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Clothing Maketh the Saint: Ælred's Narrative Intent in the *Life of Saint Ninian*

MARIE ANNE MAYESKI[1]

IN HIS PREFACE to the *Life of Saint Ninian*, Ælred of Rievaulx reveals his understanding of what a hagiographical narrative is and, by extension, what the task of a theological narrator requires. In doing so he is writing within the confines of a genre already well established. Theologians before him had demonstrated the theological character of their narratives in similar prefatory material wherein they also described their intended audience, laid out their purposes, and revealed their theological assumptions.[2] Familiarity with earlier prologues can alert the careful reader both to their echoes and to new notes in Ælred's prologue. It is important here, therefore, to expose briefly some significant elements in two prefaces that predate Ælred's work, then, in the light of these, to consider Ælred's intentions as laid out in his preface to the *Life of Saint Ninian*.

The first text I wish to consider is that of Jonas of Bobbio, specifically the preface to his life of Saint Columbanus, published in 643, shortly after Columbanus's death in 615. In his prologue, Jonas carefully lists a kind

1. This essay was first presented at the Cistercian Studies Conference, May 8, 2008, Kalamazoo, MI. The author is grateful for the scholarly critique she received.

2. See Marie Anne Mayeski, "New Voices in the Tradition: Medieval Hagiography Revisited," TS 63 (2002): 1-21, for a fuller development of this material and its implications.

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of canon of saintly biographies, in imitation of which he has penned his own narrative. About these *vitae*, including explicitly his own, he says: "The creator provided that past deeds would leave behind models for the future, so that [the servants of God] might boast in generations to come, either by imitating the example of those who preceded them or by committing them to memory."[3]

We note, first, that the work of writing these *vitae* is attributed to God's initiative; they are part of God's providential care of those who become members of the divine household. Second, these *vitae* are intended not just as moral guides ("by imitating their example"), but something more, achieved "by committing them to memory." The phrase evokes the importance of *memoria* in the theology and anthropology of the early Middle Ages, especially in monastic contexts. It relates the lives of the saints to the reading of the word at Eucharistic liturgies as well as to the *imago dei* anthropology, in which memory, like the first person of the Trinity, is the source of all that the human person will know, choose, and become. Clearly, these texts are understood to be instrumental, if not fully effective, causes of Christian salvation.

The second prefatory text to consider is that of Rudolf of Saxony. Rudolf was the star pupil of Rabanus Maurus, who, in the ninth century, was elevated from the abbacy of Fulda (where he had taught Rudolf) to the episcopal see of Mainz. In an author's preface to his life of Rabanus, Rudolf clearly presents the written narratives of saints' lives as a theological genre, not only similar to the scriptures but, indeed, a continuation of them.

Rudolf asserts that the authors of saints' *vitae* write for an audience interested in "ecclesiastical matters" and, in doing so, act "wisely" and "usefully," adverbs traditionally applied to theological writing.[4] Most

3. Iohannis Vedastis, "Ionae Vitae Sanctorum Columbani," ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH, *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum* (Hannover, 1905) 1.151. Translation mine.

4. PL 107:41A-B. "The writers of ecclesiastical matters have resolved not only wisely, but also usefully and according to the divine precepts of living men, to hand over to posterity the lives and deeds of those who are just through the revelations of literature. Deservedly they must be extolled by the faithful with great praises because they have not passed over these things in silence out of envy. Rather, overflowing with a charity that desires to benefit everybody, they published them, wishing them to be an example of living rightly to be imitated by all those faithful [who] wish to rely on the truth of faith. For if they had not done so, we would not be able to know at all that which the holy patriarchs, the prophets, and the apostles, as well as the rest of the holy martyrs and confessors of Christ had done or taught. Nor would we know by what signs and acts of power they became famous (either

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strikingly, Rudolf adds saints' *vitae* to the long list of biblical writings, indicating that they continue the sweeping story of salvation begun in Scripture. Furthermore, Rudolf uses precise theological language in writing about *vitae sanctorum*: the *vitae* themselves are *revelationes*, and the process by which the author communicates the story to the community is *tradere*; the contents of these lives are *credita* and *intellecta*. The meaning of the lives of the saints have been revealed and handed over as tradition; what they teach is to be believed and understood. Finally, Rudolph speaks of the saints' lives as "the revelations of literature." This reminds the reader of the discipline of study by which the Christian learned to read biblical texts, with the skills of literary criticism embodied in grammar, logic, and, especially, rhetoric.

