

## Introduction

### *The Poetics of Monasticism*

**T**he argument that lends this collection of essays its coherence is based on two simple premises. First, I take it for a fact that, up to the twelfth century and beyond, the liberal arts have been underlying Christianity's each and every literary expression. Second, in my view it is monasticism that has both incorporated and transformed the liberal arts into a reading culture, the poetical nature of which has been hitherto insufficiently appreciated. From a professional, historical point of view both assumptions are truisms. Or rather they should be. Ever since Henri-Irénée Marrou's seminal book, *Saint Augustine and the End of Classical Culture*, each historian of late antiquity and the Middle Ages has known that he is denied direct access to the texts of Augustine and, by implication, of his patristic predecessors and medieval successors. Whatever religious treasures those texts—as indeed the text that conditioned all others, the Bible—might have in store, they were not just for the taking. Jealously guarded by their custodians, the liberal arts, they had first to be mastered before they could be enjoyed. With a stroke of genius Augustine had blended the technical requirements of the liberal arts—the educational process of learning how to speak and read—with the concept of mental training. Thus the mastering of language turned into a religious exercise if not a fight. Like Jacob's fight with the angel, the struggle for the word, from the learning of the ABC's to the spiritual understanding of the Bible, was the one and only way in which incarnation—the central concept of Christianity—could materialize. Of course, if He had so wished, God could have acted in a less laborious manner as, for instance, through the offices of an angel. However, “if He had seemed to reject the opportunity of communicating his

Word through men to men, the human condition would have been bypassed.”<sup>1</sup> Always on its way out, the Word had to be confronted with violent reading in order to be “kept down,” preserved, and understood. Time and again two desperate cries can be heard in Christian—monastic—literature reflecting the urgency of understanding a text: “I will not let you go unless you bless me,” and “abide with us, for soon evening will fall.”

This study is not primarily historical, or, more precisely, it is not historical in a conventional way. As I shall point out in more detail below, it is my foremost ambition to distill from monastic literature a poetical tool that can be used to decipher the literary structure of religious texts. Yet it goes without saying that such a procedure cannot be ahistorical. The very technique of monastic reading, focused on leisure and immobility, is part and parcel of history. I will take this leisure and immobility as my point of departure, and thence forge my poetical key. This key will have the shape of circularity and manifest itself in its most perfect guise the one moment in the history of Christianity at which monastic reading is characterized by a perfect blend of rationality and affection. Of course, so bold an assumption with regard to “moments in history” is a *parti pris* on my part. As such it is rather arbitrary. I am quite willing to admit that the same point can be made in many other, different ways. Far from being a highlight, this “one moment,” from a linear viewpoint of history in search of a chain of historical causality, is nothing but one moment. Only in that shape can it have the power and strength it arguably has and reveal other moments in history as counterpoints. Thus, although I shall discuss this particular manifestation of monastic poetics (in the work of Anselm of Canterbury) in the second, central part of the book, its sheer force permeates the other parts as well.

Taking this monastico-historiographical point of departure into account, the historical underpinning of my literary activities centers on one or two basic concerns. First, in spite of an overwhelming increase in the number of studies into the formal aspects of medieval literature, monasticism tends to be systematically ignored, as if the realm of religion should stay untouched as far as its technical structure is concerned. This neglect is all the more interesting because—to make another sweeping statement—theological studies proper from the second half of the twelfth century up to the present day tend to take their formal, “scholastic,” that is, argumentative, structure for granted.<sup>2</sup> Second, in my view it is indeed the shape of

later “scholastic” theology and the fact that, in the course of the later Middle Ages, scholastic theology and devotion parted ways that have prevented historians from reading the—older—corpus of monastic literature properly. Third, the combined forces of doctrinal theology and devotion (as an anachronistic rereading and reuse of older devotional texts) have denied literary historians, as indeed all lovers of literature, the benefit of appreciating monasticism as one of the constitutive elements of Western literature. For once, it would not be altogether anachronistic if notions common in modern literature, such as the artificial versus the psychological nature of the human subject in art works or the nonlinearity of narrative, were to be traced back in earlier, monastic sources.<sup>3</sup>



