# Introduction: withdrawal and engagement

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How are we to comprehend the Cistercian Order? How do we examine and represent a phenomenon which has existed for over 900 years and spread across the world, which has built monumental architecture and produced a wide array of texts, tilled land and cultivated minds, seen schisms and sought concord? How do we grasp the basic tenor, the fluctuations, the varied responses to widely different conditions within one overall scholarly framework?

An influential trend in Cistercian scholarship has viewed the history of the White Monks as a tug-of-war between 'ideals' and 'reality'. The assumption is that the Order was founded on a set of ideals, crystallised in twelfth-century legislation and foundation narratives: lofty aspirations – whether for isolation from the world and its ways, for repudiation of tithes, ownership of serfs and other allegedly corrupting practices or for harmony and uniformity within the Order and its communities. The reality is, then, all those factors which cause appropriation, modulation and abolition of these ideals, synchronically as well as diachronically: local conditions, extramural powers, pragmatism or the impact of individual figures. Louis Lekai, seminally, set the dichotomy as a motto for his momentous *The Cistercians: Ideals and Reality* (1977) and, in a definitive article, employed the collision between ideals and reality as a key to the dating of the Cistercian decline: the Order's fourteenth-century fall from its initial ideals, pushed by the overpowering force of reality.[1] Seen in this light, ideals become synonymous with 'true Cistercianness' in the shape of unanimity, strictness and absence of ambiguity, whereas reality stands for distortion, deviation and equivocation.

Recent scholarship has challenged Lekai's dichotomy. There is a growing sense that its robust segregation produces a fragmented understanding of the Cistercian history and culture.[2] But much remains to be done if we want to understand the complexity of the Order, its history and its relation to society without losing sight of its fundamental ideas:

if we want to examine, in an integrated way, its matter without neglecting its spirit – and vice versa.

The Cistercian Order is multifaceted, and the field of Cistercian studies is broad and complex. One of the roads to an integrated approach to the White Monks goes by way of consciousness of the different disciplinary approaches, their interrogatory horizons and scholarly aims. Riding roughshod over nuances and specialisations, we may divide Cistercian studies into two overall approaches: two groups of scholars with different objectives, methodologies and questions for the material. Each of the groups is too heterogeneous to be seen as a single scholarly unit, school or tradition, but let us, briefly and for the sake of overview, consider the composite corpus of Cistercian scholarship as two distinct approaches.

One approach, involving historians, archaeologists and historians of architecture and art, focuses on organisation and materiality, on Cistercian life as it was lived at a particular time and place. These scholars study their material in its historical and physical context as shaped by contemporary conditions. They search for the political, economic, social and spiritual *Sitz-im-Leben* of the Cistercians' texts, buildings and artefacts, and their search may be informed by theories formulated within, for example, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. This approach has brought forth studies of watermills and granges, of individual houses and their edifices, and it has fostered monastic archaeology as a specific discipline.[3] Twentieth-century pioneers are scholars such as the British historian David Knowles (1896–1974) and the American historian Bennett D. Hill (1934–2005), whose specialised research focused on particular national or regional aspects.

Earlier generations of scholarship took their cue directly from the Cistercian legislation and material remains, but since the 1970s a broader variety of sources have been employed to throw light on the Order and its handling of land, buildings, production and societal relations. This change of focus has come with a shift from an interest in unity to an interest in diversity – and with an ambition to comprehend the medieval idea of unity in diversity.

The other approach, represented by historians, theologians, philologists and literary scholars, centres on the spiritual world and religious mentality of the White Monks. These scholars study the handling of the biblical and patristic legacy and examine the Cistercians as students and teachers of doctrinal issues such as the image of God in man or the relationship between Fall, restoration and beatitude, and they examine differences in the teaching of, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux,

William of Saint Thierry and Aelred of Rievaulx. Their methodological tools come from philology, rhetoric, literary studies, philosophy and theology, and a considerable portion of their work has been carried out in connection with editions and translations.

