

PAST MODELS AND CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS: THE FOUNDATION AND GROWTH OF THE CISTERCIAN ORDER

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OF all the medieval monastic orders the Cistercian has undoubtedly received the most attention from historians, and this engagement with the White Monks shows no sign of abating. In the words of David Robinson in his recent volume on the Cistercian abbeys of Wales, 'to turn one's back on the subject, even for a moment, is to lose the plot'.¹ Current scholarship continues to be concerned with a range of issues. However, much of the most controversial scholarship has centred on the dating of key Cistercian documents: the narratives of the origins of Cîteaux, that is, the *Exordium Parvum* and the *Exordium Cistercii*, as well as various versions of the Cistercian constitution, the *Carta Caritatis*, and successive *capitula*, that is, the pronouncements of the Annual General Chapter. The debate is not new. For over seventy years scholars, including in an English context Dom David Knowles, have sought to unravel the textual and manuscript complexities of the documents relating to the foundation and growth of the mother house itself and of the order.² In the last six years two significant contributions to this area of scholarship have appeared, the first more controversial than the second. First, Constance Berman argued that the key Cistercian documents were inventions of the latter part of the twelfth century, designed to create a past for the Cistercian order, an organization which, she argues, did not exist before the mid-twelfth century.³ Before then, Berman suggests, *ordo Cisterciensis* meant not a formal order, but the way of life (*ordo*) followed at Cîteaux and other reformed houses, initially in Burgundy but gradually spreading more widely. Berman's arguments have not met with

¹ David M. Robinson, *The Cistercians in Wales: Architecture and Archaeology 1130-1540* (London, 2006), x.

² The bibliography is exhaustive. The issues were addressed by David Knowles, 'The Primitive Cistercian Documents', in *Great Historical Enterprises: Problems in Monastic History* (London, 1963), 197-222.

³ Constance Hoffman Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: the Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia, PA, 2000).

universal acceptance but have forced a reassessment of the evidence.⁴ Second, between 1999 and 2002, Chrysogonus Waddell produced in three volumes new editions, with notes and translations, of the *Exordium Parvum*, *Exordium Cistercii*, *Carta Caritatis*, the twelfth-century statutes of the General Chapter, and the *Usus Conversorum*, or Usages of the Lay Brothers, thus providing the basis for future discussion.⁵

It need hardly be stressed that the dates of these documents have important bearings on key questions about the very origins of what is commonly described as the most successful of all new monastic movements to emerge from that great period of revival and resurgence, the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Those questions bear repeating here. What were the intentions of the founders of the New Monastery, as Cîteaux was first known, that is, of Abbot Robert and his band of twenty-one monks who left the prosperous monastery of Molesme in 1098 for the *heremum*, the desert, of Cîteaux? When did the ideologies that we associate with the Cistercians first emerge? And at what point can we detect the beginnings of a Cistercian order, that is, a group of houses bound by both shared aspirations and aims and by a constitution, the *Carta Caritatis*, which held those houses together in a common observance?⁶ It is with some trepidation that I put my toe in the still swirling waters of controversy. However, the undoubted impact that the Cistercians had on the monastic world of the Middle Ages seems to invite a reassessment of how far the dynamics behind the enterprise were inspired by the themes of this volume, that is, by notions of revival and resurgence. The aim of this essay is therefore to review in a critical way where scholarship stands on, and what it has to tell us about, the impulse behind the emergence of Cistercian monasticism. Was it a

⁴ See, for instance, the review articles: Brian Patrick McGuire, 'Charity and Unanimity: the Invention of the Cistercian Order; A Review Article', *Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses* 51 (2000), 285–97, and Chrysogonus Waddell, 'The Myth of Cistercian Origins: C. H. Berman and the Manuscript Sources', *ibid.*, 299–386.

⁵ Chrysogonus Waddell, ed., *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux*, Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses, Studia et Documenta IX (1999) [hereafter: *Narrative and Legislative Texts*]; *idem*, *Cistercian Lay Brothers: Twelfth-Century Usages with Related Texts*, Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses, Studia et Documenta X (2000); *idem*, *Twelfth-Century Statutes from the Cistercian General Chapter*, Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses, Studia et Documenta XII (2002).

⁶ Among many articles and papers that treat these questions, see J. Leclercq, 'The Intentions of the Founders of the Cistercian Order', in M. Basil Pennington, ed., *The Cistercian Spirit: a Symposium*, Cistercian Studies Series 3 (Spencer, MA, 1970), 88–133. Editions and translations of the *Summa Cartae Caritatis*, *Carta Caritatis Prior* and *Carta Caritatis Posterior* are included in *Narrative and Legislative Texts*.

movement concerned with past models, and a conscious evocation of history? Or was it prompted more by contemporary concerns of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries? Within a monastic context revival can imply a sense of renewal after a period of decay, as, for instance, in tenth-century England. It can also suggest that those who sought to 'renew' saw weaknesses in existing models, in the case of Cîteaux in the practices of eleventh-century monasticism, and in the past much of the debate has centred on the growth of the Cistercians as a response to crisis and decline in the Benedictine world.⁷ In addressing these questions I want to include, but at the same time to cast the net wider than, what are often called the primitive Cistercian documents on which recent scholarship has tended to concentrate. I want to look at some non-Cistercian texts, and to consider how Cistercians within a regional context expressed their ideologies and how they developed them in relation to past models.