Like the site of a monastic building complex the artifice of eternity breathes an air of peace and innocence. If we look, for example, at the twelfth-century Cistercian abbey of Senanque in Provence, we are struck by the peace and calm that seem to bring rest and control to the wildness of the environment. Languishing in the Mediterranean sun at midday it seems to be “such stuff as dreams are made on” and its life “is rounded with a sleep.” All the outsider can observe is the calm of the place, which gives the distinct impression of uneventfulness. Yet there is “death in the afternoon”; indeed, a drama is going on that is all the more dramatic because it is invisible.<sup>4</sup>

The early monks who withdrew to the deserts of Egypt and Syria, for example, were known and admired for their spectacular battles against the incessant attacks of demons. Interestingly, underneath this demonology—which, anachronistically, may seem naive to the modern mind—there was an early warning system based on a sophisticated psychology. Thus the selfsame monk who can be seen battling at night against the devil dressed in his traditional outfit of black monstrosity does not cease to exercise his mind so as to be able to recognize the devil’s tricks. Disguised as “the angel of midday” (that is, the angel of light), the demon tries to manifest himself *sub forma boni*. Only a well-trained eye is able to distinguish between deceitful appearance and reality. As for this invisible night side of the monastery, a story about Macarius, one of the desert fathers, illustrates the point.<sup>5</sup> In the middle of the night the devil, in the disguise of a monk, knocks on the door of Macarius’s cell, inviting Macarius to join him and

inspect the place where the fellow monks celebrate the vigils. Macarius's perspicacity prevents him from being tricked. He recognizes the devil for what he is and refuses to accept the latter's invitation, arguing that the society of the demons and that of the monks have nothing in common. However, Macarius's perspicacity turns out to be only partial. For the devil cynically retorts, "don't you realize that no meeting of monks takes place without our presence?" In order to prove his point the devil now takes Macarius to the meeting. The scene is utterly shocking. The monks are there all right, praying and chanting. But there are also black, Ethiopian boys, running around, dancing, and sitting on the monks' heads, distracting the quiet company from their official business and lulling them to sleep. Meanwhile, the boys use this splendid opportunity to infuse dark thoughts into those pious minds. The next morning the monks look unchanged. But when asked by Macarius if any dark thought had entered their minds during the vigils, they realize—and admit—that they had been distracted.

So the sleep and dreams that round the monastery's peaceful existence are not as unproblematic as they seem. But even the invisible intrusion of demons into the enclosed space and time of liturgy, chant, and prayer is not all there is to the story. Underneath this invisibility of demonic presence lurks another, more serious presence in the shape of sadness, melancholy, aridity, desolation, and tepidness. In short, it is death in the afternoon. The very invisibility of the demonic assaults in Macarius's story seems to produce a kind of double dramatic effect. Admittedly, together with Macarius we are witnesses to the nocturnal scene of dancing demons. But in reality all we see is praying and chanting monks. They are not *really* distracted. They still sing and pray. Yet deep down, invisible to both themselves and the eye of the beholder, the threat of indifference and aridity eats away at the stability of the well-protected life within the walls of the monastery.

