

NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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THE SYMBOLIC MENTALITY OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY

The Middle Ages, and in particular the twelfth century, with its monks who were philosophers, theologians, and mystics, hung upon biblical thought and through it did its thinking, its loving, and its acting. The Old and the New Testaments were studied and meditated upon together, though the Old Testament was more often commented upon than was the New. Both offered two successive stages, represented by the law and by grace. For the men of the twelfth century Holy Scripture was the basis of their symbolic mentality. Through Scripture they could distinguish a duality of meanings which can be stated precisely under the terms "letter" and "spirit." This double terminology was comprehended on two different levels and depended on the degree of the individual's evolution. Saint Bernard understood it very well when he alluded to the ordinary mode of seeing and to the spiritual mode. The heart's vision sees in the mind (Sermon XLV, 5, on the Song of

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Songs).¹ Just as that hearing which is not of the body but which belongs to the heart understands what the ears could not hear, there are, according to Saint Bernard, three kinds of language to which three modes of understanding correspond: the mode of the hireling, that of the son, and that of the wife (Sermon VII, 2, on the Song of Songs).² The first stays on the threshold to knowledge, the second crosses it, but only the wife penetrates into true knowledge which designates a knowledge acquired more by intuition than by learning and which Saint Jerome called "*scientia secretorum*." This stimulates another way of thinking and of loving and coincides with a new dimension of being. In regard to the comprehension of symbolic content, three steps or successive stages are involved here.

Commenting on a text of the Song of Songs (1:7), "Tell me . . . where Thou reposest at noon," Saint Bernard observes that these images and similitudes appear to designate only bodies and corporeal realities—but this is not at all the case and to follow such a manner of interpretation would be erroneous (Sermon XXXIII, 1, on the Song of Songs).³ These words open the way to a spiritual understanding. And, to reach it, the author recommends that "we enter into ourselves."

This way of understanding Holy Scripture constitutes the real "knowledge of salvation." The expression comes from Guillaume Firmat and has nothing to do with a hereafter following death but rather with existence itself—a state of plenitude to which it is fitting to accede. Along this line—we might say on this "royal road," to use terminology frequent at the time—the men of the twelfth century had precursors who became their initiators. The Greek and Latin Church Fathers had interpreted the symbols of the Bible, and these symbols guided later men in their way of proceeding.

This utilization of symbols, whether it appears in language, in writ-

1. *Patrologie latine* 183, 1001. For this and other references to the commentary on the Song of Songs see *Cantica Canticorum: Eighty-six Sermons on the Song of Solomon*, trans. S. J. Eales (London: Stock, 1895); and *Saint Bernard on the Song of Songs*, translated by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (London: Mowbray, 1952).

2. *Patrologie latine* 183, 807. This same theme was set forth at length by Cassian, *Collatio* XI, vii, in *Patrologie latine* 39, 853. For an English translation of Cassian see *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2d ser., XI (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1894), 417–18.

3. *Patrologie latine* 183, 945.

ing, or in reflection, involves two different attitudes; we shall come back to these later. The first appears as entirely external; it consists of a repetition of more or less systematic symbols and is merely a stylistic process. The second is animated—the result of the experience of life, it gives evidence of a profundity and by that fact indicates a change of level, the passing from exteriority to interiority.

For the authors of the twelfth century, all knowledge, whether of God or of the universe, is preceded by the knowledge of one's self. This is at the beginning and at the end of every search.

These men knew themselves to be the heirs of a past, a past which they did not scorn. On the contrary, they wanted to adopt it. They maintained the same respect in regard to antiquity as did the men of the Renaissance. Thus they rediscovered the neo-Platonistic inspiration which came to them through Saint Augustine and Dionysius, the one closely bound up in time and history, the other attached to mystery and the transcendent. Moreover, the scholars of the twelfth century see themselves as the debtors of Greco-Roman thought;⁴ one is astonished to see the extraordinarily extensive culture of Romanic men. Pierre le Mangeur's *History*, for example, is, as Alphanbéry puts it, a "memento of the history of religions."⁵ Correspondences between Christian symbols and symbols belonging to universal man have often been pointed out as a means, not of stimulating faith, but of making it more accessible.