There exist two Cistercian narratives of the origins of Cîteaux, the *Exordium Parvum*, and the *Exordium Cistercii*. Chrysogonus Waddell has argued that the earlier of the two – in part at least – is the longer text, the *Exordium Parvum*. This comprises a prologue and eighteen chapters. Waddell's hypothesis is that the prologue and chapters I, II, together with chapters IV to XIV, represent a primitive or early version of the *Exordium*. This early version, he suggests, was composed by Stephen Harding, abbot of Cîteaux from 1109 to 1133/4, probably as a 'postulants' guide' around the time of the foundation of Cîteaux's first daughter house at La Ferté in 1113. This version of the text does not survive independently – it is hypothetical – but Waddell argues persuasively for its existence. Waddell further suggests that the additional material came from the pen of Raynard du Bar, abbot of Cîteaux from 1134/5 to 1150, and was composed around 1147 as a preface to the RIII customary that included the revised version of the *Ecclesiastica Officia*.⁸ Waddell was not the first to see the *Exordium Parvum* as a composite document. In 1986 Jean Baptiste Auberger argued that chapters I to X

⁷ See the important articles: Norman F. Cantor, 'The Crisis of Western Monasticism, 1050–1130', *American Historical Review* 66.1 (1960), 47–67; J. Leclercq, 'The Monastic Crisis of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries', in N. Hunt, ed., *Cluniac Monasticism in the Central Middle Ages* (Hamden, CN, 1971), 217–37; John van Engen, 'The "Crisis of Cenobitism" Reconsidered: Benedictine Monasticism in the Years 1050–1150', *Speculum* 61.2 (1986), 269–304.

⁸ *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 197–231 (introduction), 233–59 (text), 417–40 (text and translation).

and XIV were the work either of Stephen Harding or an associate, composed before 1123, probably c.1119.⁹ The shorter narrative, *Exordium Cistercii*, Waddell also identifies as the work of Raynard du Bar, produced early in his abbacy, probably 1136/7, as an historical introduction to the second revised customary designated RII.¹⁰ It will be appropriate to start by looking at these two texts and isolating the features that seem to point to ideas of resurgence and renewal, and I will begin with the *Exordium Cistercii* as the earlier of the two in its surviving form if not in terms of its original composition.

In the two fairly short chapters of narrative in the *Exordium Cistercii* the monastery of Molesme, from which the famous secession took place in 1098, is described in terms that are far from critical. Molesme was 'of the most celebrated renown, and remarkable for monastic observance', and 'illustrious by the gifts of [God's] grace', 'ennobled ... with illustrious men' and no 'less ample in possessions than resplendent in virtues'. It was the prosperity of Molesme, however, that was the cause for concern 'because association of possessions with virtues is not usually longlasting' and it was for this reason that the founders of the New Monastery began 'thinking upon poverty, fruitful mother of a virile stock'.¹¹ This is the first manifestation in the *Exordium Cistercii* of the Cistercian theme of revival and resurgence, a return to that poverty which is linked to virtue, the apostolic poverty of the early Church. The author makes a further link between poverty and virtue, for the monks are said to realize that their lives could not without poverty be fully holy and respectable; indeed, that poverty, they 'fell short of their desire and purpose to observe the Rule they had professed'.¹² Here, in this phrase, is the second indication of the evocation of earlier models, in this case the Rule of St Benedict. A third indication comes with the description of the site of Cîteaux, which is called *locum tunc scilicet horroris et vastae solitudinis*, a phrase derived from Deuteronomy 32: 10,

⁹ Jean-Baptiste Auberger, *L'unanimité cistercienne primitive: mythe ou réalité*, Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses, Studia et Documenta III (Achel, 1986), 42–52. For further discussion, in particular of the impact of Abbot Stephen Harding on developments at early Cîteaux, see H. E. J. Cowdrey, 'Quidem Frater Stephanus nomine, anglicus natione', in E. Rozanne Elder, ed., *The New Monastery: Texts and Studies on the Earliest Cistercians*, Cistercian Fathers Series 60 (Kalamazoo, MI, 1998), 57–77.

¹⁰ *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 137–61 (introduction), 179–81 (text), 399–404 (text and translation). Auberger, *l'unanimité cistercienne*, 52–7, argues for a Clairvaux origin for the *Exordium Cistercii*.

¹¹ *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 399–400.

¹² *Ibid.*, 400.

the desert through which the chosen people travelled to the Promised Land. The full verse is *Invenit eum in terra deserta, in loco horroris et vastae solitudinis*, translated in the King James version as 'He found him in a desert land and in the waste howling wilderness'. At Cîteaux the monks found their *heremum*, their desert or solitude, a word that evoked not only the biblical wilderness, but the eremitical origins of monasticism in the eastern deserts, and also the opening chapter of the Rule of St Benedict. The narrative in the *Exordium Cistercii* of the settlement of Cîteaux closes with the monks of the New Monastery binding themselves to stability, *firmitatibus stabilitatem*,¹³ that cornerstone of the Rule of St Benedict, thus firmly embedding Robert and his companions in a Benedictine tradition.