Another way this "death in the afternoon" manifests itself is through the sudden reversal of religious experience into despair. Like a manic-depressive patient the monk can suddenly turn from ecstatic joy about the pleasures of the divine presence to a sense of utter sadness and desolation. The father of Western, ascetic monasticism, John Cassian, has expressed this aridity of the soul as follows:

And next [after the experience of divine presence] we are suddenly and without any preceding cause filled with anxiety and depressed because of an irrational feeling of sadness. This feeling is so strong that we do not only have an increasing sense of aridity. We also hate being in our cell. Reading [scripture] fills us with repulsion. Our prayer turns into an unstable, wavering utterance as if spoken by someone who is drunk. As a result, in spite of our sighs and frantic efforts, our mind is not able to redirect itself to its previous course. And the more intently we focus our attention on contemplating God, the more vehemently it is forced through a slippery side path to its unstable course. Thus all spiritual fruits are made worthless. Consequently, neither a desire for the kingdom of heaven nor a fear of hell is capable of rousing the mind out of this lethal sleep.<sup>6</sup>

So much, then, for the safe haven of the monastery. Exactly what is hiding behind this “demon of midday,” trying to lull the happy, monastic soul asleep? In psychological terms, it is the intensity of the experience of happiness. Such intensity just cannot last. Just as the soul is lifted up into an excessive feeling of bliss, so desolation strikes back and brings the soul down to earth. Interestingly, when Cassian describes this downfall of the soul, he uses phrases that are traditionally applied to mystical experience, such as *raptus* and *excessus*; the difference with mysticism is that, unlike the brief moment of bliss, the violent attack of sadness and despondency captures as well as freezes the soul into lethality.

Describing our monk as potentially depressed is not enough, however, and psychology is not all that counts. The monk’s melancholia does not result from the general tribulations of life. His is not a despondency about lost parents or broken relationships. Rather, it is the artificial nature of his “splendid isolation” that makes him unhappy. The mechanics of the monastic existence, the unending cycle of prayer and chant, the iron rhythm of the daily schedule, the lofty ideal of taking one’s brethren to have the faces of angels—however ugly they may appear to the gaze of the weary observer—the treadmill of meditation and reading without ever being distracted and free—for even the free moments are part of the rule that regulates the free life, the “holiday” of the *vacare deo*—all this constitutes the life without a shadow that is threatened by the death in the afternoon. Consequently, using words such as “despondency,” “desolation,” or “sadness” to describe the monk’s state of mind is inadequate to the extent that

it suggests a certain visibility. But we do not see monks who are melancholy and depressed. Far more dangerous than such public symptoms and, in fact, underlying all monastic sadness is the most untheatrical of all temptations, tepidness. As an invisible drawback in the routine of daily life, an undramatic bend rather than total despair, tepidness is the real threat to the stability of monastic life. It is the ultimate manifestation of the demon of midday. Its effect is that of someone holding a match rather than actually setting fire to the powder (to use an anachronistic metaphor). True, explosions do occur: witness the sudden stroke of aridity and despair as described by Cassian. But they originate in the *aevum* and the *longue durée* suggested by the artificial monastic context and the art-full way of life. Improbable though it may seem from the viewpoint of the weak structures of general society, it is indeed this nature of *aevum* that both opens up and reinforces the verticality, that is, the *real* drama of monastic despair.



When taken literally, the technique of the *contemptus mundi* seems to function as the means through which the monk withdraws from the world, both the world at large and the world within himself. Yet its real focus alerts us to a problem that is more serious than the status of what is supposedly left behind when fleeing the world. It is the fullness of the divine presence itself that is problematic. As a result, the monastic claim of a real and intense life versus the weakness of the world is under the permanent threat of falling short. Should this threat materialize, things would be turned upside down—or, from the perspective of normal, worldly life, be reduced to their normal state—leaving the monastery behind as the empty artifice it is. Here the “death in the afternoon” and the technique of monastic despair meet. The monastery and its rituals represent divine presence. But the divine is not for the taking; it is not even there. As far as visibility is concerned, the divine is no less concealed than the Ethiopian boys in Macarius’s story. Languishing in the midday sun, the monastery that is supposed to contain and preserve the divine presence is as much to be activated and “run” by its inhabitants as the nocturnal activities of the demon are to be discerned by the well-trained eye. On the other hand, the divine is overwhelmingly present in the same way as the midday sun, through its sheer intensity blinding the eye of the beholder. In order to hold those disparate elements of presence and absence together, the monastic mind keeps exercising through prayer, chant, and meditation. Technically speaking, the

