

## *William of Saint Thierry—V*

by Geoffrey Webb

‘Time was’, wrote William, ‘when the corrupt love of the flesh had its masters, who were so skilled in their subject that the most famous of them was constrained, even by the lovers and companions of his depravity, to recant by praising the opposite of what he had originally taught’. The reference to Ovid is clear enough. The *Ars Amatoria*, to a monastic mind of the twelfth century, is the testament of a pastmaster in corruption and perversity, of a persistent follower of the bent of fallen nature, which is away from God, back to the flesh, and downward to the earth.

The due order of nature, for William, is the upward direction that fire takes, for the soul is created to look heavenward, to rise in pure spirituality and be identified with God whose image it is. And it is meant to spiritualise the body, and carry it in that same upward direction – as far as that is possible on earth – aiming at least toward some position between earth and heaven. If heaven is unattainable before death, at least one can strive to be lifted up from the earth. But fallen man, with such as Ovid for his guide, is only too prone to cleave downward, to the flesh, to the earth, and to corruption. And this is the opposition that William traces in the first chapter of his *Nature and Dignity of Love*, the work which was called *Anti-Nasonem* in the middle ages, on account of its avowed attack on the *Ars Amatoria*.

Now it is obvious that William would never have bothered himself with Ovid, in his busy days as abbot of Saint Thierry in the eleven twenties, unless he had some polemical axe to grind. Later on he would put the same energy into his writing against Peter Abelard. In either case, as he saw it, a heresy was involved, and a defence of orthodoxy was required. Just as Abelard appeared to be creating a heretical approach to faith, so Ovid implied a heresy about love. Or rather, it was not so much Ovid himself that William was interested in, as Ovid’s influence on contemporary taste. He was to find the Carthusians of Mont Dieu so disorientated by the *Sic et Non* that they seriously wondered if they had ever understood Christian faith aright. So now, round about the year 1120, the influence of Ovid amounted to a pagan manifesto among his contemporaries, harmful enough to justify a statement of the Christian position. Like Abelard, Ovid was not dangerous in himself. His

danger consisted in his being praised, admired, and above all, imitated.

It is altogether likely that young men who came to Saint Thierry as novices were the ones who made William realise to what extent Ovid had helped to form their ideas, for in the schools where clerics pursued their studies, Ovid was the most preferred of all the pagan poets, the most important of all literary influences. Their 'pop' culture too had undergone something of the same influence. In the light-hearted atmosphere of the court of Aquitaine, Ovid had cast his spell over Count William IX, Queen Eleanor's father, the man in whom courtly love has been said to have originated, with its synthesis of the precepts of the *Ars Amatoria* and the Christian ideal of service. And in complete contrast to the courtly approach, yet combining with it to create a profane ideal of love, the old pagan story of Tristran and Yseut had found its way into Romance poetry. With the potion that made love into a fatality, an uncontrollable destiny, love was seen in Europe for the first time, as Gaston Paris said, as something embracing the whole of life, 'creating about itself a whole world of feelings, rights, duties and aspirations'.

When, towards the end of the century, Queen Eleanor's eldest daughter, Marie de Champagne, had her chaplain write his *de Arte Honestae Amandi*, the courts of love which form its background had been in vogue for a long time, and it is quite possible that Marie really did think of them as a real contribution to the refinement and education of young men. But the chaplain's treatise certainly reveals how Ovid had been at work on the twelfth century mind, how the noble ladies in their quiet courts and their learned clerks had been ministering to each others' needs. Not only had the women read and studied more, but the clergy had become refined by this contact to such an extent that some of them (not necessarily, of course, in major orders) went so far as to set themselves up as the ideal type of lover. They were, so they claimed, the only members of society who combined both learning and gallantry, and therefore were qualified to pay their respects to women of the highest degree, and worthy to have their service reciprocated with favour.

Women were now in a position to command, and no men so disapproved of the innovation as those of the stricter religious outlook. 'You see them decked out, positively burdened down with gold, silver, precious stones and all manner of splendour. You see them trailing great trains of precious stuff after them, raising clouds of dust wherever they go . . .'. The comment is Saint Bernard's. He could be observing, with that eye all too sensitive to beauty, the cortege of Queen Eleanor, wearing the latest thing from Constantinople.

The period lacked, as the work of Andrew the Chaplain makes quite clear, any reasoned theology of marriage, love and sex, and it is of course not surprising that woman, in the monastic imagination,

had to be something always fascinating and appalling. 'Love', said the Countess of Champagne, 'is totally incompatible with marriage, because whereas married people are united by a law external to themselves, lovers are united by free, spontaneous choice'. The marriage contract imposed an obligation, and love did not necessarily come into it. There was always a fear of allowing concupiscence into marriage, and the union of our Lady and Saint Joseph was held up as an ideal. Courtly love seems odd enough to us, but the medieval attitude towards marriage is far odder. As Fr Kenelm Foster says, courtly love vindicated the intrinsic value of sexual relationships, giving them a moral worth that was denied in traditional theology.

Andrew's chief source is *mirificus Ovidius*, and so it is not surprising that for him there is no place for a love directed towards God. Love implicitly excludes everything but the sexual relationship between men and women. Love is a fact, given in nature, as in the pagan Tristran. Therefore, to get to the root of the disagreement between 'Ovidian' heresy and Christian truth, William has to go right back beyond a definition of love, in his *Anti-Nasonem*, to a definition of nature.