The *Exordium Cistercii* accordingly introduces what we might call three past models, those of apostolic poverty, the Rule, and the desert. Abbot Raynard, in condensing the narrative of Cîteaux's foundation for the *Exordium Cistercii*, evidently saw no reason to paint a picture of Molesme that was anything but good. The features which distinguished Cîteaux from Molesme were its location and its stress on poverty. Historians of the Cistercian order have always been struck forcefully by the difference in tone between the *Exordium Cistercii* and the *Exordium Parvum*, and we must remember that we are comparing one text, *Exordium Parvum*, which was in part a product of the first generation of monks at the New Monastery, with another produced after the death of Stephen Harding, the last abbot to have been a founder father of Cîteaux. The two texts are a generation apart, and a turbulent generation at that. Moreover, if Auberger and Waddell are correct in seeing the *Exordium Parvum* as a dual-layered compilation then we need to look at the nuances of both the primitive and the expanded text.

The primitive *Exordium Parvum*, which we may take to represent or reflect the earlier views on the main issues, is striking for the frequency with which it invokes the Rule of St Benedict. Indeed, it would not be overstating the case to describe the Rule as the dynamic around which the whole text is constructed. Here it does indeed stand in contrast to the *Exordium Cistercii*. The Rule is mentioned in seven of what Waddell sees as the thirteen chapters of the primitive *Exordium Parvum* and in three of the additional five chapters. Let us look first at the chapters deemed by Waddell to represent an early stage of composition, possibly

¹³ Ibid., 401.

two decades before the *Exordium Cistercii*. In chapter I the monks led by Robert of Molesme are said, without any particular nuance, to have wished to place their lives under the custody of the holy rule of Father Benedict.¹⁴ In chapter II the language is somewhat stronger. The monks had stood before Archbishop Hugh of Lyons and, according to his letter had 'professed that you wished from then on to adhere more strictly and perfectly (*arctius deinceps atque perfectius*) to the Rule of the most blessed Benedict, which till then you had observed lukewarmly and negligently in that monastery'.¹⁵ The same word, *arctus*, is employed in the letter of Archbishop Hugh of Lyons that forms chapter XII: the monks are said to have left Molesme for the sake of a stricter (*arctior*) and more secluded (*secretior*) life. At this point, despite the generally critical tone concerning Molesme, the author strikes a different note. The monks who left, he says, determined to observe the Rule of St Benedict 'having set aside the customs of certain monasteries – judging their frailty (*imbecillitas*) no match to bear with so great a burden'.¹⁶ Here the decision to jettison the heavy liturgical burdens of contemporary monasticism is not expressed in terms of a return to the Rule, but in terms of the stamina of the monks themselves.

But what of those chapters that Waddell sees as much later additions, the work of Raynard du Bar? In chapter III the criticism of Molesme is raised a notch. This describes the departure of the monks from Molesme and their foundation of the New Monastery as the direct result of the failure of Molesme to observe the rule which amounted to perjury (*et ob hoc periurii crimen scienter incurrisse*).¹⁷ A key chapter in the *Exordium Parvum* is chapter XV, which Waddell sees as Abbot Raynard's summary of the capitula and statutes agreed by c.1147. Entitled 'The Institutes of the Monks of Cîteaux who came from Molesme', this lays out the ideology of the order in many aspects we have come to see as the distinguishing features of the White Monks.¹⁸ Here the Rule is used in several ways. First, the Cistercians rejected everything that was seen directly to contravene the Rule in matters concerning food and drink and clothing, and determined to adhere to its regulations. This was implicitly critical of current monastic practices parodied so articulately some twenty-five years after the foundation of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 419.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 430.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 421.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 434–7.

the New Monastery in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Apologia*. Second, there is an appeal to the Rule which in reality goes beyond the Rule, and largely derives from the Life of St Benedict by Gregory the Great. By invoking Benedict's life, chapter XV explains the decisions to ban certain types of revenue, to prevent women from entering monasteries, to exclude burials, to found monasteries in lone places, and to establish new foundations with the apostolic number of twelve monks and an abbot. Here the appeal is not to the Rule but to the man himself.¹⁹ Third, chapter XV makes additions to the Rule to achieve what was seen as its spirit. Thus it records the decision to refuse to accept tithes on the grounds that it was inappropriate for monks to do so. It also records the important introduction of the *conversi*, or lay brothers, designed to preserve for the monks their way of life within the cloister 'for without the assistance of these they did not understand how they could fully observe the precepts of the Rule day and night'.²⁰

Of the three manifestations of an appeal to earlier traditions mentioned above in connection with the *Exordium Cistercii*, one, the Rule of St Benedict, is dominant in the *Exordium Parvum*, and to the possible reasons for this I will return. The appeal to the desert tradition of monasticism is more muted. The words *heremum* and *solitudo* are used to describe the site of Cîteaux on several occasions, but the phrase from Deuteronomy, used in the *Exordium Cistercii*, which was to pass into Cistercian mythology and form the classic description of a Cistercian site, is not employed.²¹ Raynard chose instead to characterize the location of the New Monastery as inaccessible to humans and inhabited by wild beasts. But there is another way in which the antithesis between Molesme and Cîteaux is expressed and that is in terms of the cenobitic and the eremitic. In chapter VI the author recorded Pope Urban II's order for the return of Robert from Cîteaux to Molesme, 'from the desert to the monastery' and that 'both those who love the desert live together there in quiet, and that those in the monastery observe the practices of the Rule'.²²

¹⁹ Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Book II, conveniently translated by Myra L. Uhlfelder, *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great, Book Two, Saint Benedict* (Indianapolis, 1967). For Benedict's sister, Scholastica, and her burial in Benedict's monastery, see *ibid.*, 42–4.