Jonas and Rudolph write about saints' lives in fairly exalted terms. They associate their work with that of previous authors, giving a kind of accepted canon of *vitae*. They describe saints' lives as full of revealed truth about God's on-going plan of salvation. They affirm that these texts are to be believed, studied, understood, and committed to memory, there to nourish faith and devotion, until they have contributed to the reformation of the divine image in the Christian believer. Further, Jonas and Rudolph create a kind of normative *structure* for the prologue: identification of the audience, a laudatory reference to previous works, a humble assertion of their own inadequacy, and a description of their own intentions. Altogether, they set up a useful framework for reading Ælred's *Life of Saint Ninian*.

Probably around 1157, Ælred of Rievaulx responded to an episcopal invitation to write a new, and better, life of Saint Ninian, founder of the See of Whithorn. At the beginning of this work, Ælred includes both a Prologue and a Preface wherein he sets out his relationship to his sources, his understanding of his audience, his devout purposes in re-writing the life, and, especially, his authorial plan or strategy. There are provocative

before or after their death), except for the things understood and believed from their writings. They [the writers] have revealed these things, not to receive praise for themselves but that through such examples they might incite everyone possible to reform their customary ways of behaving [which have become] depraved because of human presumption and to praise greatly the power of the divine majesty. And so, following their laudable beginning in my own small measure and with whatever ability I am able to write, I depend on the power and miracles that God has thought worthy to do through his saints in modern times" (translation mine).

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echoes here of both the prefaces we have just looked at. At the same time, Ælred quite properly introduces language, imagery, and themes that are distinctively his own.

Ælred begins his prologue with an immediate reference to previous narrators of saints' lives, identified as "wise," and describes their purposes as keeping the holy life in active memory and edifying the community. This echoes some of the very language of the earlier prologues and certainly reflects their thinking accurately. He does not identify any previous work by name but places his subject, Saint Ninian, in relation to Abraham, repeating in spirit if not in language Rudolph's sense that the lives of the saints continue the essential story of salvation begun in Scripture. He identifies his audience explicitly: it is not only the bishop who commissioned the text but also "the clergy and people of [his] holy church." This is to be a pastoral document, with all of the purposes, theological and devotional, that are essential to good pastoral work.

Like his predecessors, Ælred also expresses the possibility that he is unequal to the task with which the bishop has charged him. It is in this context that Ælred introduces some new and distinctive elements, specifically a description of writing/composition that utilizes both the metaphor of clothing and the ancient typology of light and darkness. His thought here is complex:

> You have been pleased, therefore, my dear friend, to place this burden on me, insignificant though I am, that I should draw the life of this illustrious man out of rustic speech, as if bringing it from a kind of darkness into the light of lat in eloquence. That light was indeed set down accurately by earlier writers, but in an extremely barbarous style. I embrace your devotion, I approve your desire, I praise your zeal—but I know my own ignorance, and I am afraid that I may strip him of the coarse clothes in which he has until now been concealed without being competent to provide others in which he may appear more resplendent.[5]

There are two major metaphoric threads woven into this passage. The first is the image of language as the clothing of thought. It is a meta-

5. Vita N, Prologue, ed. Johannes Pinkerton, *Vitae Antiquae Santorum* I (London, 1789) 1 trans. Jane Patricia Freeland, *Ælred of Rievaulx: The Lives of the Northern Saints*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2006) 36.

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phor that bears on both the content of the text to be written and the process of writing itself. The second is the transition from ignorance to understanding imaged as the transition from darkness to light. The latter metaphor bears primarily on the desired goal of the text and the task and refers specifically to the audience. Rustic speech is both "coarse clothes" and, if not the cause of "darkness," the condition of it. The narrator's task is to dress the saint in better clothes—the eloquence of Latin—and, thereby, to draw him forth from darkness into light. One of the differences between Ælred's life of Ninian and the two previous lives referred to in this paper is that there was already a written life of Ninian as well as information in Bede's history. Ælred is, therefore, somewhat at pains to explain both the bishop's request for another *vita* and his own efforts to create one. The clothing metaphor allows him to do this. He will provide better clothes for the saint than were provided by the narrative in rustic speech.

At the most literal interpretation of the clothing metaphor, Ælred affirms that his language will make the life of Saint Ninian more appropriately attractive. This is not, however, the superficial characteristic it might first appear. The importance of human attractiveness in the drama of salvation pervades all of Ælred's work: anthropological, Christological, and pastoral. Especially pertinent are the Christological implications. For Ælred, it is precisely the function of the humanity of Jesus to make the Godhead humanly attractive and thereby to draw the faithful along the paths of divine love. The human beauty of the Word made flesh draws the faithful soul through the power of *affectus*, leading her, first, to love the human Christ in a human way, then, to find there, in the human Christ, the hidden divine beauty that draws her to complete union with God. Such an understanding, omnipresent in Ælred's work, must inform what he says here about the more attractive language in which he hopes to dress the story of Saint Ninian. It will not merely decorate the saint's life; it will make that life a more effective tool for the sanctification of those who will hear, read, study, and memorize the *vita* he writes.

