“MUSCIPULA DIABOLI,” THE Symbolism of the MÉRODE ALTARPIECE

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I

In the Mérode altarpiece by the Master of Flémalle, the figure of Joseph appears in a wing beside the Annunciation as an artisan who fashions mousetraps (Fig. 1).1 Not only is the presence of Joseph in the context of the Annunciation exceptional in Christian art; we are surprised also that his craft of carpentry should be applied to something so piquant and marginal in his métier. The writers on Flemish painting have seen in this singular detail the mind of the author, who shows in other parts of his work an unmistakable disposition to the domestic, the intimate and the tiny; his pictures represent a cozy, well-kept bourgeois world in which the chief actors are comfortably at home. He has been called the “Master with the Mousetrap,”2 and a recent critic has regretted the now accepted name, since the former one is “prettier and more characteristic.”3

I believe that this detail of the mousetrap is more than a whimsical invention of the artist, suggested by Joseph’s occupation. It has also a theological meaning that was present to the minds of Christians in the Middle Ages, and could be related by them to the sense of the main image of the triptych. St. Augustine, considering the redemption of man by Christ’s sacrifice, employs the metaphor of the mousetrap to explain the necessity of the incarnation. The human flesh of Christ is a bait for the devil, who, in seizing it, brings about his own ruin. “The devil exulted when Christ died, but by this very death of Christ the devil is vanished, as if he had swallowed the bait in the mousetrap. He rejoiced in Christ’s death, like a bailiff of death. What he rejoiced in was then his own undoing. The cross of the Lord was the devil’s mousetrap; the bait by which he was caught was the Lord’s death.”4

This metaphor appealed to St. Augustine as an especially happy figure of the redemption; it occurs no less than three times in his writings.5 In another sermon he says: “We fell into the hands of the prince of this world, who seduced Adam, and made him his servant, and began to possess us as his slaves. But the Redeemer came, and the seducer was overcome. And what did our Redeemer to him who held us captive? For our ransom he held out His Cross as a trap; he placed in it as a bait His own Blood.”6

The image of the mousetrap was only one of several metaphors of deception by which the theologians attempted to justify Christ’s incarnation and sacrifice as the payment of a ransom owed to the devil, who held man prisoner because of the sin of Adam and Eve.7 The conception of Christ’s body as a bait on a divine fishhook which lures the demon to destroy himself was an older and more common figure, already used by Gregory of Nyssa and Cyril,8 but was questioned by some writers as immoral. Anselm replaced the commercial transaction between God and the devil by the feudal idea of a wrong done by man to the honor of his superior, God, for which man as a finite creature was incapable of rendering due satisfaction (since the insult to God was infinite and required an infinite yet human penalty); and hence God in his infinite mercy offered his own incarnate Son as a voluntary sacrifice to atone...

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1. For an illustration of the Annunciation see the accompanying article by Millard Meiss (Fig. 1).
5. See also Sermo cxxxiv, ibid., col. 745 (on John 5: 5-14), and Sermo cclxxiv, ibid., col. 726, (on John 8: 31-36).
8. “The Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as is done by greedy fish, the hook of Deity might be gilded down along with the bait of the flesh”— Gregory of Nyssa, Oratio catechetica magna, 24, cited by Rashdall, op. cit., p. 305; for Cyril, see ibid., p. 311, note 3; for Augustine, ibid., pp. 330 ff.; and on these metaphors in the West, see Riviére, op. cit., pp. 39, 40.
for man's sin. Abelard, shortly after, devised a more ethical account of the sacrifice on the pattern of personal love, as a spontaneous, ultimate manifestation of Christ's love of man, which inspires the latter to a corresponding goodness and love. But the older view, with the authority of Augustine and Gregory the Great, persisted throughout the Middle Ages. Peter Lombard in his widely read Sentences repeats almost word for word Augustine's fable of the mousetrap and the deceiver deceived.13 In the time of the Mérode altarpiece, the metaphor of the fishhook still appears in the writings of John Gerson expounding the Redemption.10