²⁰ *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 435.

²¹ For the phrase see, for instance, the *Narratio de Fundatione* of Fountains Abbey, printed in *Memorials of the Abbey of St Mary of Fountains*, I, ed. J. R. Walbran, Surtees Society 42 (1863), 2.

²² *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 423.

What are we to make of the *Exordium Parvum*'s evocation of these past models? The shorter text, the *Exordium Cistercii* of c.1136, expresses none of the concerns, so prevalent in the *Exordium Parvum*, about the poor monastic observance at Molesme, and the failure fully to follow the Rule. It has become common to see the *Exordium Parvum*'s insistence that strict observance of the Rule was the dynamic behind the creation of the New Monastery as a response to criticism of the Cistercians concerning the way in which their monastery came into being as the result of schism.²³ Scholars who have taken chapter XVIII at face value, and dated the text to the early 1120s, have read it in a context of the emerging debate between the Cistercians and Cluniacs, the most famous salvo of which was Bernard's *Apologia*. They have seen the *Exordium Parvum*'s insistence that every aspect of the foundation of Cîteaux was canonical, or in accordance with the Rule, as the *apologia* of the second generation of Cistercian monks and as a defence against criticism that in abandoning Molesme the monks had also abandoned their Benedictine vow of stability. Constance Berman also sees a defensive tone but one which arose in an entirely different and much later context. She suggests that the *Exordium Parvum* may 'have been composed in response to growing criticism of the Cistercians, particularly a letter of Alexander III dated 1170' and that by the 1170s the *Exordium Parvum* had turned 'the simple familial language of the earlier *Exordium Cistercii* into a piece of rhetoric, a legal brief arguing for the legality of Cîteaux's secession from Molesme'.²⁴

The conclusion of this line of argument is that whether the *Exordium Parvum* was written in the 1120s, the 1140s, or the 1170s, its deliberate emphasis on the Rule was a means of recreating or rewriting the origins of Cîteaux. Is this interpretation still tenable in the light of Waddell's hypothesis that the primitive version of the *Exordium Parvum* was composed by Stephen Harding c.1113? Waddell himself rightly points out that the fierce discord engendered by the departure of Abbot Robert from Molesme in 1098 had largely been settled by 1113. Moreover, this date is rather too early to see any real tension emerging between the White Monks and the Cluniacs. If the *Exordium Parvum* does indeed date from the beginning of the Cistercian expansion then its evidence suggests that we should see that desire to return to the Rule

²³ See, for instance, Louis J. Lekai, 'The Rule and the Early Cistercians', *Cistercian Studies* 5 (1970), 243-51.

²⁴ Berman, *Cistercian Evolution*, 9-23, esp. 10.

of St Benedict in its primitive form as the dynamic behind the actions of the monks, and not simply as a device employed as polemic or to rewrite origins. We still need, however, to take account of the more explicit criticism of Molesme especially in the additional chapters. This suggests that around 1147, when Raynard revised the *Exordium Parvum* and added chapter III, with its notorious accusation that the failure of Molesme to keep the Rule amounted to perjury, there was a perceived need for more forceful language. The ongoing debate between the Cistercians and the Cluniacs may indeed have brought with it a desire to avoid a charge that in leaving Molesme the monks had subverted a key principle of the Rule, *stabilitas*. I would argue that the *Exordium Parvum*, both in its primitive and in its expanded form, creates for the Cistercians in a way that the *Exordium Cistercii* does not the idea that the Cistercians were preservers and transmitters of the Rule in its strict form, and that in so doing the text records the reawakening of the values of the author of the Rule that motivated Robert and his companions. This was the emphasis in what Waddell sees as the primitive version of the *Exordium Parvum* and it was reinforced by Raynard du Bar through his additions to the text.

A key word to emerge from a study of the Cistercian narratives is *arctus*, the strict, or stricter, observance of the Rule.²⁵ Did the reputation of the Cistercians as 'strict' upholders of the Rule spread further than the confines of Cîteaux and the Cistercian world? Here it may be instructive to look at views expressed in non-Cistercian writing. Often overlooked in this context is William of Malmesbury's essay on the Cistercians, which from its reference to the archbishop of Vienne, *qui nunc apostolicus est*, was clearly written before 1124, before, that is, the Cistercians had made their first landfall on British soil.²⁶ That an English Benedictine monk could write with confidence about the Cistercians speaks volumes about contacts between their monasteries and the English Church by the third decade of the twelfth century.²⁷

²⁵ On the significance of the word, see Leclercq, 'Intentions of the Founders', 90 and 101–1.

²⁶ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: the History of the English Kings*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols (Oxford, 1998–9) [hereafter: *Gesta Regum*], 1: 576–85. The pope referred to is Calixtus II, who confirmed the *Carta Caritatis* in 1119. The editors of *Gesta Regum* note the accuracy of William's account of the Cistercians (2: 288–94).

