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## The Prologue to the *Historia de Preliis*: A Pagan Model of Spiritual Struggle

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Is it permissible and is it profitable to read pagan authors? We know how insistently that question was raised during the patristic period. From this debate the Middle Ages retained in particular two illustrious passages from Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine, the former commenting on the regulations in Deuteronomy pertaining to the *captiva gentilis*, the latter justifying the *spoliatio Aegyptiorum*. Drawn from these was the notion that it was good to borrow from the knowledge of ancient letters that which is useful for deciphering the word of God. But for the Christian, can there be not only a useful tool for the study of the Scriptures, but even a direct moral profit to be gained from reading pagan authors and, through them, from a knowledge of the ancient world? Certain remarks of Saint Jerome suggest that this is possible. The idea is implicit, but indeed present, in the passage from Augustine on the *spoliatio Aegyptiorum*, and it is explicit in the *Confessions*. It underlies Cassiodorus's recommendation that monks copy the works of pagan antiquity—a counsel which rescued that literature for us. Later on it will be valorized through the didactic import of the *accessus ad auctores*.

The possibility and the conditions of this moral profit are expressed forcefully in the middle of the tenth century in the prologue to the *Historia de Preliis*, a translation of the Romance of Alexander by the Pseudo-Callisthenes, of which the Archpriest Leon had brought back a copy in 942 from Constantinople, where the Duke of Naples had sent him as an emissary. Whether this prologue, which survives in a very few manuscripts, is or is not by the Archpriest is of little consequence to our present concerns:

Certamina vel victorias excellentium virorum infidelium ante  
adventum Christi, quamvis exstitissent pagani, bonum et utile est  
omnibus Christianis ad audiendum et intelligendum tam praelatis

quam subditis, videlicet saecularibus et spiritualibus viris, quia cunctos ad meliorem provocat actionem. Nam prelati, id est rectores, legendo et considerando quemadmodum praedicti pagani idolis servientes agebant se caste et fideliter atque in omnibus se inreprehensibiliter ostendebant, per eorum exempla bonorum operum ita acuunt mentes suas, eo quod fideles et membra Christi esse videntur, ut multo magis meliores se illis demonstrent in castitate et iusticia atque pietate. Subiecti vero, id est milites sub milicia constituti, legendo vel audiendo talia certamina et operationes commilitum suorum, qui magis daemonibus quam Deo militabant, certent se prudentiores ostendere illis in omni opere bono, sicut decet militibus Christi. Nam dominis carnalibus pure et fideliter secundum praeceptum apostoli (1 Peter 2,13; cf. Romans 13,1–5, Titus 3,1) deserviant, Deo vero, creatori suo, tota mente ita decertent famulari custodiendo precepta eius, nulli umquam violentiam facientes aut aliena auferentes, sed in sua substantia abundantes, sicut precursor et baptista Christi, beatus Johannes, in Evangelio precepit (Luke 3,14), ne, quod absit, militando saeculo alienentur a militia caelesti. Licet namque et spirituales homines audire, quae et qualia certamina vel quam benignas operationes propter amorem saeculi in se habebant pagani ab initio usque ad adventum Christi, ut merendo considerent, quam sapientes et pios viros tunc possidebat diabolus excecando mentes illorum, ne suum agnoscerent creatorem et servirent creaturae potius quam creatori, et ideo intelligebant, quam iustum et necessarium fuit humano generi adventus Christi, quia secundum sacram scripturam, si nos non visitasset ex alto redemptor noster demonstrando se ipsum nobis viam salutis, per quam salvemur, ut eum solum in trinitate adoraremus ipsumque verum creatorem omnium agnosceremus, funditus nos omnes in aeternum perieramus. Quapropter pura mente cum apostolo admirando proclamemus: “O altitudo sapientiae et scientiae Dei, quam incomprehensibilia sunt iudicia eius et investigales viae eius” (Romans 11,33). Et iterum cum psalmista requirentes exclamemus: “Quis loquitur potentias Domini et auditas faciet omnes laudes eius?” (Psalms 106,2). Subaudis: nemo.<sup>1</sup>