The connection of the mousetrap in the picture with the theological metaphor is strengthened by the extraordinary way in which the artist has rendered the Annunciation in the neighboring panel (Meiss, Fig. 3). Instead of the Holy light penetrating the window are not simply a phenomenal passion.1 Here, too, as in the Joseph scene, doctrine, metaphor and reality are condensed in a single object. The beams of light which have just passed through a window. This homunculus Christ with the cross is fairly common in later mediaeval art,11 although it appears to be contrary to dogma in showing the substantial human form of Christ before the moment of incarnation; it was criticized as unorthodox,12 but the child was probably understood by the pious spectator as a symbol of the incarnation to come, just as the cross carried by this figure symbolized the crucifixion and redemption.13 Here, too, as in the Joseph scene, doctrine, metaphor and reality are condensed in a single object. The beams of light penetrating the window are not simply a phenomenal detail of everyday life, which later Dutch artists were to represent more subtly and picturesquely in their genre paintings of a woman reading or sewing in her room; the passage of the rays through the glass is a characteristic mediaeval image of the miraculous insemination. In mediaeval poetry, in mystical literature, in hymns and mystery plays, the deceiver deceived.9 In the time of the Merode altar-piece, the connection of the mousetrap with the same mode of fantasy as the metaphorical mousetrap becomes more credible as an element of this symbolic whole. The imaging of the incarnation through the movement of the tiny soul-homunculus passing through glass along the rays of light belongs to the same mode of fantasy as the metaphorical mousetrap with its fleshly bait for the devil. Together they mark the poles of the human career of Christ.

II

The image of the mousetrap depends, of course, on the presence of Joseph, who is a most unusual figure beside the Annunciation. In the two other examples that I know — a painting by Giovanni di Paolo,15 contemporary with the Mérode panel, and a tapestry in Reims of about 153016 —

As a ray of the sun
Through a window can pass,
And yet no hurt is done
The translucent glass,
So, but more subtly,
Of a mother untried,
God, the son of God,
Comes forth from his bride.14

In the Mérode panel, the mystery that takes place within the Virgin's body is symbolized in the space of the house; the various objects, all so familiar and tangible, the door, the window, the towel, the basin, the pot of lilies, the lighted candle, and perhaps others, possess a hidden religious meaning, focussed in the central human figure. The theological sense of the mousetrap becomes more credible as an element of this symbolic whole. The imaging of the incarnation through the movement of the tiny soul-homunculus passing through glass along the rays of light belongs to the same mode of fantasy as the metaphorical mousetrap with its fleshly bait for the devil. Together they mark the poles of the human career of Christ.

(see P. B. Soto, "Petri Compostellani De consolatione rationis libri duo," Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, VIII, 4, Münster, 1912, p. 122).

Another example is published by Mone, op. cit., p. 63, in the hymn, "Dies est laetitiae in ortu regali . . . ," its special significance will be discussed in the accompanying article by Millard Meiss, whose questions about the motif of the light passing through the window in the Annunciation have been the occasion of my own consideration of the symbol. Further examples are cited in the valuable book by Georges Duriez, La Théologie dans le drame religieux en Allemagne au moyen âge, Paris, Lille, 1914, p. 209 (German mystery plays; Amadeus; and St. Bridget, who seems to paraphrase the poems published by Mone), and by K. Smits, De Iconografie van de Nederlandse primitieven, Amsterdam, 1913, p. 46, who connects this detail in Flemish painting with a corresponding mediaeval Netherlandish text.

15. Now in the National Gallery in Washington; see Art Quarterly, V, 1942, p. 316, fig. 2.
16. Ch. Loriquet, Tapisseries de la Cathédrale de Reims, Paris, Reims, 1882, pl. IX. These tapestries are now in the Municipal Museum.
the mousetrap is not rendered. In the first, Joseph simply warms himself by the fire; in the second, he is shown as a carpenter cutting wood and is part of an elaborate typological composition that includes Isaiah, the Temptation of Eve and Gideon’s Fleece. It is possible that in both works, Joseph and Mary were understood as counterparts of Adam and Eve; in the Italian work, the Expulsion adjoins the Annunciation.

In the Mérode triptych, which was probably made in the 1420’s, the introduction of Joseph is peculiarly timely and local. This is a moment of strong propaganda for the cult of Joseph, which is undeveloped before the end of the fourteenth century. In 1399, the feast of Joseph (March 19) was adopted by the Franciscan order, and a little later by the Dominicans, but it did not enter the Roman breviary until 1479 and became obligatory for the entire church only in 1621. In the first decades of the fifteenth century, the leaders in the movement for the cult of Joseph were two eminent conservative reformers of the church who had held important religious posts in Flanders, the Cardinal Peter d’Ailly (1350-1425), bishop of Cambrai, a diocese that embraced Hainaut, Brabant and Namur, and his pupil, John Gerson (1363-1429), who for a time after 1397 was dean of St. Donatian in Bruges. At the Council of Constance in 1416, they proposed that Joseph be elevated to a rank above that of the apostles and next to the Virgin’s; they argued also for the institution of a universal feast of the Marriage of Mary and Joseph. Their effort was unsuccessful, but it contributed, no doubt, to the growth of the cult of Joseph. In the early fifteenth century, his feast appears in service-books of churches in Louvain, Liége and Utrecht, and the feast of the Marriage is adopted toward 1430 in Bruges, Douai and Arras. Gerson composed a number of works in honor of Joseph, including a sermon and a mass; in his writings on the Annunciation and the Nativity, he dwells on the virtues of Mary’s husband, whom he calls the “chief and seigneur de la mère du chef et Seigneur de tout le monde.” He pictures with great feeling the ideal relationship of the couple, their mutual trust, their chaste marriage, and, employing arguments that had been offered by an earlier theologian, Simon of Tournai, he justifies their relation as a true marriage, in spite of the perpetual virginity of the couple.