For our authors, every step in the symbolic order begins with the knowledge of self. If a man does not know himself, it is strictly impossible for him to perceive the meaning of the symbols and to adhere to their reality. This self-knowledge which precedes all knowledge is, according to Saint Bernard and Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, the very objective of the monastic life—it is part of the apprenticeship in charity to which the monk devotes himself. The beginner frees himself from all knowledge of the outside in order to give himself up freely and solely to this knowledge of the inside, on which is based his ascetic and mystic

4. Cf. E. Faral, *Recherches sur les sources latines des contes et romans courtois du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1913).

5. Alphanbéry, "L'Ephémérisme et le début de l'histoire des religions au Moyen Age," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, CLX (1934), 23.

life. And here are the terms in which Saint Bernard invites his disciples to this knowledge:

Here [in the monastery] you have to be concerned neither with the care of raising your children, nor of pleasing your wives, nor with bargaining, with business, nor even with food and clothing. The evil of the day and the solicitude of life are ordinarily unknown to you. A God has hidden you in the most secret place of his tabernacle: Keep yourself in a holy repose and consider your God (Ps. 45:11). But to reach this you must act so as to know who you are, according to this word of the prophet: "Let men know clearly that they are men" (Ps. 9:21). It is to this double consideration that your vocation must be devoted, according to this word of a saint: "My Lord, make me to know you and to know myself."⁶

Here, Bernard recommends self-knowledge as he considers again a text of Saint Augustine; he will also require it when he cites the Delphic oracle and the Bible as his authorities—thus Greek tradition and the Bible are joined. More than that, the famous adage comes from heaven as the word of God: "It is from heaven that this counsel is given us: know thyself, O man. Indeed, have you not noticed that this is the language which the husband, in the Song of Songs [1:7], addresses to the wife when he says to her: 'If thou knowest not thyself, O fair one among women, go forth and depart?'"⁷ Thus there is a progressive movement of knowledge; again we find in the twelfth-century commentators a reflection of Paul's teaching: *sed quod animale, deinde quod spiritale* (I Cor. 15:46, "But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual").

Such a mentality implies a recognition of the sacred. At that time, all was made sacred, not only theology, mysticism, and art, but sociology and even politics. Nothing escapes the sacred, which extends to man as well as to fauna, flora, and stone. There is no nature and supranature; at least the terms could not be used as opposites of each other and to imply some hostility between them. The universe is harmony, an architectural potency in which each element occupies a place of choice; ordered diversity collaborates in the beauty of the whole. A master of the school of Chartres will write that the world is an "ordered whole of

6. Serm. II, 1, *De diversis*, in *Patrologie latine* 183. 542.

7. *Sermon de diversis* XL, 2, in *Patrologie latine* 183. 648.

creatures.”⁸ Let man penetrate into the order of causes, and all appears to him bound up in the visible and the invisible.⁹

Among the biblical texts other than that of the Genesis, which was so frequently cited, the Song of Songs appears to be laden with symbols. That is why it was, more than any other text, the subject of twelfth century commentaries. According to Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, the Song is presented as a drama in which all the actors use the language of the flesh. And Guillaume does not convert the carnal into the spiritual—it is up to the individual to grasp the sense of the Song according to his own ability. Only the “carnal” will persist in a meaning which is solely carnal; those who “progress” and the “perfect” will know how to discover the mystery which lies beyond the erotic expressions. To those who might be surprised by Guillaume’s style, which is moreover characteristic of medieval exegesis, we might recall the phrase of the Talmud: “God speaks to men in the language of men.”