²⁷ Berman, *Cistercian Evolution*, 69, 101, discounts the witness of William of Malmesbury as evidence of the nature of the Cistercian order, stating that he wrote only of Cîteaux and

William's account of the origins of Cîteaux was coloured by his admiration for its third abbot, the Englishman Stephen Harding. William records how Stephen became a monk at Molesme, a monastery described as *novus* and *magnus*, where 'he easily recognized the basic elements of the Rule he had seen long ago'.²⁸ However, Stephen 'modestly' raised questions 'when other observances were set before him which he had neither read of in the Rule nor seen anywhere'. For William, then, the revival of the original spirit of the Rule was central to his understanding of Cistercian origins. According to his account the debate at Molesme was about the nature of the observance of the Rule of St Benedict, with Abbot Robert proposing 'that they should abandon superfluities and explore the very marrow of the Rule and nothing else' (*sententiam probaret supersedendum superfluis, solam medullam regulae uestigandum*). Ultimately this led to the secession of the abbot and eighteen monks 'declaring that it was not possible to maintain the purity of the Rule in a place where mounting wealth and overwhelming meals stifled even the spirit that fought against them' – and one may hear in this an echo of the *Exordium Cistercii*.²⁹ The description that William goes on to give of life at Cîteaux could almost have been drawn from the pages of the Rule, and his remark that they kept 'so closely to the Rule that they think it wrong to diverge by one letter, one iota' suggests a close familiarity with the sentiments if not the text of the *Exordium Parvum* and with the *Carta Caritatis*.³⁰ It would appear that by 1124 the Cistercians had acquired a reputation as upholders of the Rule that had spread to England. They were seen to hold to the Rule not just *arctius* but literally. One may recall here a similar description of the characteristics of Cistercian monasteries by another Benedictine monk, Orderic Vitalis.³¹

The description of a Cistercian community as one which by definition maintained a close observance of the Rule passed into later Cistercian historiography. The 'Life of Ailred of Rievaulx', written by

not of Cistercian monasteries, despite William's evidence that at the time of writing Stephen Harding had founded sixteen abbeys and begun seven more (*Gesta Regum*, 1: 583). The editors of *Gesta Regum* suggest that William's knowledge of the Cistercians came from a French Cistercian house, possibly L'Aumône (2: 291).

²⁸ *Gesta Regum*, 1: 579.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1: 581; *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 399–400.

³⁰ *Gesta Regum*, 1: 580–3 ('ita regulae incubantes ut nec iota unum nec apicem preterundum putent'); *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 408–9 (*Summa Cartae Caritatis*), 444 (*Carta Caritatis Prior*).

³¹ *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. M. Chibnall, 6 vols (Oxford, 1969–80), 4: 312–27.

Walter Daniel following Ailred's death in January 1167, clearly models the early community at Rievaulx on a monastery derived from the Rule. In an early chapter Walter puts in the mouth of a friend of Ailred a description of the infant community.

A pound of bread, half a pint (*emina*) of drink, a dish of cabbage and one of beans make up their meal. If they sup, the remnants of the previous meal are put back on the table, except that fresh vegetables, if any are available, are served in the place of the two cooked dishes. They sleep girded, one to a bed, in cowl and tunic winter and summer alike. They have nothing to call their own; they do not even talk together, and no-one undertakes anything of his own volition. Their every occupation is begun, or changed, at the superior's nod. Great and small, wise and ignorant, all are governed by the one law, be it at table, in procession, at communion or in other observances and rites.³²

This summary of the characteristics of the early Rievaulx community is derived from chapters 5, 6, 22, 33, 39, 40 and 42 of the Rule.

This was, of course, a retrospective, an account written in 1167 of an event, Ailred's conversion, that took place in 1134 two years after the foundation of Rievaulx. In other words the *Life* was written at a time when Cistercian historiography was developing but had not yet reached the heights in England that it would do forty years later. An even greater gap separates the events it describes from the composition of the most sophisticated of English Cistercian foundation narratives, the *Narratio de fundatione* of Fountains Abbey, begun by Hugh, monk of Kirkstall Abbey at the request of Abbot John of Fountains (1203–11).³³ It is now many years since Derek Baker tackled the question of the literary and documentary sources of the *Narratio*, and more recently Elizabeth Freeman has discussed its place in the Cistercian tradition of historical writing.³⁴ It is clear that although Hugh's preface suggested that his main source was the aged eyewitness Serlo, a monk of Kirkstall

³² Walter Daniel, *The Life of Ailred of Rievaulx*, ed. and trans. F. M. Powicke (London, 1950), 10–13, at 11–12. I have preferred the translation by P. Matarasso, *The Cistercian World: Monastic Writings of the Twelfth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1993), 153–4.

³³ Printed in *Memorials of Fountains*, I.

³⁴ L. G. D. Baker, 'The Genesis of English Cistercian Chronicles: the Foundation History of Fountains Abbey', 1, *Analecta Cisterciensia* 25 (1969), 14–41, and 2, *Analecta Cisterciensia* 31 (1975), 179–212; Elizabeth Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Historical Writing in England, 1150–1220* (Turnhout, 2002), 151–68.

then approaching his one hundredth year, his account of the secession of a group of Benedictine monks from St Mary's Abbey, York, and the foundation of Fountains Abbey, took its inspiration from Cistercian sources such as the *Exordium Parvum*. The parallels are clear. The secession from St Mary's was provoked by the arrival of a group of monks from Bernard's abbey of Clairvaux en route to found the first Cistercian house in the north, Rievaulx. However, they merely fomented discontent within the York abbey caused by a failure to observe the Rule of St Benedict, by a desire to restore primitive Benedictine observances, and by the pull of the 'desert'.

