







Aue maria
omine labia mea
aperies



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THE VIRGIN Of all holy men and women the Virgin was the most honored and the most loved. Art exalted her above all creatures, and conceived her as an eternal thought of God. And the men of the Middle Ages loved the Virgin with a disinterested love—they did not beseech her incessantly for miracles. They conceived of her as a sublime idea, in which the soul and the heart may forever discover new wonders. Her purity

RELIGIOUS ART OF THE WANING MIDDLE AGES

in particular was the eternal subject of the solitary's conversation with himself. Womankind, fallen, fragile, and dangerous, stood forth perfect and spotless in the celestial essence of womanhood, worthy of infinite love. The monk who fled women found in his monastery the Virgin.

[In the latter centuries of the Middle Ages the religious orders contributed most to the exaltation of the Virgin. Each monastery had its poet as it had its bell for sounding the angelus, and the many thousands of prose pieces, hymns, and little poems, which have been collected in our day, were written mostly by monks. Many of these works are repetitions of established formulas, but some reflect the ethereal conception of the universe which was that of the cloister. Inside monastery walls the world was spiritualized by the habit of contemplation; realities trembled, dissolved, and evaporated in prayers. The perfumes which mounted from flowers were likened to virtues—modesty, charity, forgetfulness of self. Since he was always meditating on the Virgin, the monk saw her everywhere. The clear spring in the cloister was her purity. The high mountain which closed off the horizon was her grandeur. She was the springtime, coming adorned with a garland of flowers that was a garland of virtues. When the monk stepped out of the monastery all the magnificent things he saw about him were only diminished aspects of the beauty he contemplated in the Virgin. She was the field of grain nourishing within us the bread of eternity, she was the rainbow colored by a ray of God's evening, she was the star from which a drop of dew falls upon our interior aridity. . . .]

[In the early years of the sixteenth century there appeared in France a touchingly poetic figure of the Virgin as a girl, almost a child, in the attitude that Michelangelo gave to Eve at the moment of her appearance upon earth,

hands clasped in adoration. [The young Virgin seems suspended between heaven and earth, wavering like a thought still unexpressed, as yet only an idea within the mind of God. Above her God pronounces the words of the *Canticle of Canticles*: *Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te*. And to adorn still further the beauty and candor of the spouse that God has chosen, the artist visualizes the suavest metaphors of the Bible: the enclosed garden, the tower of David, the fountain, the lilies of the valley, the star, the rose, the mirror without stain. Everything most admired by man becomes a reflection of the Virgin's beauty.]

Such imagery is the outgrowth of a long development extremely interesting to analyze. For several centuries the doctors of the Church had identified the Virgin with the Sulamite in the *Canticle of Canticles*. This ancient love poem, impregnated with a thousand perfumes, burning and sultry as Syria, had become, in the Christian commentaries, as virginal as the summits of the Alps. The beloved "whose hands drop myrrh on the bolt of the door, whose garments smell of frankincense," is the Virgin Mary, mother of the Saviour.

One of the most mystical books of the fifteenth century, the *Canticle of Canticles* illustrated with woodcuts, had made these metaphors and similes almost popular. The Bridegroom is the Lord Himself, conceived as a candid adolescent. [The most ardent words are translated into the language of the soul] and the contrast between text and illustrations is at times so sharp that it has the impact of great poetry. "A bundle of myrrh is my beloved," says the text, "he shall abide between my breasts." And the engraving shows us the Virgin standing, clasping to her breast her crucified Son. The spirit of the illustrated *Canticle of Canticles* is exactly that of the monastic poetry

written in honor of the Virgin. Both, to use the language of Saint Francis of Assisi, are chaste as water.

Like the concept of the girl-Virgin, the grouping of the biblical emblems around Our Lady was also the slow growth of time. Long before, the liturgical writers had chosen the most beautiful biblical metaphors for the adornment of the offices of the Virgin. "Star of the sea," "closed garden," "rose without thorns"—all the lovely biblical phrases came to compose together the richest of ornaments, the most marvelous of diadems:

*Botrus, uva, favus, hortus,
Thalamus, triclinium.
Arca, navis, aura, portus,
Luna, lampas, atrium.*

Grape and cluster, honey, garden,
Marriage bed and banquet-room,
Ark and ship and breeze and haven,
Moon and lamp and coming home.

So reads the Missal of Evreux. All the missals convey the same mild music by whole columns of nouns: flowers, perfumes, precious metals, colors, honeycombs, all that is most delicious in nature. The most delicate poets of later times have not been more sensitive to the enchantment of words. Thus, the litanies of the Virgin, which, in their present form, did not appear until 1576, have a distant origin. These beautiful words were recited perhaps less for the sake of a specific prayer than for the solace the words alone brought to the heart.

It certainly took ingenuity to create these metaphors, depict them, and surround with them the Beloved of the *Canticle of Canticles*.