

Preface

The monastic soul is governed by hope and despair. In order to achieve the first, one has to specialize in the second; thus also the author who aims to give an account of his reading of monastic texts. Ever since I wrote my doctoral thesis on Anselm of Canterbury many years ago, I have been fascinated by the sheer genius, hovering between desperation and joy, with which he succeeded in blending beauty of style with rigor of argumentation. Just as one rereads and rediscovers the great narratives of civilization without ever striking rock bottom, so the basic moods of joy and despair, artfully manipulated by Anselm and other great medieval thinkers, appear to be inexhaustible in eloquence and expressiveness.

From a more modern point of view, talking about “moods” would seem to be mainly about feeling and experience. And indeed it must be acknowledged that much of the directness and authenticity of the stirrings of the modern psyche derives from the way in which Western devotion has developed since the late Middle Ages. As the core of my book, which deals with an earlier period (the flourishing of monastic literature between 1000 and 1200), demonstrates, it is clear that, instead of being concerned with authentic emotions, the monastic author focuses on the artificiality of a technical process in which emotions are being established and handled as part of performative exercises rather than as feelings that are present and accessible as such.

One of the ways to write about this complex body of literature is to turn to the rhetorical techniques at hand and analyze their historical function in medieval (monastic) sources. This is the approach of the great Swiss scholar Peter von Moos, to whose immensely learned work I owe much. In

my effort to read and represent monastic writings in their entirety—in the unity of their technical and emotive aspects—my inspiration has always been drawn from modernist literature, in particular Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*. His focus on *Genauigkeit und die Seele* (precision and the soul) seems eminently applicable to Anselm and to other monastic thinkers, as does his playful and ironic use of technical, scientific language. The subtle shades that can be discovered in Romanesque literary “sculpture” with the help of Musil and others are, in my view, proofs of the fact that the discipline of (literary) history could profit from more recent specimens of literature if only to break the great chain of (deceitful) historical continuity. It was not, therefore, fear of anachronism that kept Musil and the likes of him out of my earlier writings on Anselm, but the economy of focus: *Genauigkeit*/precision. Both aspects, the economy of focus and the possibility of a *historical* assessment of intensity and precision, are expressed most wonderfully in Ernst Bloch's Musil-like characterization of his friend, the conductor Otto Klemperer: *nirgends brennen wir genauer* (“nowhere do we burn with greater precision”). Bloch's adage seems quite suitable for describing Klemperer's career, haunted and almost destroyed by recurring periods of manic depressive moods. It was not the great man's moodiness in itself that made his conducting so intense and precise; rather, moodiness, however aggressive and unsettling, was to be seen as the side effect of the focus, precision, and intensity of his art. This, to my mind, is exactly the way the monastic mind operates. Joy and despair do not cease to be linked to a burning place, the *paradisus claustralis*, whose depths, both horrible and blissful, are unfathomable.

In the course of years I have built up a considerable debt to a number of scholars and friends. Ever since our first meeting in 1974, Arjo Vanderjagt has been my loyal companion in matters Anselmian and beyond. The secretary of the International Anselm Committee, Helmut Kohlenberger, has been indefatigable in organizing Anselm conferences all over the globe, from which many chapters in this book have sprung. I appreciate his friendship over the years and our conversations about academia, religion, and culture. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Jules Vuillemin, whose rigor of argumentation, stylistic elegance, and wit are not without Anselmian overtones.

John Ashton, Mette Bruun, Michael Clanchy, Bram Kempers, Helmut Kohlenberger, Frans-Willem Korsten, Willemien Otten, Rob Pauls, and Ineke van't Spijker have read the manuscript, or parts of it, and provided me with illuminating comments. As always, my colleague and friend Alastair Hamilton has taken care of my English in his customary efficient way.

I would like to thank Willemien Otten and Hent de Vries for their continuous support and Bram Kempers, not only for his accurate and sympathetic reading of the manuscript, but also for our friendly conversations originating in our shared method of exercising our administrative duties in the service of our university by wandering around the streets of Amsterdam.

It is my pleasure to dedicate this book to Peter Cramer of Winchester College, England. Not only has he furnished me with countless ideas that have gone into the conception of this book, but he also is the most stubbornly leisurely reader—and person—I know. A master of procrastination, he has positioned himself outside the production-driven culture of present academia. Yet, as far as I am concerned, for any future studies of the humanities to make sense, the slowing down for reflection and meditation is a prerequisite. If, from a historical perspective, this book takes as its point of departure a period of transition from the slow pace of monastic culture to the outburst of mental energy in towns and universities, it may also be a reminder of the beauty of intellectual rumination once practiced and now almost forgotten but for the Cramers of this world.

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