

**Desert, Fortress, Convent, Body: the Allegorical Architecture
of Nervèze's *L'Hermitage de l'Isle sainte***

**by
Barbara Woshinsky**

The history of conventual representation in early modern France roughly parallels the historical movement from desert to social enclosure which took place in the formative centuries of the Christian era. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the *topos* of the *désert*, or deserted place, was very much in vogue in both secular and spiritual literature. As Danièle Duport explains, “Sur un fond de guerres et de doutes, les influences conjuguées des définitions du bonheur chez les Anciens font surgir le rêve d’un âge d’or pastoral et agricole” (Duport 89). “Cette vogue de la retraite aux champs” is reflected in Montaigne’s “De la solitude” as well as in Camus’ *Elise*: “Agréables deserts, séjour de l’innocence, où loing des vanitez de la magnificence/ Commence mon repos, et finit mon tourment;/ Valons, fleuves, rochers, plaisante solitude./ Soyez-le desormais de mon contentement” (Camus, *Elise*, 353). Like popular pastorals of the time, conventual fictions of 1600-1620 tend to be episodic, chronicling the wanderings in deserted places of voluntary and involuntary exiles from society.

Antoine de Nervèze (1570? - 1625?) was *secrétaire de la chambre* to Henri IV and an author of pastorals and religious poetry. His *L'Hermitage de l'Isle Sainte*, which was published in 1612 with the approbation of the Sorbonne¹ is liminal for religious writings of the turn of the century period. Through it, we see how Renaissance neo-Platonism and counter-Reformation zeal shaped the concept of sacred space at the beginning of the seventeenth century, establishing persistent patterns of thought and imagery. *L'Hermitage de l'Isle Sainte* is an illustrated allegorical work, divided into Meditations. Like Bunyan’s better known *Pilgrim’s Progress*, it shows the advances and backslidings of the soul as it navigates its way through the world. Its complex structure--the work contains not only narrative and illustrations but allegorical glosses on the illustrations--calls for a reading on sev-

eral levels. In the most immediate and literal sense, Nervèze enjoins the Christian to escape from the world (*le monde*) into a sacred refuge. Quoting the Gospel according to St. John, chapter 2, Nervèze characterizes the world as a place of sin, totally removed from God and given up to carnality: “N’aymez point le monde ny les choses qui sont au monde... car tout ce qui est au monde est la convoitise de la chair” (129). In this total dichotomy between world and God, the former is portrayed almost as a projection of the body, and described in the negative terms ascetics use for corporeal functions: “cette grande Babilone du monde n’est qu’un bourbier d’immondices.” We are trapped in the body with the same fatality as we are trapped in sin: “Le corps n’est pas plus naturellement suivy de son ombre, que le peché l’est de son chas-timent” (85). Thus, whoever remains in the world is determined physically to be lost spiritually. Nervèze prays: “ne me laissez pas esgarer dans ce labirinthe du monde” (36). From the perspective of the text, both Babylon and the labyrinth are pagan architectural constructions associated with sin and sensuality.

In this gloomy situation, the only hope of escape is to leave society for *le désert*. Using military imagery going back to the early desert fathers and reiterated by Saint Teresa (Carrion 263), Nervèze describes the desert retreat as a fortress against temptation:

Et quels sont ces lieux? Les deserts et les solitudes
ou l’on fait les retranchements dedans et dehors
pour fermer les advenuâs à l’ennemy dedans par la
mortification de la volonté, dehors par
l’esloignement des objets mondains.

At the same time, one goes into the desert for a more positive reason: to find God. Alluding to both the Old and New Testaments, Nervèze states:

C’est en ses retraicts solitaires ou Dieu se comuni-
que & converse avec les hommes: *Je t’ay cogneu au
desert en la terre de solitude.* (124)

Car c'est en ces demeures de solitude & de silence,
ou les oracles du Ciel se font entendre, & non dans
les bruits & foules populaires... Dieu ne s'est appa-
ru à Moyse, qu'aux deserts, & aux montagnes.
(285)

The text and its illustrations combine forest, mountain and island to create a privileged site of retreat. At the same time, this desert contains a variety of buildings which represent various steps along the spiritual journey. The frontispiece shows a pilgrim crossing a bridge to a rustic island hermitage. On a metaphorical level, the desert retreat also represents the convent in which, paradoxically, physical imprisonment brings spiritual liberation:

Il est vray qu'en ceste condition captive il nous
reste toujours le pouvoir de racheter nostre liberté
comme font ces belles ames qui devotement hon-
teuses de vivre en ceste captivité terrestre se mettent
en franchise dans les saintes prisons de Iesus
Christ. (136)

Both the desert hermitage and the convent are *Isles Saintes* where the soul can take refuge from the world. In the first case, one retreats into a space outside society; in the second, one locks oneself away from society, in a sacred counter-labyrinth which protects against *le labirinthe du monde*.