The human mind is incapable of knowing the divine, for the divine, according to Saint Bernard, will blind the soul. Indeed, he will say, man can look at the sun each day, but he never sees it as it is, he sees it “really only as it lights up other things, such as the air, a mountain, or a wall.” And man could not even see God in this way if the light of the body—given by his eye—did not have a certain affinity with the sun. The pure spirit could not be offered to the contemplation of a carnal spirit. That is why the fulgurating God, in order not to blind carnal man, must envelop himself in shadow. The shadow of God is formed by Christ as flesh. Consequently it is necessary to go beyond this consideration in order to contemplate Christ in the brilliance of his glory, that is, as the Verb of God. If man spiritualizes himself, the wall of shadow crumbles away, and if it is not entirely destroyed, there are apertures which allow the light to filter through. Man thus sees by flashes without being blinded, and these flashes of light signify a presence and infuse man with the desire to become a true son of light. He turns away from everything which may be a trap to slacken his progress. His journey becomes ever more rapid, the shadows holding back the captive light less and less. Truth, Saint Bernard says in the same ser-

8. Guillaume de Conches, *Glossa in Timaeum*. Cf. J.-M. Parent, *La Doctrine de la création dans l'école de Chartres* (Paris, 1938), p. 146: “*mundus ordinata collectio creaturarum*.”

9. Cf. the writer's *Essai sur la symbolique romane* (Paris, 1955), pp. 15–16.

mon, has no face, but it confers a face; it does not blind the bodily eyes, it inundates the heart with joy.

The field of investigation to which this search for the meaning of symbols applies is immense—it includes all the arts (trivium-quadrivium). History itself was unable to escape from it. The symbolic interpretation was present in the poetic arts and in the art of architecture, in bestiaries and lapidaries; Arthurian romances, the sculpture of Saint Savin, the liturgy, and the treatises on colors and numbers reveal it. This behavior of writers, artists, poets, and sculptors bears witness to a deep unity of research and teaching.

Of course, we may reproach our authors for being excessively inspired by their forerunners and for interpreting and even copying men like Isidore of Seville, Boethius, Raban Maur, or even Bede. But the tradition which was offered them did not need to be varied, since it was located outside of time. Only the understanding which one might have of it was modified.

Whether it is received or transmitted, this teaching which inspires the men of the Middle Age has its roots deep in those ancient traditions in which Semitic and Greek thought commune. Whether for example it is the numbers proposed by Isidore in his *Liber numerorum* and which Hugues de Saint-Victor and Eudes de Morimond take up again on their own account, or the importance of the names set forth by Honorius of Autun, there is still the interpretation of a mysterious science for those who consider it on a level which is not that of the transformation of being, or, more precisely, of the evolution of being. The denominations concerning the symbol may change, but the content remains identical. It is in this sense that Mircea Eliade could write: "Images constitute openings to a transhistorical world."¹⁰ The symbol has that undifferentiated character of Semitic verbal time which leaves one hanging on the articulations of development. The future constantly molds the present.¹¹ Thus the symbol goes beyond history at the same time that it situates itself in history—in the midst of universality it liberates from the real by causing light to be produced. That is why it has a meaning devoid of limitation—it has been, it is, it will be. Its function is creative; it causes one to be by tearing him away from the servi-

10. *Images et symboles* (Paris, 1952), p. 229.

11. Cf. A. Chouraqui, *Les Psaumes* (Paris, 1956), p. 2.

ture of ignorance. From this is derived the importance of the Romanesque church, of its architecture and of its iconography. In art the symbol appears as an initiating instrument which is addressed to all men. The meditation of vision is a form of liberation, teaching through the eyes that which others reach through hearing.

The perception of symbols is always comparable to a journey ending in a knowledge which coincides with love. In the *Quest of the Grail* it is clear that for Galahad to know is to love and to love is to know.¹² All knowledge born by virtue of the presence of a symbol develops into a love of universal order. This applies to all symbols, even to those which might appear to escape such a law.

If, for example, we take the word *Adam*, we see Honorius of Autun, using the Greek letters of this name, coming out with the figure forty-six.¹³ And four plus six equals ten, which is the figure of the perfect man and which, cabala teaches us, is also the number of God. Of course, an interpretation made in a literal sense has no interest at all. It becomes animated only to the extent that it includes a dynamic sense and thus assumes a progressive movement—that of man who creates himself, has no confidence in himself, and responds to his first finished creation by perfecting himself. If we are concerned with the word *bread*, we see Pierre de Celle collecting and interpreting the Biblical texts in which bread is mentioned (*De panibus*, P.L. 202. 927 ff.). The literal interpretation of the daily bread to which the texts of Matthew (6:11) and Luke (11:3) allude may mean the food which nourishes the body. When the real symbol is perceived, bread takes on a completely different meaning—it designates the spiritual bread which allows man access to another level.