Some of these scholars are concerned with the systematisation of spiritual categories such as the Bernardine degrees of love, and they seek more or less coherent representations of the spiritual worldview that underpins Cistercian life. The French historian of philosophy Étienne Gilson (1884–1978) may be considered a founding figure for such a systematising approach.[4] Others are interested in the Cistercian texts as palimpsests of biblical, liturgical and patristic utterances, rhetorically complex and carefully edited. Scholarly foundations for this approach have been laid by, for example, the Dutch philologist Christine Mohrmann (1903–88) and the Benedictine scholar Jean Leclercq (1911–93).[5] The issues studied in this scholarly area are examined as themes which have been conceptualised and formulated in a specific intellectual and religious climate, but connections can also be traced across centuries in, for example, a search for Augustinian influences, ruptures and continuities in anthropology and ecclesiology across the Christian tradition, or the reception of biblical phrases through liturgical texts. Focus is directed to systems of belief as well as to linguistic, rhetorical and literary structures.

Evidently interests overlap: scholars concerned with legislation look at religious motivation and rhetorical strategies; scholars orientated towards spirituality may take manuscript traditions and the material embeddedness of spiritual principles into consideration. The idea is not to make strict divisions but to sketch various perspectives within Cistercian studies.

A central motif in Cistercian scholarship is the tension between withdrawal and engagement, between the wilderness and the world. On the one hand, foundation narratives and legislation state repeatedly that the White Monks must found, and do found, their houses in inhospitable areas far from human habitation. On the other hand, historical and archaeological evidence attests to an abundance of cases where Cistercians appropriated land which was already cultivated, or took over existing monastic houses; and charters, wills and letters point to a wide range of interactions between abbeys and the surrounding society.

At a first glance, the tension between wilderness and engagement may seem like a case of 'ideals' versus 'reality': as if the Cistercians aspired to withdrawal from society but in reality succumbed to engagement with it. In fact, withdrawal and engagement are two sides of one

and the same thing: the Cistercian ethos in its field of tension between earthly life and heavenly beatitude, between the monastic tradition and the conditions of a specific time and place and between the individual houses and the Cistercian Order at large – at a given moment and across the ages.

It takes both approaches to understand this ethos. The idea of the wilderness is soon dissolved if examined from the point of view of physical and material conditions. But if considered as a 'written world', the trope of the wilderness abounds in information about the Cistercians – and information about their societal relations too. Engagement is best approached from a perspective attuned to social exchange, authority and power. When examined from this angle, it does in fact turn out that the Cistercian engagement with the world hinges on both significant spiritual factors and elements central to the monastic tradition.

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## WITHDRAWAL

Older historical scholarship took the Cistercian wilderness mythology at face value. But in the 1980s the narrative of the Cistercian settlement in the desert was increasingly contested and it has now been abandoned, owing to archaeological evidence, the redating of key documents and a less literal reading of the narrative sources.[6] After this turn, the Cistercian claim that the Order settles in the wilderness has appeared somewhat dubious. The suspicion of hypocrisy is not new. It was voiced already by Walter Map, ever critical of the Order:

> So they choose a proper place to abide in, a place not uninhabitable but inhabited, clean, fertile, responsive to tillage, receptive of crops … a place outside the world in the heart of the world, remote from men in the midst of men, as wishing not to know the world yet to be known of it.[7]

But how are the references to Cistercian solitude to be understood if we want to move beyond scepticism? Ernst Robert Curtius has already warned us that medieval descriptions of landscapes are permeated by rhetorical principles and elements inherited from Antiquity.[8] Seen in this light, it is unsurprising that the representations of Cistercian sites are shaped less by topographical than by rhetorical factors. When dealing with Cistercian descriptions of wildernesses, we are not looking at physical circumstances or literal meaning, but at the spiritual and rhetorical mentality of the Order – in Waddell's words: a spiritual climate,

in Newman's: a metaphorical condition[9] This is a condition imbued with the language of the Bible and the early Christian Fathers.