Finally, as the narration unfolds, evocations of a physical retreat to desert or convent gives way to a purely allegorical journey. In this evolution, the illustrations play an important role. Thus in Figure 1, we see the Soul entering with alacrity into a *palais*: a "modern" neo-classical style building which looks incongruous in its forest setting. The clouds hovering over the palace the roof line and divide the picture, like a medieval painting, into levels representing Earth and Heaven. This hierarchical vision is emphasized by the artist's use of space and proportion. More space is given to Heaven than to Earth; the palace is squeezed into a corner of the picture by the many crosses on the left (which the soul has refused to bear). In addition, Christ and the angel are drawn in a dispropor-

tionately large scale, overwhelming the smaller figure of the Soul below.

The next two illustrations display an identical image with different *explications* or glosses. In figure 2, the angel's right arm is pointing upward to Christ on the Cross, the rising path, or Heaven. At the same time, its right wing is projected protectively over the Soul. However, the Soul's posture, with arms raised and palms up, seems to resist this protection. According to the *explication*, the Soul is looking back at the *vanités du monde* represented by a portrait of a fashionably dressed woman. In the background, we see an austere, fortress-like building (in contrast to both the hermitage and the palace), with a suggestion of a further retreat sketched yet higher against the mountains.

The next illustration in *L'Hermitage* is a duplicate of figure 2, but this time the *explication* "reads" the *repentance* of the soul into its closeness to the cross: "L'Ame touchée de repentance s'approche de Jésus Christ" (194). The gloss further reinterprets the visual allegory by stating that the cherubic figure (*l'amour*) holding the frame is in fact *l'amour du monde*, and that the image is not a painting, but a reflection; "l'amour . . . luy veut faire voir comme dans un miroir les beautez humaines qu'elle a jadis ay-meés. .." (194).² Both the mirror and the female figure within it are representations of *concupiscence*, or attachment to the flesh.

In the following illustration (figure 3), the Soul is kneeling in front of the cross, showing further progress towards repentance and salvation. The building in the background is closer and more accessible. It is no longer the forbidding fortress of figure 2 but a small church or chapel with an open door. In front of the structure stands the *bon ange* awaiting the Soul's arrival. But the Soul's journey is not yet over: three cherubs, flitting about like flies in front of it, represent the senses which still attach the Soul to "ces folles amours du monde."

In figure 4, finally, Christ himself has descended to lead the Soul by the hand into retreat. The three cherubs of the previous illustration are shown drowning in a sea of penitent tears which

serves to separate the Soul from the world. This scene marks the closest *point de rencontre* between illustration and main text:

[J]e vous propose une Isle que vous formerez pour vous & en vous mesme, vostre corps sera la terre, & vos pleurs les eaux qui l'environneront et couleront d'une vie repentante. (24)

Significantly, there are no buildings in this figure; in contrast to human habitations, the dwelling place of God is an open space:

O mon Dieu et mon Createur... que mon Ange me montre dans un *espace*, orné & divinement embelly de vos hierarchies celestes. (190)

To summarize, Nervèze's allegory is both macrocosmic and microcosmic, expanding and contracting in vertiginous fashion like Pascal's infinite universe. On the one hand, the whole earth (*terre*), as distinguished from the world (*monde*), is an *Isle sainte*, "un Hermitage aux esprits solitaires et contemplatifs" (444). On the other hand, the place of sanctuary is localized within the human body, which becomes a whole world unto itself. The narrator compares himself to Aeneas who, arriving on an island, nailed his arms to the door. "Ces armes, c'est la Croix, la porte c'est le coeur; ou les cloüant avec des cloux d'amour elles y demeureront eternellement" (445-6). Within the microcosmic earth/body, the heart becomes the sanctuary which Christ's arms (the Cross) identify as his own. In addition, the nails which pierce the heart as the crosses are nailed to it reproduce Christ's sufferings as his body was nailed to the cross. Finally, the crosses nailed to the door recall the medieval tradition of planting crosses outside the church door to indicate the limits of *clôture* (as was also the medieval custom at Fontevraud). There is no attempt to illustrate this conceit; perhaps the result would have been too baroque! In a move which can be conceived of allegorically if not represented visually, the soul takes refuge within the heart, protected by its dedication to Christ, as the

religious take refuge behind convent walls. Paradoxically, in the end it is the body which offers the soul a retreat from the world.