There were at that time in the monastery of York which is called St Mary's religious men walking in the way of the fathers, following without question the institutes that they had received from their elders. They lived in the manner and custom of the traditions of their fathers, honourably, under a Rule and an abbot, but far from the vow of their profession, far from the perfection of the discipline of the Cistercians. Some of them, having heard of the purity of the order were led by holy instinct to emulate them [the Cistercians]. Their consciences accused them of fulfilling their profession less than they should, and the example of others highlighted for them their own shortcomings . . .

. . . It embarrassed them that they lived this side of perfection, that they had dwelt so long in the land of Moab, and had accepted a heritage beyond the river Jordan. The tumult of the world and the clamour of the city wearied them. They longed with great longing for the desert, for the labour of their hands, for the ways of the prophets.³⁵

It may be tempting to dismiss the *Narratio* as designed to create a myth and a past for the English abbey that drew comparisons with the mother house of the order, and allowed Fountains to emerge as the English Cîteaux. But that concern for the Rule was indeed an important dynamic is reinforced by Bernard's letter to Abbot Richard and the monks of the newly founded monastery of Fountains praising their actions: 'you yourselves discovered whether or not it were safe for those who have vowed to observe the Holy Rule to remain in a stage below

³⁵ Latin text in *Memorials of Fountains*, I, 5–6, my translation. The reference to the land of Moab is to Josh. 13: 32, the division of the land of Canaan.

what is required by it'³⁶ – they were moved, in other words, by a desire to observe the Rule *arctius*.

A re-reading and re-assessment of the texts, then, suggests to me that we should not see the insistence on the Cistercians' observance of the Rule *arctius* merely as polemic discovered or invented either in the 1120s in the context of the growing debate between the Cistercians and the Cluniacs, or in the 1140s, or even in the 1170s, and recycled by the English Cistercians in the second half of the twelfth century. The Rule was a genuine role model, and the return to it a real attempt to revive what was seen as the spirit of primitive Benedictine monasticism. At the same time the Cistercian view of the Rule was not a static one. Too often critics have been inclined to take the Cistercians to task for creating rules, and then breaking them, and for holding themselves up as followers of the Rule while they selectively altered and modified it.³⁷ While it is true that the writings from both inside and outside the Cistercian order stress the role of the White Monks as the upholders of the Rule, they themselves saw that in order to maintain the spirit of the Rule, they would have to adapt it.

The more obvious ways in which the Cistercians made additions to the Rule lie in the constitutional arrangements laid down by the *Carta Caritatis* to maintain uniformity and promote *caritas*, and in the mechanisms for regulating the economic activities of Cistercian houses through the *conversi*. There is also clear evidence that the Cistercian insistence on the Rule was more about reinterpretation than literal restoration or revival and that they were adapting the Rule to suit the spirit of the age. One obvious example is the attitude to child oblates. This raised its head early in the growth of the order, when one Cistercian at least was forced to confront the issue. In 1119 Bernard, the young abbot of Clairvaux, wrote to Robert, often described as his nephew but probably his cousin, who had become a Cistercian. Robert then regretted his decision; his conscience evidently troubled him because he had been promised as a child by his parents to Cluny. Bernard, in a view that would be adopted as official Cistercian regulation, condemned the practice of offering children as oblates contained

³⁶ 'Professis siquidem sanctam Regulam, an citra eius puritatem sistere gradum tutum sit, ipsi sensistis': *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, ed. J. Leclercq and H. Rochais, vols 7 and 8, *Epistolae* (Rome, 1974–7), 7: 246–7 (letter 96), translated in *The Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. B. Scott James (London, 1953), 240–1 (letter 171).

³⁷ However, see Lekai, 'Rule and the Early Cistercians', 248–51.

in chapter 59 of the Rule of St Benedict, but he did so by appealing to Benedict himself:

Let them see and judge which has the most force: the vow a father makes on behalf of his son, or the vow a son makes on his own behalf, especially when it is a vow of something better. Let your servant and our law giver, Benedict, judge which is the more in order: a vow made for a child when it is too young to know anything about it, or the vow he afterwards makes for himself when he realizes and understands what he is doing, when he is of an age to speak for himself.³⁸

Thus it was that the Cistercians turned their backs on one key chapter of the Rule that was not in harmony with twelfth-century attitudes.³⁹

Some five years after he wrote this letter Bernard felt compelled, in his *Apologia*, to deny that he was criticizing other orders, and to condemn Cistercians who might be so doing. In the chapter 'Against Detractors' he insisted on the importance of following the spirit, rather than the letter, of the Rule. He is here addressing those Cistercians who criticize others.

I have heard it said that you speak of yourselves as the only ones with any virtue, as holier than everyone else, and the only monks who live according to the Rule; as far as you are concerned other monks are simply transgressors.⁴⁰

Bernard insists that no-one should pass judgement on another, contrary to the gospels and the epistles. But not all monks were satisfied with his answer.