Many other examples could be considered, such as that of the beatitude "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3), often commented upon by medieval theologians. They understood that it was not a matter of poverty on the material level but of begging for the food of the spirit, of being famished for it. He who thinks he possesses, expects nothing; one should have properly a feeling of emptiness in order to desire ardently, to lie in wait for the signs and to be able to receive.¹⁴

12. See M. Lot-Borodine, "Les grands secrets du Saint-Graal dans la quête du pseudo-map," in "Lumière du Graal," *Les Cahiers du sud* (Paris, 1951), p. 157.

13. *Sacramentarium*, *Patrologie latine* 172. 741.

14. Cf. Saint Bernard, *De conversione ad clericos*, VII, 12, *Patrologie latine* 182. 841.

The dialecticians and the rational thinkers rose up against this symbolic turn of mind. They rejected this mode of thought which they judged with severity and which it is important not to confuse with the systematic allegorism of a man like Rupert of Deutz or with the symbolic cosmology of Hildegarde of Bingen, or even with the eschatological imagery of Joachim of Flora.

When the symbolic process is utilized in exegesis, it runs the risk of appearing tiresome. Proceeding by clichés, it thus loses all spontaneity and is organized into a system. The different senses—literal, spiritual, allegorical, historical—sometimes appear to be studied simultaneously and often without any important result.¹⁵ In fact the use of the symbol is valid only on condition that it correspond to its true function, that of revealing a presence, a veiled presence which must be discovered. That is why, in the Middle Age, man is thought of as a traveler, a pilgrim, an itinerant who goes from discovery to discovery. He is called upon to pass through various stages—which explains the very frequent theme of Jacob's ladder, the ladder to heaven (*scala caeli*, according to Honorius of Autun [*P.L.* 172. 1239]), the theme of the tree (Hugues de Saint-Victor, *De fructibus carnis et spiritus* [*P.L.* 176. 997]). Man accomplishes a cosmic voyage to which Alain de Lille alludes in his *Anticlaudianus* (I. v and vi).

However, one must not confuse symbol with allegory. In his work on the study of the allegories of Holy Scripture, Isidore of Seville shows that they are what he calls "prefigurations of mystery."¹⁶ The use of allegory was developed both in exegesis and in architecture and the allegorical study of numbers became highly successful. But although allegory enjoyed an immense prestige, the fact remains that it was still figurative and did not offer teaching material. Because of its didactic value, symbolism will fill quite another role. In *Symbols of Transformation* Jung writes: "The symbol is neither an allegory nor a *semeion* [sign]; it is the image of a content which in large part transcends consciousness. We must discover that such contents are real, that is, that they are *agentia* with which it is not only possible, but necessary, to come to terms."¹⁷

15. On this question see M. D. Chenu, *La Théologie au XII^e siècle* (Paris, 1957), pp. 191 ff.

16. *Questiones in vetus Testamentum, praefatio, Patrologie latine* 83. 207B.

17. Translated from the French of *Métamorphoses de l'âme et ses symboles* (Geneva, 1953), p. 155.

The use of symbols does not mean, for that matter, that those who repeated such and such a symbolic interpretation may not have been caught in a dead letter. Moreover, when we read medieval authors it is easy to see what is sterile, or on the other hand, what is alive. A number of texts of symbolic presentation exist which seem to have no reality at all. In interpreting them, we think of the text of Jeremiah 2:13: "For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

This symbolic mentality, so highly prized by the monks, is practiced particularly upon what Dom Jean Leclercq very aptly called the "literature of silence," which belongs much more to written than to oral style. "In the monastery," he says, "one writes because one does not speak, one writes in order not to speak."¹⁸ But beyond the writing to which the silent monk may dedicate himself, there exists a true silence stripped of all language, whether writing or speech is involved. In this sense Saint Bernard alludes to the necessity for some men to accede to the summit of the heart (Sermon XXXII, 8, on the Song of Songs). For him who is eager for truth a moment comes when his God speaks to him "mouth to mouth" as to Moses. His knowledge goes beyond "enigmas and figures" (XXXII, 9). Led step by step to the sacred mountain, he is introduced into the tabernacle, that is, he is placed in the presence of the truth, he sees it uncovered.