*contemptus mundi* meditation, that is, the exercise in despair about oneself and the world, sets the pattern of the monastic life, thereby preventing the self from dissolving into the vagueness and diffusion of the world and preparing it for “living the way one reads.” No wonder that so intense and focused a way of living is by definition on the brink of falling short, not as a dramatic collapse with a concomitant display of despair, but through the subtle offices of tepidness: death in the afternoon. Out of its well-hidden position of slumber, tepidness, in turn, may “suddenly and without any preceding cause” take on the shape of utter aridity and desolation.



If we now turn to the design of a poetical tool that may help us to “read” the picture thus evoked, the simplest way seems to call on the concept of circularity. Just as, on the face of it, narrative prose is characterized by its sequential structure, so monastic literature is shaped by circularity and repetition. In facing monastic circularity we no doubt confront the problem of time. Now, it is a given fact that classical culture had furnished early and early medieval Christianity with a fixed set of literary genres, thereby lending it the same air of timelessness as suggested by its own stable forms of epic, drama, and lyricism. Considered from the perspective of literary genres, most monastic texts seem to focus on the ongoing process of exegetical rumination, as if the monks were doing their very best to exclude all traces of a culture that—from the monastic viewpoint at least—is marked by a competing stability of literary forms. Yet this should not lead us to believe that the art of rhetoric was forgotten.<sup>7</sup> Far from it. For the monastic lifestyle, reflecting as it did the leisure (*otium*) of the Hellenistic *litteratus*, would seem ideally suited to incorporate the “timeless” nature of classical literature.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the surface of calm and rest so characteristic of monastic literary production may well be deceptive. The very circularity of its shape introduces the possibility of sudden contractions into the seemingly uninterrupted flow of contemplation and rumination. Thus we are witness to sudden flashes of bliss and damnation, of hope and despair. These are in fact the result of time making its entrance in the guise of eternity’s shadow. The intensity of time is such as to break and shorten the permanence and fixity of literary expression and, conversely, to lengthen and extend its own flash-like appearance into a protracted suggestion of suspense.

This is what I mean when I speak of the hold of eternity over time.

Through the use of my poetical key I intend to unveil this hold not only in monastic literature, but also, by way of contrast, in other literary works as well. It is my conviction that between the fixed genres of classical and classicist literature and the outburst into free expression of Romanticism and (post)modernism a mode of reading and writing existed that was rooted in the immobility of a ritual lifestyle. Yet the basically temporal nature and fragility of human existence caused that same mode of reading permanently to be hovering on the generic edge.

Admittedly, the average interpretation of medieval, and particularly monastic, texts does not pay attention to this fragility. Ever since the publication of Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Culture and the Latin Middle Ages*, the general idea about medieval literature has tended, in one way or another, to be associated with the fixity of genres and literary clichés.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, one of the ironies of the historiographical trade has been that both theologically orientated interpreters and historians of mentality—undisturbed, it seems, by the barriers of formal expression—carry on the business of distilling their own meaning, cultural as well as spiritual, from the sources at hand. However, neither approach does justice to the special status of monastic texts. As for those texts, the hold of eternity over time that seems to result from reading them is intrinsically present *inside* them. Due to the very embrace of eternity and time inside the text, time reveals its true and fragile nature.

In contrast to the pity and fear raised by tragedy, the laughter raised by comedy, the emotions over war and peace brought on by epics, and the affective mood of passion inspired by lyricism, the fragile nature of the human existence dwells inside the monastic texts themselves. For this reason they demand to be handled with care by the reader. The reader, in turn, does not himself dwell outside the text. He is at its very core, not as an implied reader, but as its very soul. This is what the ultimate structure of monastic poetics is about. The Bible, writings by the Church Fathers, sermons or meditations by the father abbot, all this is the source material for reading, rumination, and contemplation. But this does not make the texts themselves soulless. They are “memorials,” living products of the authors’ memories that, in turn, memorize other texts that had been revolving around the same source material as that of their readers.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the act of reading is nothing but one memory meeting and absorbing another one, a *memoria memoriae*, a memory of memory.