Let us explore the metaphor more closely. Language, especially written language, is to the saint-subject as clothes are to the man. But what are clothes to the man in Ælred's world? That is what we must consider. Besides the obvious—protection from the elements—clothes

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were a means of identifying the person and locating him in relation to all other persons in his world: the clothes of the monk, the peasant, the house-servant, the lord did not only keep him warm and decent. They fixed him in the social order, in a geographical location and in a network of relationships. They indicated his or her contribution to the common good. I am a dairy-maid; I can be found in the outbuildings of the large estate. I am the servant of the local squire and therefore I am responsible to him, to my lord, the local bishop, and beyond them both to God. At the same time, bishop and lord are responsible for me. I contribute to the local economy; I put milk, cream, and cheese on the table for my lord and lady and all who are dependent on them. Beyond mere dressing or external ornament, therefore, clothes revealed the full historical and social reality of the person who wore them. So too, then, asserts Ælred by the use of his metaphor, the language/style of the saint's *vita* will fully identify who the saint is. Therefore, the quality of the style, or better, the appropriateness of the style, is of signal importance, bearing the task of more or less clearly revealing the saint to the faithful. The more appropriate the clothes of language, the more accurately will both the human reality and the holiness of the saint be expressed. These are not two separate conditions or attributes. A saint's holiness is intimately related to, indeed an expression of, his or her vocation, part and parcel of his or her social location.

But the idea of social location suggests more. In the last line of the pertinent paragraph, Ælred contrasts the rustic speech of the earlier life with the Latin eloquence in which he hopes to re-write it. These two kinds of language indicate the social stratification of Ælred's own world and can work in two complementary ways in this passage. Perhaps the rustic speech of the earlier text implied a rustic social location for Saint Ninian, whereas Ælred tells us that he was the son of a king and became a bishop. "Latin eloquence" therefore would more accurately identify his origins and social location as well as the status of his ministry. But it can also have reference to the audience. A text in rustic speech, or "barbarously written," as he says elsewhere, might have been appropriate for rural audiences, but Ælred's own monastic audience as well as that of the bishop's congregation could well require Latin eloquence.

But the metaphor is not yet fully exhausted. Somewhat later in the

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text, Ælred again refers to clothes, and the second reference returns to the theological implications of his clothing metaphor. "In his very infancy," Ælred writes, "having been reborn in the water of sacred baptism, and clothed in white, Ninian kept unspotted the white marriage garment he had received." (Ælred, Vita N 1.10). The reference is, of course, to the symbolic meaning of the white garment worn in baptism. Ælred makes the explicit connection between the identity signified by the clothing and the interior reality it symbolizes, that is, the perfect sinlessness of the newly baptized. After Baptism, Ninian's interior reality is truly expressed in his outer white garment. External appearance and inner reality are perfectly congruent, the goal to which Ælred himself aspires in thinking of language as clothing the reality of Saint Ninian.

We are approaching here the heart of Christian metaphysics, the conviction that inner, spiritual reality is both expressed and *made present* in its external, physical manifestation. This is the faith conviction that grounds our understanding of the Incarnation, of the sacraments, and of the essential unity of human nature.[6] In another text, Ælred himself uses the metaphor of clothing to expose the humanity of Christ as an expression of His divinity. In Homily 9, for the feast of the Annunciation, he engages in a lengthy exposition on Joseph's coat of many colors. That brings him to the identification of Christ's flesh as the tunic that veils His divinity. Then he says: "he appeared in this world, as it were, clothed with flesh and, when he chose, he laid the flesh aside like a tunic and, when he chose, he took it up again."[7] A few sentences later, he speaks of the beauty of this tunic, reinforcing the first theme discussed above. By the power of language, Ælred intends to make present the powerful saint himself even as he makes him more attractive and imitable.

The connection of this baptismal exposition to the clothes metaphor brings us back to the original passage of the Prologue. In drawing the life of Ninian "out of rustic speech," Ælred affirms in the Prologue, he will

6. The importance, and manifold implications, of the ontological relationship between inner reality and exterior expression are carefully presented by Karl Rahner in his essay, "The Theology of the Symbol," *Theological Investigations* vol. 4 (London: Darton, 1974) 221–52. He stresses the symbol, or external expression of a divine reality, as the mode of presence of the reality of salvation.