That is why the twelfth-century scholar reads without curiosity but with the purpose of instructing his soul. He is called upon to read in his heart, a disciple of Saint Bernard tells us. Such reading is preferable to the reading of manuscripts: *in corde magis quam in omni codice*.¹⁹

To this symbolic mentality of the monks there corresponded among the people a sensitivity in search of the marvelous, a fondness for miracles, and a discernment in natural phenomena of signs which heralded good or bad events. One must add, of course, that when we talk of the people, it is clear that we have no real grasp of them. We know them only through historical and poetic documentation, which is surprisingly abundant. This is true even in the case of the *Historiae* of Raoul Glaber, the *Historia* of Guibert of Nogent, the work of Foucher of Chartres

18. *L'Amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu* (Paris, 1957), p. 147.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

(*Gesta Francorum Hierusalem peregrinantium*), or if we turn to more particular chronicles, epic poetry or the didactic treatises.²⁰

Faith in the power of relics is total—they give healing and protection from danger. The discovery of the “holy lance” restores confidence and convinces the crusaders when they are discouraged on the plain of Antioch. Animals play a role—white stags, nay even the goose, guides pilgrims and those who have lost their way. Not only animals, but all of nature protects the just and makes them triumphant over their enemies. Clouds gather around soldiers to keep them from being seen, and at Antioch the noise of the assailants is not heard because the wind covers it.²¹

Man is linked to heaven and earth, and he belongs to nature. That is why it appears natural that a plant, an animal, or a star should warn, counsel, or be provided with a precise meaning. According to Foucher of Chartres, God uses the elements of creation not only to converse with man but to instruct him, protect him, or make him vigilant. Fires, wars, epidemics, and famines are announced by signs. These may include a comet, an unusual color of the sky or of the night, hail storms, falling stones, and of course, eclipses. Here we find again the Augustinian representation of a universe in which God easily manifests himself as much in the ripening of the vines and of the fields of grain as in the miracle, worked in a poor monastery, which permitted starving monks to find bread and wine on their empty table.

Signs have either a collective or an individual import; they precede disasters and calamities and the good deeds or the death of an important personage. In certain cases, the chronicler reports faithfully the feelings experienced by an individual or a group; in others he corrects what he considers to be childish. Thus Raoul Glaber alludes to a whale which cast fear into the minds of those who saw it on the coast of Caux. Shortly thereafter, a war broke out. But Raoul Glaber finds the reason for the fighting in the discords which had been dividing the common people and which, spreading to the lords, put them at each other's throats.²²

20. *Fierabras*, ed. A. Kroeber and G. Servois (Paris, 1860), p. 107.

21. Albert d'Aix, *Liber christianae expeditionis*, I, 1, *Hist. occid.*, IV, 295.

22. Raoul Glaber, *Historiae*, ed. Prou (Paris, 1886), I, v, c. 3 ff. See the article by L. Musset, “Raoul Glaber et la balcine,” *Revue du Moyen Age latin*, IV (1948), No. 2, 167 ff.

Imagination is so rich that animals and plants of oriental origin, unknown in the West, are described in minute detail. Extraordinary men and animals are provided with strange powers.²³ The animals which a man might encounter near his house, in his woods or fields, participate in his joy and in his misfortune. Everything is an omen. When a wolf sounds a bell (!), when a church candle breaks three times, an important event occurs. Monsters and demons appear more frequently than saints or angels. The Devil's tricks are without number—they strike the imagination, and diabolical visions haunt men's minds and are incrustated in stone.

The birth of men whose importance will be unusually great is often preceded by dreams of premonition by the mother or by those in the newborn's immediate household. And the infant itself has a behavior which sets it apart from other children of the same age.