It would be interesting to know why the cult of Joseph should spread at this time, and why the two men who were especially active in the unification and reform of the divided church, should be its chief proponents. Here it is enough to observe that the cult of Joseph, when considered beside the worship of the apostles and the local saints, who represent the authority and miracle-working powers of the church, places the human family of Christ in the foreground of devotion. It is essentially domestic and bourgeois, and celebrates the moral, familial virtues of the saint, rather than a supernatural accomplishment. Joseph belongs to the world as a husband and artisan, but he is also a model of continence. These aspects of his cult are in harmony with Gerson’s nominalism and warm, emotional piety, his vernacular style, his concern with moral questions and desire for a simple faith freed from formal theological elaborations and subtlety. He turns from the mysterious, incomprehensible Trinity of dogma to the “divinissima Trinitas Jesu, Joseph et Mariae.”

Although there is nothing about the mousetrap in his writings, Gerson’s account of Joseph is not irrelevant to this detail of the Mérode panel. In the first place, he stresses Joseph’s occupation as a carpenter (he calls him a “charlier” — interesting for his personal enthusiasm for Joseph, since Charlier was Gerson’s family name), and he disserts at length on the virtue of this humble craft, which, together with the Virgin’s labor as a weaver, assures his humility, his moral dignity, and livelihood.

O quele merveille comme profonde humilite:— et se la benignite et humanite de Dieu fu tel que’il ha voulu estre subget à ung fevre en bois, c’est à dire à ung charlier ou charon, ou à ung charpenter, et à une texceresse ou povre ouvriere en soye.21 [Joseph] se donna a labour et a mestier, tant pour soy bien ochuper comme pour gaignier honnestement et justement sa vie, et pour acquier la benediction de la quele parle le Prophete, quant il dit: “Pour ce que tu mengeras les labeurs de tes mains, (c’est à dire que tes mains gaigneront); tu es benois et te fera bien” (Vulg., Ps. 127:2). Si se donna saint Joseph en son jone auge a estre fevre en boys, comme à faire charretes ou huches, ou fenestres, ou nefs, ou maisons, jaoice fust il de tres honeste et noble lignee en la cite de Nazareth: et c’est contre ceulx ou celles qui ne veulent ouvrer, et reputent à honte ou à servage, si sont souvent povres et mechants quant au monde, et trop plus quant à Dieu; car telles personnes sont communement serves et subgetes à tous vices. . . .22

These arguments, it may be said in passing, anticipate the ascetic Protestant concept of the vocation and the religious value of industriousness, and should be taken into account in the problem of the origins of the Protestant ethic and bourgeois morality.
Fig. 1. Brussels, Collection Mérode: Master of Flémalle, Retable of the Annunciation, Right Panel
The symbolism of the Merode Altarpiece

If this praise of Joseph as an artisan helps us to understand the pictures of the Saint plying his craft, there is another aspect of the Saint discussed by Gerson, which refers to the theological concepts behind the metaphor of the mousetrap. He is deeply concerned with Joseph's rôle in the deception of the devil in the divine plan of redemption, and in treating the question he alludes more than once to the other aspect of the Saint discussed by Gerson, which refers to the perpetual virginity of Mary. He observes that in ancient paintings Joseph is represented as a very old man with a big beard, and he attempts, like a modern student of iconography, to account for this type by historical considerations.

In the early period of Christianity, when the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary had not yet taken firm root in the hearts of the faithful, it was necessary to combat heretics, who pointed to the Gospel passage about the broth-

The painters have a certain liberty, he says, quoting Horace:

... Pictoribus atque poetis
quidlibet audendi semper fuit aqua potestas.