Precisely at this meeting point we see the fragility of time and the nature of temporality itself come to the fore. As the genres of epic, drama, and lyricism in a sense externalize time and events by the sheer force of their (formal) power as handled by the reader, they maintain a delicate balance of suspense and relief, distance and proximity. In one way or another, the reader experiences width and breadth. In contrast, the experience of monastic reading is based on sheer verticality, the timeless extension of the reading process notwithstanding. Precisely at the point where the gaze of the reader touches the text, time and eternity meet, grasping the reader and forcing him to turn inward, to memorize, to construe and reconstrue time and history in their vertical guise. Consequently, the routine of reading (and praying and singing), rather than representing uninterrupted continuity, consists of repetition. It may create the suggestion of wholeness and continuity if seen from a distance. But on closer inspection the technicalities of the composition are revealed. It is the ever-repeated act of turning inward, of activating memory, that constitutes the so-called calm and continuity of monastic rumination and contemplation. In the repetition lies the truth.

So, from the monastic viewpoint, to read a text is neither an arbitrary nor a harmless act. To touch it means not only to be caught but also to be drawn into it, and into the abyss of one's own memorial self. At the same time, as I have pointed out, like the Word that is at the source of all language and understanding, the text itself remains inaccessible, resisting any appropriation. It can only be conquered in a slow and sustained fight. The result of this fight is a vertical version of epic, drama, and lyricism. The same ingredients that constitute the usual stories of war and peace, happiness and doom, love and hate also go into the making of monastic memory. Yet in a striking difference from the conventional genres, they are all being contracted into the *punctum* or *puncta* of the monastic "narrative," while at the same time expanding into the ever-streaming flow of rumination and meditation.

As a result of time's special manifestation inside the monastic text, the notion of *otium* changes face. Having mastered the liberal arts, the Hellenistic *litteratus* was supposed to apply his skills at leisure anywhere and at any time. Now there is no denying that our eleventh- or twelfth-century Benedictine saw himself as the proud successor of a culture in which education in the liberal arts was the key to a successful career, either sacred or profane. But, although monastic schools such as Le Bec were to remain the

training centers in which the applicability of the arts “anytime and anywhere” were still being taught, here too the hold of eternity over time can be seen to have struck relentlessly.<sup>11</sup> To get a better grip on this matter, let us have a look at Anselm’s introductory remarks to his *Prayers or Meditations*:<sup>12</sup>

The *Prayers or Meditations* have been written to excite the mind of the reader to love or fear God or to analyze one’s own mind. Therefore, they are not to be read in turmoil but in quiet, not cursorily or in a hurry but slowly, with an intent and scrupulous meditation. Nor should it be the reader’s ambition to read them in their entirety, but to the degree that he feels himself capable, with the help of God, of igniting the feeling of prayer or to the degree that it pleases him. Nor is it necessary always to begin at the beginning. The reader is free to begin wherever he likes. For that purpose the text of the prayers and meditations is divided into different parts with the help of paragraphs so as to enable the reader to begin and to stop where he likes. Thus neither the prolixity nor the frequent repetition of the same subject matter generates a feeling of boredom. Rather, the reader manages to acquire some of the devotional affectivity for the purpose of which those prayers were made.

