

The Virgin Suckling St. Bernard

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IN an article by Millard Meiss on *The Madonna of Humility* which appeared in the *Art Bulletin*, XVIII (1936), the author describes on pages 460-461 a Majorcan painting of the fourteenth century representing "St. Bernard... kneeling before the Virgin (a statue of the Madonna del Latte 'come to life', according to the legend) and drinking her milk". The author adduces other examples of the motif in Christian art, and cites literary references to the Virgin not only as "Mater omnium" but also as "Nutrix omnium". According to Meiss such "miraculous appearances" are illustrations of the Virgin's "charity". While this is certainly not incorrect, it ought also to be pointed out that the representation has not merely this edifying value but also a further and strictly metaphysical significance: that of a formal adoption. It would, moreover, accord with all that we know of St. Bernard as the exponent of a doctrine of *deificatio*, to suppose that the "miracle" had an especially appropriate application to him in this sense.

The motif itself illustrates particularly well the remark of Andrae (*Die ionische Säule, Bauform oder Symbol*, 1933, Schlusswort) that "a formal symbol can remain alive not only for millennia, but... can spring into life again after an interruption of thousands of years," because, as he adds, "the power from the spiritual world, which forms one part of the symbol, is eternal". The more ancient history of this symbolic suckling is in fact connected with Hercules; the theme has been discussed by Eva Fiesel, *The Hercules Legend on the Etruscan Mirror from Volterra*, in *Am. Journal of Philology*, LVII (1936), pp. 130-136. An engraving on this Etruscan mirror of the fourth century B.C. shows "Hercules as a bearded man, with his club and his lion's skin, in a half-kneeling position near Juno, who is offering him her breast... This scene, showing Hercules on Olympus, apparently has a symbolic meaning; it represents the adoption of the hero by Juno. The act of suckling (implying a new birth) as a juristic symbol for the performance of an adoption is also known from other peoples. In the case of Hercules, his new birth is at the same time a resurrection. According to Bayet it includes the gift of immortality, since the suckling is performed by a deity". The subscribed legend is interpreted to read: *Haec (est) monstratio (?) quomodo (?) mortalis (?) Hercules Junonis filius factum sit*, or in place of *factum sit*, possibly *nascebatur*, and this is evidently "an explanation of the significance of the action portrayed". The translation would be "Here is shown how the mortal Hercules became the legitimate son of Juno", or possibly "was [re-]born as the legitimate son of Juno". It is a matter of initiation, second birth, and recognition. In the same way we may say of the Majorcan painting that here is shown how the mortal Bernard became the legitimate son of the Virgin.¹

This subject of a divine "adoption" was treated by Cardinal Nicolas de Cusa, Bishop of Brixen (1400-1464), in his *De filiatione Dei* (1445). The Cardinal is chiefly known by his work *De docta ignorantia* (1440), which is very close to the almost contemporary English writing *The Cloud of Unknowing*, both works being based on the *Mystical Theology* of Denis the Areopagite. In his study *About Learned Ignorance* (published in the *Beitrag zur Geschichte der Philosophie*

und Theologie des Mittelalters, Vol. XIV) M. E. Vansteenberghe remarks (Page 12): "Cusa understands by 'divine filiation', by deification, the *Theosis* of the Greeks, which is nothing other than direct knowledge of God and of His Word, or intuitive vision. He is thus led to say that the Divine Word, illuminating the believer's reason, enables him to raise himself up to Divine filiation". The following texts are drawn from the *De filiatione Dei*, pp. 119-123: "Non aliud filiationem Dei quam Deificationem, quae et *Theosis* graece dicitur, aestimandum iudico. *Theosin* vero tu ipse nosti ultimitatem perfectionis existere... Filiatio... est ablatio alteritatis et diversitatis et resolutio omnium in unum quae est et transfusio unius in omnia. Et haec *Theosis* ipsa... Tunc recte deificamur, quando ad hoc exaltamur, ut in uno simus ipsum". ("In my opinion we should consider that divine filiation is nothing other than deification, in Greek *Theosis*. Truly you know yourself that *Theosis* is the last degree of perfection... Filiatio... is the suppression of otherness and of diversity and that resolution of all things in one which is also the transfusion of one into all things... And this is *Theosis* itself... We are truly deified when we are raised up to this Reality so that we are It and one with It"). Let us add that Cusa, when in this context he examines the relationship of intellect and will, insists on the following idea: whichever of these two faculties has most contributed to directing the seeker towards God there can be no separation of knowledge and love when the goal is attained. In a sermon preached at Brixen in 1455 he declared: "*Mens sine desiderio non intelligit, et sine intellectu non desiderat*" ("Without desire the mind does not understand and without intellect it does not desire").

Since we have just quoted Nicolas of Cusa and are in this article concerned with the *raisons d'etre* of iconography, we shall note that another of his works, the *De Visione Dei* (1453-54) explains a particularity of certain 15th century paintings, those in which the eyes of the person represented, and especially those of Christ, appear to look at the eyes of the observer and to consider him alone, from whatever angle the picture is looked at. The metaphysical idea which inspired this symbolical "effect" is self-evident. One thinks straightaway of that "meeting of the eyes" which is in India defined as the starting point of a series of stages in the life of loving, stages of which death may be the final term. One thinks too of the "seventh and best ray" of the Sun by which the Sun is directly united to each being and by which also the individual must raise himself till he attains to the Sun, that is, to the true center of his being. This "seventh ray" can be identified with the "dark ray" of Denis and with that "spiritual direction" by following which the Pilgrim reaches the Sun and, supposing an *ablatio omnis alteritatis* (a suppression of all otherness) to have truly taken place, crosses the solar threshold ("I am the door"; "No man cometh unto the Father but by me") and so, in the words of Hermes, "comes forth from the cosmos". These comparisons make it very remarkable that Nicolas of Cusa should have used precisely the above-mentioned particularities of certain paintings as a starting point for the practice of *contemplatio in caligine* ("contemplation in darkness"), directed to the goal of filiation and of deification.

To return to the representations of Hercules and of Saint Bernard, they offer us an example of the regular transmission of symbols, and they show moreover that symbols together with a knowledge of their spiritual significance have been continuously transmitted, uninterrupted by religious changes. Iconography and essential meaning represent an artistic constant, where style and application are merely variable accidents.

¹ Cf. Hermes Trismegistos XIII, 2: "The matrix is Sophia (*sophia hē mētra*) the will of God is the sower of the seed (*speiras*) through which a man is reborn as son of God"; and Boehme: "The Mother of the New Man is the Virgin *Sophia*, the Divine Wisdom, or the Mirror of the Essence of God" (quoted by Evelyn Underhill in *Mysticism*, 1912, p. 147).