They retort: 'How can these monks be said to keep the Rule? They wear furs and they eat meat and fat. Every day they have three or four different dishes, which the Rule forbids, and they leave out the work it enjoins. Many points of their Rule they modify or extend or restrict as they like.' This is so; no one could deny it. But look at God's Rule, with which St Benedict's regula-

³⁸ Letter 1, Leclercq and Rochais, eds, *Opera*, 7: 1-11, at 6; James, *Letters of St Bernard*, 1-10, at 6.

³⁹ *Narrative and Legislative Texts, Institutum Generalis Capituli*, LXXX (361, 490). This fixed the minimum age for entry into the novitiate at fifteen. It was later raised to eighteen.

⁴⁰ *Cistercians and Cluniacs: St Bernard's Apologia to Abbot William*, trans. Michael Casey, Cistercian Publications (Kalamazoo, MI, 1970), 45-52, at 45.

tions agree. It says that 'the kingdom of God is within you', it does not consist in outward things like bodily clothing and food, but in man's interior virtues ... You cast aspersions on the Fathers because of mere outward observances, while you yourself don't bother about the more important spiritual regulations laid down by the Rule. You gulp down the camel and strain out the gnat. How absurd! Great care is taken to see that the body is clothed according to the Rule, whilst the Rule is broken by leaving the soul naked.⁴¹

Bernard is not, of course, excusing infractions of the Rule, and in the *Apologia* he goes on in a typically robust way to condemn what he sees as manifestations of a decline in observances that would have shocked the great abbots of Cluny as much as anyone. However, in the passage I have just quoted, he is both inveighing against monks judging others, and setting the spiritual against the bodily. To the detractor he states: 'If you think that all those who make profession of the Rule are obliged to keep it literally without any possibility of dispensation, then I dare say you fail as much as the Cluniac'.⁴² For Bernard, then, the Rule is to be followed in spirit as much as to the letter.

The same need for adaptation appears in the writings of Ailred of Rievaulx. In the final chapters of *The Mirror of Charity* Ailred turns to musings on the monastic life, prompted by a letter whose author has indicated what, for him, were the essentials of monastic life, that is, stability, conversion of life, and obedience according to the Rule of St Benedict.⁴³ This is what the unnamed correspondent called the 'essential character' of the monastic profession, as distinct from the practices which sustain it. Ailred admits that what his correspondent describes as those practices – manual work, the quantity of food and drink and so on – can be changed and dispensations allowed. However, Ailred's view of what can be adapted includes even the 'essential character or body' of the monastic life. He argues that even the concept of stability can be modified, for Benedict himself sent Maur to Gaul without compromising his profession, and

How often monks are transferred by a dispensation from their

⁴¹ Ibid., 46–8.

⁴² Ibid., 50.

⁴³ Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*, trans. Elizabeth Connor, Cistercian Fathers Series 17 (Kalamazoo, MI, 1990), III, 35 (279–87).

abbots, I do not say from monastery to monastery but even from region to region. How then can stability of place susceptible to such frequent dispensations pertain to the body of our Rule and the essential character of monastic profession?⁴⁴

It is clear that for Ailred, as for Bernard, the significance of the Rule lay less in its literal interpretation than in what it represented about the resurgence of the spirit of primitive monasticism. The image articulated in the *Exordium Parvum* and in non-Cistercian texts such as the *Gesta Regum* was one of the Cistercians living strictly according to the Rule. The Rule of St Benedict was clearly of paramount importance to the Cistercians, not only in the way they interpreted the monastic life, but also in their construction of their self image. However, this view needs to be modified in so far as we should recognize that the White Monks themselves admitted that modification might be necessary. They saw in their way of life a restoration of early practice overlaid with concerns for current conditions.

But what of the other indelible image associated with the Cistercians, that of the 'return to the desert' that characterized a number of contemporary movements of the eleventh and twelfth centuries? The Rule of St Benedict itself provides a link with the desert origins of the monastic life, since chapter I articulates Benedict's view that the cenobium, that is, the community, provides the training ground or apprenticeship for the 'solitary combat of the desert'. The Cistercians' own narratives provide powerful evidence on which have been constructed views of the desert associations of the White Monks. As we have seen, the *Exordium Parvum* uses the word *heremum*, that is, desert place, or solitude, to describe the location of the New Monastery, while *Exordium Cistercii* prefers *locum horroris et vastae solitudinis*. The 'Cistercian Institutes' laid down that Cistercian abbeys were not to be built 'in cities, walled towns, villages, but in places removed from human habitation'.⁴⁵ The Benedictine monk Orderic Vitalis also understood the secluded nature of Cistercian abbeys when he wrote that 'they have built monasteries with their own hands in lonely wooded places'.⁴⁶

Critics from the twelfth century onwards have accused the Cisterc-

⁴⁴ Ibid., 282.

⁴⁵ *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 408 (*Capitula*), 435 (*Exordium Parvum*), 458 (*Instituta*).