In *Exordium Cistercii* from the mid or late 1130s (that is, the second generation of the Order),[10] Robert of Molesme and his monks are described as purposeful *milites Christi* (soldiers of Christ):

> After many labors, therefore, and exceedingly great difficulties … they at length attained their desire and arrived at Cîteaux – at that time a place of horror and of vast solitude. But judging that the harshness of the place was not at variance with the strict purpose they had already conceived in mind, the soldiers of Christ held the place as truly prepared for them by God: a place as agreeable as their purpose was dear.[11]

The place is in concordance with their aim. The passage hinges on the phrase *locum tunc scilicet horroris et vastæ solitudinis* ('at that time a place of horror and of vast solitude') from Deuteronomy 32.10, which was to become a key reference in Cistercian foundation narratives.[12] In its biblical context the phrase alludes to the desert where God sustained his people during their forty years of wandering. In *Exordium Cistercii* it conveys the hostility of the terrain (which did in fact accommodate a chapel, a cabin for three serfs and a main road),[13] but in a way which lifts the site into a typologically tinged sphere.

The conglomeration of desert asceticism and *militia Christi* harks back to the Egyptian Desert Fathers, and the text makes the Cistercian founders heirs to both Moses, the desert-wanderer, and Anthony, the paradigmatic fourth-century hermit. Such aspirations belong to the second generation of Cistercians rather than the first,[14] but when ascribing them to the first generation, the authors secure a connection between themselves, the founders, the early Christian Fathers and the biblical text. Their portrait of the wilderness of Cîteaux and its cultivation posits a past for the Order, which is in keeping with its mid-twelfth-century present and constructs a topographical antecedent in harmony with the Order's ethos at this point. Later foundation narratives took the cue and thus stressed the association of new houses with the primordial foundation at Cîteaux.

The wilderness hovers between the literal and the metaphorical. It represents the site and may take its bearings from a physical topography, but its key function is to point out spiritual and ascetic co-ordinates. The wilderness is a pliant narrative topos. On the one hand, it brings with it a cluster of basic implications: withdrawal from society and exposure to harsh climates and hostile forces. On the other hand, it is

easily modulated and transferred: the sylvan thickets or soggy marshlands of Western Europe can readily be seen as analogous to the stony desert of Thebes, the habitat of the Desert Fathers, or to the unspecified desert of Exodus. The wilderness may even be invested with different qualitative nuances: it can be hostile and diabolic, but it can also be contemplatively flavoured and indicate proximity to God.

In short, the wilderness is a topos, which connotes the weight of legitimacy and the power of uniformity; it is stamped with the mark of constancy that comes with prescriptive and normative genres. The idea of the wilderness links Cistercians everywhere and at all times to a legacy and a 'foundation mythology'. But at the same time it functions as a repository of various characteristics and implications, and it may easily be adapted to different circumstances and rhetorical needs.

Already the two foundation narratives *Exordium Cistercii* and *Exordium Parvum* represent two different shades of wilderness representations. They agree that the nature of Cîteaux was hostile and uninhabitable and thus in concord with the ascetic aim of Robert and his companions. They also agree that no sooner had the monks reached the wild than they began to cut it down and create a monastic civilisation. But whereas *Exordium Cistercii* stresses the *militia Christi* motif, *Exordium Parvum*, which dates from before 1147, directs its focus to the life of the men of God (*viri Dei*) in its contrast to secular life:

> Understanding upon arrival that the more despicable and unapproachable the place was to seculars, the more suited it was for the monastic observance they had already conceived in mind, and for which sake they had come there, the men of God, after cutting down and removing the dense grove and thornbushes, began to construct a monastery there.[15]

The place is fitting because it is the exact opposite of the world, just as Cistercian life in its orientation towards God – as envisaged by the founders, according to the second-generation authors – is the exact opposite of secular life.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Bernard of Clairvaux is no great champion of the wilderness. He associates the desert with the life of the hermit as opposed to the cenobitic (communal) life in the monastery, and he warns against it. To a nun in Troyes, who was tempted by the hermitage, he writes, for example: 'For anyone wishing to lead a bad life the desert supplies ample opportunity. The woods afford cover, and solitude assures silence.'[16] But it is telling of the flexibility of the topos that

when he does describe the Cistercian monastery as a desert, it is a desert which is almost unrecognisable as such:

> The southern region is the cloister or the desert … and the 'southern plain' [Gen. 13.1] represents the communal life, a spiritual mode of living among good people. The paradise of the cloister, facing the sweet mildness of the favourable south wind, flourishes, as it were, with as many flowers as it abounds in virtues.[17]

Bernard turns the desert into a blossoming paradise; nonetheless, it retains an associative connection to the basic idea of the Cistercians as desert-dwellers.