This newer version Gerson believes to be more in keeping with the divine plan. For if Joseph were too old, the devil would suspect the supernatural cause of the birth of Christ and therefore not be deceived by the bait of the man-God. Some, basing themselves on passages in the Gospels (Mark 1:24 and Luke 4:34, 41), believed that the devil, from the beginning, recognized the divine paternity of Mary's child; others, following Ignatius, whose opinion was read in the office of Christmas Eve in the Roman breviary, held that the Virgin was married to Joseph precisely in order to conceal the birth of Christ from the devil, who thought the child was begotten by Joseph. This last interpretation was widespread in the later Middle Ages, and occurs in the writings of Bernard, Bonaventure, and Thomas, in the mystery plays, and the Speculum humanae salvationis.

The rôle of Joseph in the deception of the devil was therefore perfectly familiar in the time of the Merode altarpiece. It may appear surprising then that Joseph is so often represented as an old man; but the theologians themselves were not strict in this whole matter. The same au-

23. Ibid., n. 111, cols. 848, 1352.
24. Ibid., n. 111, col. 1352: ... Depictum tamen invenimus Joseph velut in aetate juvenili, qualum praediximus, sicut in hac Alemania crebro notavi. Vel die illud Horatii ... 
26. The opinions are collected by Duriez, op. cit., pp. 73, 74. See also Dictionnaire de théologie catholique, VIII, col. 1553.
27. Duriez, loc. cit.

III

The double character of the mousetrap in the painting, as domestic object and theological symbol, suggests the following reflections on the art. In the early Middle Ages the notion that the things of the physical world are an allegory of the spiritual, did not entail the representation of these things as the signs of a hidden truth. The symbolism of art was largely confined to personifications and to the figures and episodes derived from the holy books; if animals were represented as symbols, they were most often the creatures named in the Bible, like the four beasts of John's and Ezekiel's visions, or the half-fabulous beings described and interpreted in the Physiologus. The introduction of nature and, with it, of the domestic human surroundings into painting can hardly be credited to a religious purpose. The mousetrap, like the other household objects, had first to be interesting as a part of the extended visible world, before its theological significance could justify its presence in a religious picture. But even as a piece of still life, the mousetrap is more than just an object in a home; it takes its place beside the towel and the basin of water as an instrument of cleanliness or wholeness, and may therefore be regarded as an overt symbol of the Virgin's purity in the same sense as...
The artist who inserts this object among the others feels its qualitative connection with them and creates a poetic unity, based on his love for the quality that attracts him. This love need not be religious in character, but a primary personal (or social) fact, which the religion absorbs and with which the artist himself may color the religious world.

If, now, we look at the mousetrap in this poetic manner as an attribute of Joseph or of Joseph and Mary together, we are led to another result. We have to consider then its significance in relation to the human peculiarities of these two figures, who are man and woman, old and young, married yet chaste, in the context of a miraculous conception. In a poem about a beautiful maiden beside a pious old husband who is making a mousetrap, we would sense a vague, suggestive aptness in his activity, as if his nature and a secret relation to the girl were symbolized in his craft. The painter, in imagining a milieu for the Virgin and her guardian, Joseph, is unconsciously attracted by objects that project in some feature essential characters of the figures and symbolize the hidden elements of the action. As we meditate on the labor of old Joseph who bores tiny holes with his gimlet; as we regard the objects in both rooms, the pair of mousetraps and the tools, the candles, the pot of lilies, the towel, the basin of water, the windows, the open books and the fireplace, they are drawn together in our minds as symbols of the masculine and feminine. The objects which are unified as fixtures and implements of the home and on another level as theological emblems, are also coherent as metaphors of the human situation. The religious symbolism itself depends largely on the same basic properties of objects which make them relevant as psychological signs; the vessel, the window or the door, for example, is common to dreams and to religious fantasy as an equivalent of the human; it is difficult, of course, to fix precisely the meaning of a group of such sexual symbols in a painting. They are often ambiguous, and we lack, moreover, all knowledge of the life history of both the artist and the donor, who dictated perhaps the presence of Joseph and his task. But the process of symbolism is a general one and may be deduced within limits in the decipherment of single works.