It is tempting to jump to conclusions and focus all our attention on the last remark in this passage, as it highlights the process of monastic reading as one bent on achieving devotional affectivity. However, such an interpretation would be quite anachronistic. This interpretation would apply to the later Middle Ages and beyond, as indeed one of the characteristics of late medieval and early modern religious imagery is to externalize devotional feelings. To do so effectively the imagery had to be tough and, in a sense, unambiguous. This means that late medieval texts, rather than being the meeting point of their own (fathomless) mnemonic structure and the memory of the reader—a memory of memory—are designed to help the reader, through the very toughness of their imagery, to sharpen his mind and to arouse affectivity and devotion. What is conspicuously absent in those later ways of reading is the subtle poetical attitude Anselm requires here from his reader, symbolized as it is by the highly paradoxical notion of *otium*.

At first glance, those reading instructions do not seem paradoxical at all. *Non in tumultu sed in quiete*, “not in turmoil but in quiet”: that is the

proper situation for reading and meditation. Still, after all that we have said about the simultaneous presence of hope and despair, the notion of monastic leisure takes on a quite deceptive ring. Far from representing aristocratic leisure that grants the reader freedom of movement and an even more basic freedom of choice whether to read or not to read, the monastic reader, wherever he is, is not at liberty not to read (to paraphrase Augustine's dictum that man is not at liberty to ignore that he is living). It is true, on the one hand, that the leisure, the slow pace and the quiet required for monastic reading, have to be taken quite literally. It is also true that the introductory remarks in which the author expresses his concern with regard to his possibly boring the reader is an integral part of the very complex of leisure that was underlying classical and early Christian culture for ages. On the surface of it, Anselm's language, with its use of turns and *topoi* (such as the modesty *topos*), displays beauty and a formalism as elegant as that of his predecessors, both pagan and Christian. But unseen by the external eye is the true shape of this leisure, slowness, and calm, its being tied up, at any point on the circumference of the circle, to the fathomless depths of memory present *inside* the text. Thus the reader is indeed free to start or stop wherever he chooses. But, as soon as his ear is touched by a single word, hope or despair, life or terror, he becomes drawn into the abyss of his own memory, as the place where all is said and done. The result of this internalized reading is supposed to yield devotional affectivity. However, the desired state of sweetness and joy is not reached outside the text by the soul's encounter with imagery and words that batter it into happiness. On hearing the words, whether sweet or harsh, the monastic soul becomes inevitably drawn into a reading game in which it recognizes those external words to be part of a memory shared by the text (author) and reader alike, a memory that is ever remote and ever close. In this way it becomes the object of continuous rumination. How could it be otherwise? How could this process be interrupted without the reading monk falling prey to the vicissitudes of extramural time, to the turmoil of the world outside in which reading, like anything else, is bound to be "superficial" and restless, to be lacking in *otium*? Be that as it may, the price the monk pays for his own rest and leisure is high. Not at liberty not to read, his is a violent life. Like Jacob fighting with the angel at night, the reading monk will not let his opponent go unless he is blessed by him. But what

about the angel? Does he, for his part, ever contemplate the possibility of giving up? Does the hold of eternity over time ever, for a single moment, flag? Does Venus, *tout entière à sa proie attachée*, ever loosen her grip?<sup>13</sup>

The first two parts of the present study, “Violence” and “Density,” focus on the practice of monastic poetics as outlined in this introduction. In the first section I explore the different ways in which the concept of monastic leisure, once it is recognized for what it really is, that is, the slow and continuous realization of divine perfection, is full of violence both intrinsically and extrinsically. The driving force behind all this is a technical principle. It is the underlying linkage between divine and human realities that is brought out, or, rather, forced to be brought out by technicalities of language and thought. I deal with rhetoric as a means of tackling the (monastic) problems of absence and presence, turmoil and rest, war and peace, all of which result from the hold of eternity over time. In part two, “Density,” I draw the logical conclusion from this stance with the help of the most “logical” monastic thinker ever, Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). This section is entirely devoted to his work as both the most artificial and most elegant expression of monastic poetics. Tracing the way in which Anselm plays with dialectics (logic) and rhetoric—reinforcing the one with the help of the other—I discuss the poetical implications of his famous single argument (*unum argumentum*). In a sense his use of dialectic can be seen as a refined application of rhetoric. Together those two *artes* are supposed to establish once and for all, in an “artificial” manner, the link with divine perfection. The stakes thus having been raised by the introduction of dialectics as a means to achieve greater transparency, problems of violence, failure, and fragility will emerge ever more dramatically. Once, with the help of irrefutable logic, perfection is established, blackness and destruction will not be slow to follow suit. Ultimately, in terms of the arts, it is the lightness and elegance of Anselm’s Benedictine Latin (in which the argument is wrapped) that forces evil to come out of its hiding place in order next to reveal its shape of utter nothingness.