Whenever there is a need to assert monastic legitimacy, the foundation is called upon. It is typical that Armand-Jean de Rancé's (1626–1700) reform at La Trappe engendered not only a renewed interest in the Rule of Benedict and its proper meaning, but also an evocation of the wilderness topos and its inherent link to the origin of the Order. Two examples will suffice. La Trappe was founded in the 1140s, and Rancé was not a cultivator in the same way as the first founders. Nonetheless, the official visitor Dominique Georges, abbot of Val-Richer, comes close to making such a claim in the report he presented to the General Chapter in 1686. In the section dedicated to the material state of the monastery, Georges describes La Trappe before and after Rancé's reform. The 'before' conjures up a wilderness, which is the consequence of material and spiritual decay: nature is creeping in and has overtaken monastic civilisation – a well-known topos of deterioration.[18] The passage is so vivid that we almost forget that Georges's visitation took place in November 1685, more than twenty years after the situation he describes:

> When entering the cloister you saw a completely ruined roof, which, at the slightest rainfall, would cause flooding of the cloister … parlours served as stables for the horses. The refectory was a refectory in name only. Monks and seculars gathered there to play *boules* when heat or bad weather prevented them from playing outside. The dormitory was abandoned and uninhabited; it served as a retreat only for night birds … The monastery had no garden; it was surrounded by poor soil, in which grew thorns, bushes and trees. But the worst thing was that, owing to the highway built around a hundred years earlier close to the monastic walls, you saw nothing there but vagabonds, criminals and assassins. Men and women gathered in the woods nearby and there, as in a safe haven, hid to commit every sort of crime.[19]

Rancé had the highway relocated and thus reinforced the withdrawal by, so to speak, moving the world further away. The passage describes the wild muddle of animals, climatic elements, plants and vices allegedly disciplined by the reformer. In his portrait of the transformation of this Babylonian anarchy into an orderly and well-structured civilisation, Georges brings Rancé's reform close to the foundation at Cîteaux despite widely different circumstances. The visitor was countering the internal scepticism as to the reform voiced at the General Chapter of 1684 and elsewhere; the wilderness topos corroborates his comprehensive vindication of its genuine Cistercian character.[20]

In 1670, sixteen years before Georges's report, Louis XIV's historiographer André Félibien des Avaux visited La Trappe.[21] He penned his impressions in a *carte de visite*, the *Description de l'abbaye de la Trappe*, which was printed in several editions and translated into English. Félibien recounts his first impression of the scenery with verve:

> This monastery is situated in a wide valley, and the forest and the hills that surround it are so positioned that they seem to want to hide it from the rest of the world. They … make access so difficult that it is hard to get there without the directions of a guide. There once was a road from Mortagne to Paris that ran behind the garden walls … the Abbot had it redirected so that the surroundings of their monastery were less frequented. Thus there is nothing more desolate than this desert. And even though there are several towns and villages around it at a distance of three leagues, it seems that one is in an unknown region in another country.[22]

La Trappe remains a wilderness, but the tenor of Félibien's wilderness differs significantly from Georges's. It is represented as so far removed from the world that it almost seems to hover in a tension between absence and presence.

In fact, hundreds of visitors travelled to La Trappe each year,[23] and it is difficult not to agree with the nineteenth-century theologian and abolitionist Mary Schimmelpenninck's dry remark:

> It is repeatedly said that, on an average, this seclusion is visited by six thousand strangers every year; and that from 12 to 15 hundred poor are fed there … twice every week. It seems difficult to conceive how a road can be untracked, which is passed a hundred and sixty thousand times every year.[24]

But, again, the description is about spiritual temper rather than topographical layout. Rancé's reform revolved around withdrawal from

the world through penitence, silence and fasting; the *carte de visite* is permeated by this drift which, in Félibien's version, makes for joyful tranquility. The description of the wilderness which accommodates the monastery chimes in with the visitor's overall description of the ascetic regime at La Trappe as a serene haven: it is a place in harmony with the spirit of the reform.