'The art of all arts is the art of loving', he wrote, 'The teaching of this art is the prerogative of nature, and of God, who is the author of nature. Thus it belongs both to God and to nature. Love, which has been occasioned by the creator of nature, provided its natural freedom be not affected by untrue sentiment, will teach itself – that is, to those who are teachable, who are willing to be taught by love, and by God. Love is a power of the soul which carries it by a natural inclination to its appointed place or end. Each creature, whether spiritual or corporeal, has a place to which it belongs by nature, and a natural inclination to carry it to that place. And this inclination does not necessarily bear a thing downward. Water goes down, it is true, but fire goes up. In man, the inclination carries up his spirit in the course of nature, and the body downward. In either case, it goes to its appointed place. Of the body's destination we read "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return", and the book of Wisdom tells us that "the spirit of man will return to God who gave it" . . .'

'If you observe a dissolute man, you will see how the whole man is being carried by his tendencies to his end. But when all goes according to God's plan, the spirit returns to its maker and the body is put back into the earth, where it is resolved into the elements. When earth, air, fire and water have reclaimed their own particles of a man, the natural bond between them having been sundered in the course of nature by death, each particle goes back to the elements. But while it is impossible for any of these particles to wander away from the path mapped out for them by nature, the wretched soul, the unhappy spirit, although it tends naturally enough towards its end, being corrupted by sin, finds difficulty in getting back to the place of its origin. Its natural inclination is always moving it in that

direction. It longs for happiness, dreams of happiness, wishes to be happy above all things'.

As William sees it, the Ovidian approach to life, 'natural' in an unnatural sense, is the thing chiefly responsible for men ignoring the law of God that is the truly natural law of love. When Ovid and his imitators have done their worst, a repentant soul converted to God must re-discover a natural way of loving. But he needs a master, and a school, if he is to study properly the antithesis of Ovid's art. 'He must embrace purity and silence, temperateness in food and sleep, the custody of ears and eyes. His deportment must be grave, he must not be given to laughter, he must be conscientious at reading and meditation. He must love to be commanded, he must shun ordering others about, he must relinquish even the desire to dictate to others. He must be full of kindness, ready to fall in with others at all times.'

Saint Benedict considered the monastery as a school of obedience, *dominici schola servitii*. The Cistercian reform went one better, seeing obedience as a beginning and a technique for making headway in the practice of love. As Saint Aelred puts it in a sermon on the Ascension, 'Bethany, being interpreted, means a house of obedience, but this house is built on Mount Olivet, and oil is the symbol of charity. This is what our house should be, a house of obedience built on a mountain of charity.' From the beginning of the history of Citeaux, with Stephen Harding, the accent had been on charity, and a rule had been created to aim at 'that charity which shall bind all the monks together indissolubly in spirit, even though living in different monasteries, separated from each other in different parts of the world. Let there be no discord in anything we do', the founder pleaded, 'but let us all live the same sort of life, with the same rule, and with one and the same charity'.

The monastery, in William's world, is 'charity's own school, where the study of love is pursued, where love's disputations are held, and love's questions answered'. It is tempting to think that he has in mind, as points of comparison, both the schools of dialectic and the courts of love. And it is regrettable that the monastic authors concerned themselves so exclusively with the love that was to be practised within the monastery, neglecting the wider field of secular life where guidance on the matter of love was so badly needed. But if we look more closely, we shall see that the basic principle that William enunciates for monks is clearly applicable to the married state. There is a quite special concept of charity involved, which we have already considered in his meditation on Christ in the brethren. We find it touchingly expressed in the letter which Saint Bernard wrote to him to explain away what had looked like neglect. 'God knows I love you, because He has given me a gift of love to love you with, and because you deserve to be loved. God knows that, and that is what I feel . . .'

*Amicus in spiritu Christi adherens amico, efficitur unum cor et anima una cum eo. Spiritus efficitur unus cum eo in osculo uno.* Aelred, of course, surpasses all his fellows on the matter, but it was an approach that they all shared, this feeling towards a special friend within the group, a marriage of true minds. A Christian finds Christ, must find Christ in his fellow men. He will certainly find Christ more immediately in the group into which he has integrated himself willingly through similarity of interests and ideas. And he will almost surely find Christ in a special sense in some particular person, man or woman, an ideal but tangible reality. When we read the culminating passage in Aelred's *Mirror of Charity*, for instance, the image he creates strikes us as definitely not to be limited to any particular context, since it involves that over-all charity that must naturally embrace true friendship, love and marriage, indeed every relationship of true love.

'It is such a great joy to have the consolation of someone's affection – someone to whom one is deeply united by the bonds of love; someone in whom our weary spirit may find rest, whose conversation is as sweet as a song in the tedium of our daily life'. This someone he goes on to describe as a refuge that we creep into when the world is too much for us, for it is someone who will receive confidences, bring comfort, strength, healing to cure the sickness of worry, sympathy for distress, consultation in times of doubt, and rejoicing when we are happy. The bond is so deep and so strong that togetherness remains even when there is a great distance between. 'The world will fall asleep all around you, you will find, and your soul will rest, embraced in absolute peace. Your two hearts will lie quietly together, united as if they were one, as the grace of the Holy Spirit flows over you both'.