It will come as no surprise that this particular monastic way of reading was not destined to survive. In need of protective living conditions symbolized by the walls of the monastery, monastic reading lost its specific flavor once devotional language became the business of an urban society that emerged

in the course of the twelfth century. In that society devotion was still to be found in a book, but the book no longer had a soul of its own. For that it needed a coherence and density, a “simultaneousness” no longer provided by the new circumstances. Rather than being part and parcel of that process, books (of prayer and meditation) increasingly became the vehicles—however precious in themselves—to bring out despair and joy in the reader.<sup>14</sup> Like the increasingly important capital and money, books became the means to a goal rather than functioning as an extension of a living memory.

Now the title of part three, “Exile,” might suggest that I consider the development from monastic to other, less densely composed forms of (devotional) literature as a decline from grace. From the viewpoint of monastic poetics this would indeed seem to be the case, although from that same viewpoint decline is as indifferent a notion as growth. In my overall approach to the matter I stick to indifference. My main concern is to introduce the reader to a neglected chapter in the history of literature, not, as I have pointed out, for historical but for poetical reasons. In order to bring out the full impact of monastic poetics I confront it with later developments that, historiographically speaking, have tended to absorb it, turning the history of devotion into one uninterrupted and intimate story of the faithful soul. This way of dealing with the matter has the additional advantage of revealing the newness and harshness of an imagery that was no longer part of the monastic setting and that has traditionally been labeled as sweet (*dulcis*) by Catholics and Protestants alike.

From a historical point of view we may be rightly said to witness here the transition from an oral society to the world of the written record. But then again, I should like to point to history’s indifference. If, on the one hand, the modern world is governed by the written record and its soulless status that is the condition for its effectiveness and success, on the other hand, “texts with a soul” reemerge as, I suppose, they have never ceased to do. To drive this point home, a spectacular example of the combined presence of textual soul and soullessness is presented in the last chapter of this book, dealing with Joyce and Ignatius of Loyola. If Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* can be read as the epitome of externalized imagery and its Ignatian application to life (and the reader), his *Finnegans Wake* abounds with “soul.”

So, in one way or another, what I have coined here as the poetics of

monasticism and the artificiality of Christianity has lived on, not only in the shape of literature but also in the high-tech guise of popular culture. In the British television sitcom *The Royle Family*, a working-class family sits as languidly and ritually before the TV set as the monastic community was gathered around the persons or objects that constituted its memory: the preaching abbot, the books of prayer and meditation, the church altar. The ruminations of the family, whose frank use of “vulgar” language would not have displeased Joyce, are no less structureless, nonlinear, non-narrative, and repetitive than the incidents that happen on the circumference of the monastic circle. As for the television, it is never switched off. Like the monastic book, it is part of the community game. If the monk is not at liberty not to read, the Royle family and its visitors are not at liberty not to watch. Haphazard images and sounds from the screen trigger the family conversation. And although the individual mind may seem to escape the monastic fate of being driven inward on seeing, however remotely, the image or hearing the word, even that may be misleading. The television picture itself may suggest superficiality, but that does not necessarily apply to the viewer’s experience. Once the viewer’s eye and ear touch the languidness of the scene they are drawn in and down. What they hear and see is time being killed in slow motion, hovering, like the monastery, between boredom, cruelty, and bliss.