This sense of the marvelous is accompanied by a belief in immanent justice. God punishes and rewards without delay. The guilty are surprised by misfortune unless they can mend their ways, and in that case they are forewarned of a temporary punishment. The just must be rewarded and must overcome their enemies. This explains the anguish felt at the failure of a war which is considered to be holy, and the importance given to trials by ordeal. Every error calls for punishment. If pilgrims or crusaders are massacred, people immediately wonder what was the extent of their culpability.²⁴ General catastrophes are a sign of the guilty condition of humanity.²⁵

Here again, the elements fire and water proved God's judgment in respect to heretical books, relics, and men. Guibert of Nogent relates how two brothers suspected of heresy were tried by Lisiard, the Bishop of Soissons. One of them, Clement, floated when cast into a vat. He owed his life to this judgment by water, and the authorities were satisfied by his imprisonment.

Of course we should not think that these men, so attentive to the profound meaning of symbols, were necessarily gentle, just, and filled with

23. See Paul Rousset, "Le Sens du merveilleux à l'époque féodale," *Moyen Age*, 1956, Nos. 1-2, pp. 24-37.

24. See Albert d'Aix, *Liber christianae expeditionis*, in *Recueil des Croisades*, IV, 378 ff.

25. See the excellent article by Paul Rousset, "Justice immanente à l'époque féodale," *Moyen Age*, 1948, Nos. 3-4, pp. 225-48.

compassion. Among the fervent and tender commentators of the Song of Songs were many who could calumniate those whom they judged, rightly or wrongly, to be perturbing spirits. Heretics were thought to be destroyers of Christianity, and all those who troubled the established order were to be punished. During the Cambrai insurrection at the end of the eleventh century, Guibert, who was against the bishop of the town, had his tongue cut out and his eyes extinguished. Before being killed, he was dragged through the streets with his hands tied behind his back. To soothe their consciences, the bishop and his defenders appealed to a text of Saint Augustine: "To kill a man is not always criminal, but it is criminal to kill out of wickedness and not under the laws." Clever tortures were applied with cynicism. One may say that they are explained by the mentality of the period. Certainly such an affirmation is exact. But it should not be forgotten that among the acts of violence which we note with horror today, certain ones have their roots in an era which thought itself Christian.

This century whose symbolic mentality we have sought to state in precise terms is consequently not attentive to the inner life alone. Although the monasteries are the centers of the intellectual and religious life and although people have correctly spoken of "the twelfth-century renaissance," it is quite clear that this period experienced a prodigious upward surge on other levels. The dominant factor is precisely the creations in the technical field which change city life and modify social and economic conditions—windmills, water wheels, war industries, rudders, and compasses were manufactured, and as their use spread, they changed rural life and navigation. In 1188 eighteen stone arches carried the bridge of Avignon over the Rhone and mechanical clocks were marking the passage of time. And so, naïve and daring, credulous and intransigent, loving, tender—but brutal at the same time—this century appears wondrously rich.

In the heart of this passionate and ardent period, infatuated with discovery, the attention given to symbols and the taste for the marvelous may seem obtrusive. However, this symbolic mentality of the monks, this sense of the marvelous in the people, do not appear on the same level. The search for the content of symbols gives access to a higher level, but the taste for the extraordinary, the stuff of popular credulity, does not develop awareness. Yet there are elements common to both. These are asserted in respect to the universe—macrocosm and micro-

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cosm are united. God is not separated from man; He is always present, ready to intervene, to bless or to punish. Man cannot escape the power of God and the tricks of the demons—but he is called upon, according to a phrase of Evagre le Pontique, repeated by Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, to become through grace what God is by nature,²⁶ and symbols serve as so many steps on this road to deification.

This kind of mental outlook is difficult for us to grasp today, despite the favor which studies on symbols, myths, and allegories presently enjoy. Of course, it gives evidence of faith, but it also carries another meaning—the search for knowledge, a knowledge analogous to a rebirth. In this way, this symbolic mentality is essentially dynamic in the twelfth century, for it implies a motion, it is located in the order of becoming. Beyond appearances, beyond exteriority, man is drawn into the depths of his being in a motion of destruction and of creation.

26. Evagre le Pontique, *Cant.*, IV, 51, ed. W. Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus* (Berlin, 1913), p. 355, quoted by Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, *Lettre aux frères du Mont-Dieu*, ed. M. M. Davy (Paris, 1940), No. 108.