no need of any door for Him to enter.[29](#)

The image of cloister offers one more transformation before we leave it. In an "Epilogue" to *The Interior Castle*, Teresa offers her text itself as a spacious room for those nuns in enclosure to enjoy:

Considering the strict enclosure and the few things you have for your entertainment, my Sisters, and that your buildings are not always as large as would be fitting for your monasteries, I think it will be a consolation for you to delight in this interior castle since without permission from the prioress you can enter and take a walk through it any time.[30](#)

These texts chart profound changes in the attitude towards enclosure, the methods of discipline, and the practice of cloistered devotion. Literally and metaphorically, the cloister expands from its tiny cell, emphasizing punishment, silence, and solitude, to a place of divine

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conversation and spiritual fertility. In place of the hortatory rhetoric of Carthusian or Benedictine denial and obedience, Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena build their own sumptuous castles of the soul and practice their own brand of spiritual horticulture. Perhaps, like the monks and nuns who inhabit these physical and psychological enclosures, monasticism can acquire its liberating character only by placing itself within the infinite boundaries of metaphor.

Notes

1. Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987).
2. Ward, *Harlots*, 84. The story of Thais is found in PL 73, cols. 661-62.
3. Hrotswitha of Gandersheim, "Paphnutius," in *Comoedia* (PL 137, cols.1027-46). Cited in Ward, *Harlots*, 76, 81.
4. Ward, *Harlots*, 62. Ward is quick to assert, however, that the action of women who disguise themselves as men "has nothing do with a rejection of femininity; in fact it was an assertion of it; before God, all souls were feminine, and it is this femininity that the women claim, as do the men of the desert" (Ward, 63). Ward is reluctant to find in such rigorous self-denial a concomitant denial of gender.
5. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 247.
6. C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longmans, 1989), 102.
7. *The Rule of the Master*, trans. Luke Eberle (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977). For a discussion of the *Regula Magistri* and its relationship to Benedict's Rule, see *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 70-73.
8. Eberle, *Rule*, 126.
9. Eberle, *Rule*, 190.
10. Eberle, *Rule*, 121-22.
11. Eberle, *Rule*, "Chapter XII: Treatment of an Excommunicated Brother," 149-153.

12. My information on and examples from *De Quadripartito exercitio cellae* are taken from James Hogg's "Adam the Carthusian's *De Quadripartito exercitio cellae* in *De Cella in Seculum: Religious and Secular Life and Devotional Life in Late Medieval England*, ed. Michael G. Sargent, *Analecta Cartusiana* 99, no. 1 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989), 67-79.
13. *Consuetudines Cartusiae*, 75, cited in Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 135. The Latin text of *Consuetudines* is available in PL 153, col. 703 and in *The evolution of the Carthusian Statutes from the Consuetudines Guigonis to the Tertia Compilatio*, ed. James Hogg. *Analecta Cartusiana* 99, no.1 (1989).
14. Hogg, 77.
15. Hogg, 76.
16. Phillip of Harvengt, *De institutione clericorum* 4 (*De continentia clericorum*) 125, PL 203, col. 936A. Quoted in Giles Constable, *Monks, Hermits, and Crusaders in Medieval Europe* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1988), 43.
17. Constable, 242, cites Benedicta Ward's claim that the "desert myth" was a "literary ideology" in "The Desert Myth: Reflections on the Desert

- Ideal in Early Cistercian Monasticism," *One Yet Two: Monastic Tradition East and West*, ed. M.B Pennington (Kalamazoo:Cistercian Publications, 1976), 188.
18. Constable, 249.
19. From *Gregorianum* VI: 17, in PL 193:269D. Quoted in Constable, 250.
20. Catherine of Siena, *The Orchard of Syon*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel M. Liegey. Early English Text Society no. 258 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).
21. Quoted in Phyllis Hodgson, "*The Orchard of Syon and the English Mystical Tradition*," in *Middle English Literature*, ed. J.A. Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 74.
22. *Ibid.*, 78.
23. These texts in translation may be found in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, vol. II and III, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1985).
24. *The Collected Works* II, *Foundations*, chapter 31, paragraph 46. Cited in "Introduction" to *Foundations*, 25.
25. *The Collected Works*, II, *Foundations*, chapter 30, paragraph 8. Cited in "Introduction" to *Foundations*," 29.

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26. *The Collected Works*, II, *The Interior Castle*, 268.
27. *Ibid.*, 270, quoting Teresa's comment in "Epilogue," no.3.
28. *Ibid.*, 441-42.
29. *Ibid.*, 433.
30. *Ibid.*, "Epilogue," 451.

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