The question then arises: whose body? *L'Isle sainte* is dedicated to a woman, Magdalene de Montclair, who is directly apostrophized as “vous” in the text. In her honor (if the word is appropriate) the narrative contains a meditation on Mary Magdalen who cries an ocean of penitent tears (as illustrated in Figure 4.) It hardly seems flattering for Nervèze to compare his patroness to this personage; Mary Magdalen, fragile woman *par excellence*, represents human carnality in its most aggravated form. But she also was redeemed by Christ.

Like Mary Magdalene, the soul of the first-person narrator is both female and “une miserable pecheresse” (101). But unlike Magdalene de Montclair, who is addressed formally as “vous”, the Soul is addressed as “tu” and personified as a girl child towards whom the narrator assumes a protective, avuncular attitude: “Et me souvient qu'en un jardin sacré ou ie t'ay autresfois solitairement entretenuë, tu as appris de moi plusieurs secrets de la vie contemplative” (94). The *jardin sacré* suggests both a real cloister garden and the *hortus conclusus* of the virgin body. It also evokes associations with the *mariage mystique* of female Soul and male Savior to which Nervèze alludes in the text (34-35).

On the point of gender, however, text and illustration are found to be in disharmony. While the narrator defines the Soul as allegorically (and not just grammatically) female, the drawings depict it as a naked, somewhat epicene, but clearly male being. The only female figure in the illustrations is the woman in the mirror, who plays the role of temptress and embodiment of concupiscence. The reason for this disparity is unclear; after all, from the Middle Ages on, allegorical illustrations had typically represented spiritual qualities as female (Woshinsky 151). Perhaps the illustrator of Nervèze's work, which was published under the authority of the Sorbonne, felt reluctant to give the Soul a nude female form.³

Whatever the reason, in *L'Hermitage de l'Isle Sainte* feminine attribution is only allowed to take place in the context of allegori-

cal narrative. within the strange, shifting and infinitely malleable discourse of allegory, it is possible for the (female) Soul to take refuge within a (male) body (the hermitage, the convent, the Church) which will protect its frailty and seal its purity with the arms of Christ. In Nervèze's particular "construction of femininity," the Soul can retain her femaleness as long as she is disembodied and invisible. But in the "real world" of the Catholic Reformation, is the body male or female, temple or temptation? The failure to resolve this issue helps set the scene for a somber, if not tortured, classical spirituality.

University of Miami

NOTES

¹ The first edition of *L'Hermitage de l'Isle Sainte* (chez Antoine du Brueil et Toussaincts du Bray, 1612) is in the Reserve of the Bibliothèque Nationale. The edition used in this article (Rouen: chez Nicolas Loselet, 1615) is in the collection of the Folger Library. References to *L'Hermitage* are drawn from the 1615 edition and will be indicated in the text by page number.

² The juxtaposition of classical/Renaissance and religious motifs in the illustrations reinforces the opposition between world and retreat, sin and salvation; for example, in figure 2, mythological Amour nearly brushes wings with Christian angel. To distinguish them, the Angel always wears a robe while the Cupids are represented nude and carrying bows and arrows.

³ The illustrator of the 1612 edition was a certain Léonard Gaultier. I have not been able to consult this edition and do not know whether the illustrations are the same as in the 1615 Rouen edition for which the name of the illustrator is not given. Cf. Léonard Gotter, *Livres à figures édités en France de 1601 à 1660* (Paris: J. Duportail, 1914) 156-160.

WORKS CITED OR CONSULTED

Camus, Jean-Pierre. *Elise*. Paris: Chez Claude Chappelet, 1624.

Carrion, Maria M. *Arquitectura y cuerpo en la figura autorial de Teresa de Jesus*. Madrid: Anthropos, 1994.

Duport, Danièle. "'De la solitude' ou 'l'arrière boutique' de Montaigne." *Bulletin de la Société des amis de Montaigne*. 8.15-16 (July-December 1999), 88-98.

Woshinsky, Barbara. "Allégorie et corporalité féminine: les deux Muses de Poussin." In R. Tobin ed. *Le corps au XVII^e siècle*. Paris/Seattle/Tübingen: Biblio17, 1995. 151-160.