⁴⁶ Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. Chibnall, 4: 327.

ians of using the desert as a myth, both to create an image that was far from reality and to justify the dispossession or relocation of population to create the desert. As the satirist Walter Map put it:

It is prescribed to them that they are to dwell in desert places, and desert places they do assuredly either find or make . . . they make a solitude that they may be solitaires.⁴⁷

However the desert was not just about physical location. The phrase served two purposes in Cistercian historiography. It served as a link with the founders of monasticism, thus stressing the authentic tradition followed by the Cistercians, and it helped to foster the spiritual or psychological desert which the Cistercians sought in isolating themselves from the world. In Book I of the *Vita Prima* of Bernard, William of St Thierry described his visits to Clairvaux:

Unworthy though I was, I spent a few days with him [Bernard], and wherever I turned my eyes I was amazed to see as it were a new heaven and a new earth, and the well-worn path trodden by the monks of old, our fathers out of Egypt, bearing the footprints left by men of our own time . . . The first impression of those approaching Clairvaux down the steep scarp was of God's presence in the little huddle of houses, for the dumb valley itself proclaimed, through the poverty and humility of the buildings, that of Christ's poor whose dwelling place they were . . . There was a sense in which the solitude of that valley, strangled and overshadowed by its thickly wooded hills, in which God's servants lived their hidden lives, stood for the cave in which our father St Benedict was once discovered by shepherds – the sense in which those who were patterning their lives on his could be said to be living in a kind of solitude. They were indeed a crowd of solitaires. Under the rule of love ordered by reason, the valley became a desert for each of the many men who dwelt there.⁴⁸

Cistercian writers further evoked the desert by calling on the names of the earliest monks. When in the *Apologia* he condemned excess Bernard appealed to a pre-Benedictine tradition: 'Long ago, when the monastic

⁴⁷ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*, rev. edn C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1983), 92–3.

⁴⁸ Translated in Matarasso, *The Cistercian World*, 30–1. For St Benedict, his cave, and the shepherds who found him there, see Uhlfelder, *Dialogues of Gregory the Great*, 4–6.

Order began, who would have dreamed that monks could become so slack? Oh, how far away we have moved from Anthony and his contemporaries!⁴⁹ And of monks who sought dispensation on the grounds of sickness he wrote: 'Is this the way Macarius lived? Is it Basil's teaching or Anthony's command? Did the fathers in Egypt adopt such a manner of life?'⁵⁰ It was not just the desert places sought by the Cistercians that linked them to the founders of the monastic life, but the very evocation of their names.

The witness of texts, both Cistercian and non-Cistercian, argues that the Rule of St Benedict and the desert were twin planks of Cistercian notions of renewal and revival, though the renewal of the Rule was seen both in terms of strict or stricter (*arctus/arctior*) interpretation and a revival of what was seen as its spirit even at the expense of the letter of the Rule. However there was a third dynamic to Cistercian growth, a return to evangelical or apostolic poverty. As we have seen, Cistercian texts stress that poverty was a feature of early Cîteaux, in contrast to the prosperous Molesme, and make clear that monastic virtue and wealth were not easily reconciled. One way in which this poverty was manifest was in the austerity of Cistercian buildings, the *Exordium Parvum*'s 'wooden monastery' at early Cîteaux, and the huddle of buildings at Clairvaux evoked, nostalgically perhaps, by William of St Thierry. However, as early as 1124 William of Malmesbury noted as a feature of Stephen Harding's abbacy that he gave any surplus income to the poor or used it on building further monasteries:

It is an index of his self-denial that in those houses (*ibi*) you nowhere see, as you do in other monasteries, the glitter of gold or flashing gems or gleaming silver; for as the pagan poet says, 'To what purpose gold in holy places?' The rest of us think our sacred vessels fall short unless a solid sheet of precious metal is outshone by glorious gems . . . But the Cistercians (*illi*) put in second place what other mortals wrongly think most important; their efforts are all spent on the adornment of the character and they prefer pure minds to gold-embroidered vestments, knowing that the best return for a life well spent is the enjoyment of a clear conscience.⁵¹

William here accurately captured the sentiments of chapter XVII of the

⁴⁹ *Apologia*, 54.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 58–9.

⁵¹ *Gesta Regum*, 1: 584–5.

Exordium Parvum, the institutes or practices said to have been introduced by Stephen Harding, and anticipated the strictures of Bernard's *Apologia* on matters artistic and architectural.⁵² Bernard himself was echoed by Ailred in his *Mirror of Charity*.

Outward curiosity concerns all the superfluous beauty which the eyes like in various forms, in bright and pleasing colors, different kinds of workmanship, clothing, shoes, vases, pictures, statues, or various creations exceeding necessary and moderate utility – all those things which people who love the world seek out to attract the eyes . . . So it is that even in the cloisters of monks you will find cranes and hares, does and stags, magpies and ravens – which are certainly not means used by Anthony and Macarius, but effeminate amusements. None of these things are at all expedient for the poverty of monks, but feed the eyes of the curious.⁵³

Those who are attracted by these sights rather than by the poverty of Jesus find only mental anguish, and this thought leads Ailred to an exposition on humility and the need for contemplation on biblical texts which was at the heart of the monastic life.

The Cistercian story continues to intrigue and to invite debate. The sources are rich and complex and do not admit of easy interpretation. However, the paradox remains. The Cistercians created something new: an ecclesiastical organization that was held together through the mechanisms of annual visitation and the general chapter, that insisted on uniformity in all things, and that overrode political boundaries. Yet the novelty of the Cistercian adventure was rooted in the revival of what they claimed to be primitive monasticism, and the evocation of past models, harnessed to their current concerns.

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⁵² *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 438; *Apologia*, 63–6.

⁵³ Ailred, *Mirror of Charity*, II, 24 (212–15, at 212).