If the theological texts are an evidence for the religious meaning of the mousetrap in the Mérode panel, there exist documents no less explicit that point to a sexual significance. In popular magic and folklore, the mouse is a creature of most concentrated erotic and diabolical meaning.29 It is the womb, the unchaste female, the prostitute, the devil; it is believed to arise by spontaneous generation from excrement or whirlwind; its liver grows and wanes with the moon; it is important for human pregnancy; it is a love instrument; its feces are anaphrodisiac; the white mouse is also the incarnation of the souls of unborn children. For aid against mice, Christians appeal to the Belgian virgin, St. Gertrude, a spinner and patron of spinners, and also to the Virgin Mary. This conception of the mouse as evil and erotic is shared by the folk and by learned men. In the Renaissance, scholars like Erasmus and Alciati write of the mouse as the image of the lascivious and the destructive.30 To see the mousetrap of Joseph as an instrument of a latent sexual meaning in this context of chastity and a mysterious fecundation, is therefore hardly arbitrary. What is most interesting is how the different layers of meaning sustain each other: the domestic world furnishes the objects for the poetic and religious symbols of Mary's purity and the miraculous presence of God; the religious-social conception of the family provides the ascetic figure and occupation of Joseph; the theologian's metaphor of redemption, the mousetrap, is, at the same time, a rich condensation of symbols of the diabolical and the erotic and their repression; the trap is both a female object and the means of destroying sexual temptation.

These symbols, whether religious or psychological, presuppose the development of realism, that is, the imaging of the world for its own sake, as a beautiful, fascinating spectacle in which man discovers his own horizons and freedom of movement. The devoted rendering of the objects of the home and the vocation foretells the disengagement of still life as a fully secular sphere of the intimate and the manipulable. Religious thought tries to appropriate all this for itself; it seeks to stamp the freshly discovered world with its own categories, to spiritualize it and incorporate it within a scheme of other-worldly values, just as earlier, the church took over the dangerous critical method of dialectical reasoning for the demonstration of its dogmas. On the other side, the enlarged scope of individual vision makes this art increasingly a vehicle of personal life and hence of subconscious demands, which are projected on the newly admitted realm of objects in a vaguely symbolic and innocent manner. The domestic still life is claimed as a symbolic field by both the ascetic ideals and the repressed desires. The iconographic program of the period, in response to the social trend, favors this double process by placing in the foreground of art themes like the Virgin and Child, the Annunciation, the Incarnation and the Nativity, which pertain to the intimate and hidden in private life and call into play this complex, emotional sphere. The religion tries to master the feelings by transference to the imaginary holy persons, and in this it is aided by the realism of art, which...
is able to give to its figures a compelling vividness and familiarity. But in shaping a semblance of the real world about a religious theme of the utmost mysteriousness, like the Incarnation, the objects of the setting become significant of the unacknowledged physical realities that the religion aims to transcend through its legend of a supernatural birth. At the time of the Mérode panel appear also the first secular paintings of the naked female body, a clear sign of the new place of art in the contending, affective life of the individual.

It is interesting to recall that the same Gerson who spoke so knowingly of the proper rendering of Joseph (and criticized the allegorical Roman de la rose as a lascivious, though beautiful poem) condemned the painting of the nude. He warned against the current confusion of mystical and erotic love and saw a danger even in contemplating the nudity of the crucified Christ.31

The new art thus appears as a latent battlefield for the religious conceptions, the new secular values, and the underground wishes of men, who have become more aware of themselves and of nature. Jan van Eyck's portrait of Arnolfini and his wife as a marriage document32 — a significant theme at the time of the propagation of the cult of Joseph and the feast of his wedding with Mary — is a revealing example of this combat in which conflicting attitudes are made to coincide through the hidden allusions in the objects and through the reflection of the figures (including the painter) in a mirror. The latter is a beautiful, luminous, polished eye, encircled by tiny scenes of the life of Christ; it is both a symbol of the Virgin and a model of painting as a perfect image of the visible world. In accepting the realistic vision of nature, religious art runs the risk of receding to a marginal position, of becoming in turn the border element that secular reality had been. In the Arnolfini portrait, it maintains itself in the background and as a secret language in the small objects, in contrast to their ostensible domestic meaning and material charm; the more complete scenes of the life of Christ are a representation within a representation, a secondary reality forming a border around the reflecting glass.

At the end of the century this opposition comes out into the open and assumes a terrifying and melancholy form in the fantasies of Bosch, a master capable of enchanting tenderness in the painting of landscape. His works are a counter-offensive of the unhappy religious conscience against the prevailing worldliness in a period of the decay of the church. The formerly marginal grotesques of Gothic art, minutely rendered embodiments of the aggressive and the erotic, invade the entire field, and are elaborated as monstrous symbols of the desires, thrown together under the heading of the religious conception of sin. In these visions of a frightfully exasperated asceticism, more conscious of man than of God, there is neither the assurance of faith nor the refreshing beauty of the world. The mousetraps of the side-wing of the Mérode altarpiece, automatic mechanisms fashioned by the Virgin's bourgeois husband to catch the devil and overcome the passions, are forerunners of the ubiquitous Boschian instruments in which the diabolical, the ingenious, and the sinfully erotic are combined.