Félibien's text was sometimes paired with an apocryphal volume of regulations and thus made to serve an internal purpose for the monks of La Trappe.[25] But it was written for an external addressee, Jeanne de Schomberg, duchesse de Liancourt (1600–1674), who belonged to the lay entourage of Port-Royal. The historiographer begins his description with a concession: 'Madame, it is not without reason that I fear not to be able to satisfy entirely your pious curiosity, for I have difficulties making you a description of La Trappe which corresponds to the elevated idea one must have of it.'[26] Félibien portrays both La Trappe and his own awe of its life while feeding the duchess's vision of austere penance. His aesthetically flavoured representation of the severe isolation of La Trappe caters to a taste for penitential piousness and solitude which was in fashion among the duchess and her peers.[27] People talked about Rancé and La Trappe, and the monastery and its reformer seem to have qualified as interesting news; for example, Marie Dupré attached a *carte de visite* from La Trappe to a letter to the comte de Bussy-Rabutin alongside gossip about deaths, love affairs and new admissions to the Academy.[28]

Rancé maintained a comprehensive correspondence and offered moral instruction to men and women, lay as well as religious.[29] Many aristocrats came to the monastery for retreats, partaking for a while in its withdrawal from society. The guests were met with signboards instructing them not to address the monks and later had their own refectory so as not to disturb the community. They were lodged immediately outside the walls in the former abbatial lodge with its own garden (a favourite retreat for Louis XIV's cousin, Mme de Guise), in an apartment which traversed the wall or more centrally next to the lay brothers' quarters.[30] Together with Rancé's extensive correspondence and reputed charisma, representations such as Félibien's extended the penitential spirit of La Trappe beyond the monastic walls, thus, as it were, inverting the withdrawal it celebrated. For the king it even became possible to pay a virtual visit to La Trappe by way of a model (fourteen by sixteen feet), complete with needy people at the gate made of enamel, with fruit trees and flowers made of silk. It was offered to the monarch in 1708 with the words: 'Now your Majesty can visit this famous monastery in one glance.'[31]

There are five centuries between the uninhabitable thickets of the foundation narratives and Bernard's allegorical desert-paradise on the one hand and Georges's Babylonian chaos and Félibien's peaceful solitude on the other. There are differences of genre between the foundation texts, the draft sermon, the visitation report and the description intended for an aristocratic laywoman. There are differences of historical context between the twelfth-century textual consolidation of a successful Order, or the rhetorical mastery of its primary figure, and the texts written in the seventeenth-century cultural and religious climate with its particular aesthetic and penitential preferences and the specific textual needs provoked by Rancé's reform. Finally, there are significant differences between the wildernesses represented; from the impenetrable vegetation of Cîteaux to the flowery fertility in Bernard's text, from the degeneracy and villainy of La Trappe before Rancé to the placid isolation that, according to Félibien, came after. Nonetheless, they all qualify as wildernesses. Each of these representations of a monastic site makes a claim to an overall desert mythology that connotes ascetic estrangement from the world and spiritual aspiration for the love of God. They all play a part in the construction of uniformity, coherence and legitimacy, but they also represent widely different individual emphases and adaptations.

As Félibien's *carte de visite* shows, the written wildernesses are not only employed to reinforce the internal coherence of the Order. Paradoxically, the solitude, this icon of isolation, may also play a role in the engagement of the monastery with the surrounding society – and in the engagement of this society with the monastery.

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## ENGAGEMENT

The withdrawal from the world is only half of the Cistercian story. Engagement and service to the world was just as important as being 'in the desert'. The nature of the Cistercian obligations to the wider society and the connections resulting from them was a subject carefully rethought and reshaped by the Cistercian leaders. The precise form of the monastic engagement in the individual abbeys was linked to the character of different regions and localities and strongly rooted in the pre-existing monastic traditions and expectations of the lay world.

The central role of the monks has always been to intercede on behalf of the world, a tradition of which Cistercian were a part. At the core of the monastic–lay relationships was the reciprocity in the form