7. . Ælred of Rievaulx, *Opera Omnia* 2. *Sermones* .1–46, ed. Gaetano Raciti, CCCM 2A (Turnholt: Brepols 1989); Homily 9.29, ll. 271–74; trans. Theodore Berkeley and M. Basil Pennington, *The Liturgical Sermons*, CF 58 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 2001) 165.

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draw it also "from a kind of darkness into the light of Latin eloquence," an unambiguous echo of ancient baptismal symbolism. I have said above that this metaphor refers to the audience, but that is not strictly true. It is the life itself, of Saint Ninian, which is to be brought from darkness into light by being clothed in better language. Ælred envisions the life of the great saint as hidden in shadow, like a statue hidden in a side niche in the church—if I might be permitted to introduce my own metaphor. Ælred's task is to draw or drag the statue into the light, into a place, that is, where sun or candlelight can fully illumine it. The intent, of course, is so that the audience might see the full reality of Saint Ninian more clearly. In that first sentence, the life of Saint Ninian is a reality, and the light and darkness are the conditions of perceiving (or receiving) it. But Ælred immediately changes the perspective and affirms that the light *is* the life of Saint Ninian, not merely the condition of its perception. His life is there in the barbarous text, accurate but obscured by language and requiring better language for its resplendence to be manifest. Now the clothing of language does not merely make the reality more or less attractive, or simply identify its inner reality and social location. Ælred points out the power of language actually to obscure the sacred reality or to reveal it.

It is not surprising to find a twelfth-century scholar reflecting on the power of speech. But this is, for Ælred, more than an academic interest Later in the text, we find a miracle story about the power of truthful speech and two rather lengthy paragraphs on the abuse of speech. In the miracle story, a day-old infant names the father who begot him and, in so doing, clears the priest who had been wrongly accused by the distraught mother. Then comes Ælred's critique of the abuse of speech, introduced by a very personal statement. It is powerful stuff. After expressing personal shame for his own sluggishness and sloth, Ælred says, "Which of us, I ask, does not often utter, even if only in our own households, wisecracks as well as wisdom, words idle as well as useful, carnal as well as spiritual, during mutual discourse and conversation?" (Vita N 1.9). He continues to give an extensive catalogue of the ways in which monks abuse the very power, "consecrated," as he says, "for the praise of God." With the miracle of infant speech and his more personal reflections, Ælred brings his audience to reflect on the moral character of speech and language. Its power

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to obscure or reveal, to clarify truth or obscure it, to praise or dishonor God makes language bear the very weight of eternal destiny.

Let me attempt to sum up. Against the backdrop of earlier writers who saw the likeness between their own task and that of the authors of scripture, Ælred offers his intentions and self-understanding, not in the categories of biblical literature, but in the metaphor of clothing, which nonetheless bears significant theological weight. Through this many-layered image, Ælred implies, first, that his Latin eloquence will identify and reveal Saint Ninian more accurately, more truthfully, than the earlier, barbarous version. It will make him known not only in his holiness but in his human situation in the socio-economic order. Second, Ælred's Latin eloquence will make Saint Ninian more humanly attractive, allowing the saint thereby to stimulate the affection of the audience so that they will love him more truly and be more willing to imitate his virtues. Third, because his language will be more true to the holy reality it exposes, it will make that reality, the life and person of Saint Ninian, present as a powerful saving force in the lives of those who hear or read the life. Finally, the life of Ninian stands as a shining example of the moral importance of language. It will praise God by praising Saint Ninian, whose own careful attention to holy speech and sacred silence Ælred carefully exposes. In Ælred's mind, it would seem, clothing truly maketh this saint, making him both present and effective.

In describing his task in these metaphoric terms, however, Ælred also, perhaps unwittingly, reveals his self-understanding as an author. The choice of metaphors always does reveal the author as much as the subject matter. So then, if the clothing of language makes the saint, it is the act of clothing thought, i.e., the use of language, that makes the writer-theologian. Ælred implies that the writer-theologian must so understand his subject from within that he may reveal the inner truth accurately, that he may, in fact, make the inner truth present. The writer-theologian must, further, match her language to the social location of subject and audience. She must strive to reveal not only the truth but also the beauty of what God reveals and to do so in language that matches or approximates that beauty as closely as possible. The metaphor teases us with possibilities, all of which indicate a very high standard of theological and authorial practice. If this is the task that Ælred held himself to, perhaps his

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anxious disclaimer in the Preface is less a topos and more an expression of his true feelings than we usually claim. If we consider his metaphor as a standard for ourselves, we will be both humbled and challenged, and theology will be greatly enriched by that small conversion.

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