(It is good and just that all Christians, those who command as well as those who obey, that is, laymen as well as ecclesiastics, listen and be able to understand [the story] of the battles and victories of the most eminent among the infidels who lived before the coming of Christ, pagans though they were, for everyone will find therein a means of bettering their conduct. In effect, those who command, the leaders, by reading and meditating on how these pagans, even though they worshiped idols, behaved in a chaste and upright manner and in

every respect conducted themselves in ways beyond reproach, should by the example of their fine deeds sharpen their own conscience—always understood that they are among the faithful and the members of Christ—so as to show themselves very superior to these pagans in chastity, justice, and piety. As for the subordinates, the soldiers enrolled in the army, by reading and listening to accounts of the battles and the great deeds of their pagan companions at arms who more often fought in the army of demons than in that of God, they should fight in such a way as to show themselves more capable than their precursors of accomplishing all good actions, as befits the soldiers of God. They should in effect serve their worldly lords wholeheartedly and faithfully, according to the apostle's precept, and struggle to serve the true God, their Creator, with all their soul, respecting and observing His commandments, not committing violent acts or taking the possessions of others, but being content with what they have, as the blessed John, the precursor of Christ, he who baptized Him, prescribes in the Gospels, so that—God forbid!—making war in this world they not become separated from the celestial militia. Spiritual persons as well can hear the story and judge the quality of the combats engaged and the splendid acts of the pagans for the love of this world, from its origin unto the coming of Christ, in order to meditate usefully on the wisdom and piety of men whom the devil held in his power by blinding their spirits in order to prevent them from recognizing their Creator and to make them obey the creature rather than the Creator: they will also understand how just and necessary was the coming of Christ for mankind, since, according to Scripture, if our Redeemer had not come from on high to visit us and show us Himself the way of salvation by which we shall be saved, so that we adore Him alone and triune and recognize Him as the true Maker of all things, we would all be cast unto perdition for all eternity. For this, let us proclaim with a pure spirit in sharing the admiration of the Apostle: “O sublime wisdom and knowledge of God! How incomprehensible His judgments, how impenetrable His ways!” And with the psalmist let us add: “Who can tell of the mighty works of God, who can make all His praises heard?” Implied: no one.)

Do we assume that Archpriest Leon is recommending that Christians know the deeds—in this instance military actions—and not the literary works of pagan antiquity? *Certamina vel victorias*, that is what it is good and useful to know. Yet what does it mean here “to know”? To listen and to understand. The mediation of a story to which attention and intelligence are applied is supposed by *audiendum et intelligendum*. Implicit in the first sentence of this prologue is the slippage of the very meaning of the word *gesta*. The *Gesta Romanorum* is

a book. What Leon brought back from Constantinople is a book; translating it, he made another book, of which this prologue is the insert. Farther along, it is to the act of reading as well that he invites both the *praelati* (*legendo et considerando*) and the *subjecti* (*legendo vel audiendo*).

In what way is such a reading profitable? The answer is given in the governing idea of the passage, which is the following: if the pagans, who had no attachments other than to this world, were servants of the devil who blinded them, and knew not God, were capable of such virtue, then Christians, who know and serve God, must be capable, each according to his station, to do far better. The reading of works that preserve the memory of the pagans' "combats or victories" is thus in service to that virtuous emulation.

What, then, is the nature of such emulation? It could be that which obtains, literally, between the great soldiers of antiquity, like Alexander, and the Christian warriors of the present time. That is what will shortly be offered, beginning with the *Historia de Preliis* itself, by the fictive personage of Alexander transformed into a chivalric model. In a sense, it is from this image that the idea of the Nine Worthies—the nine pagan, biblical, or Christian luminaries—will be spawned near the end of the Middle Ages. But such was not the idea of Archbishop Leon. According to his view, the heroic deeds of the pagans do not offer Christians a model of heroism, but of saintliness. He does not cite the exemplarity of pagan warriors for the benefit of Christian warriors—those Christians who are summoned to battle—but rather for the defender of the faith that every Christian should be. In other words, it is the Pauline metaphor of spiritual combat that legitimizes the interest in ancient battles. . . . It is therefore necessary, to profit from them, to apply them figuratively to the Christian life and thus to understand their true significance for a Christian: the *intelligendum* of the first sentence is thus not placed there by chance.

The most striking feature of this prologue is found elsewhere, however. On the contrary, there is nothing new about the allegory of struggle on behalf of the faith. Not only is it borrowed from Saint Paul, it also governs Christian exegesis of the historical books of the Old Testament. What is remarkable, on the other hand, is the fact that Leon bases his development on the description of a social hierarchy and the organization of society according to the military model, where clerics are officers and the laity simple soldiers. It is in terms of that hierarchy and organization that the example of pagan military virtues can be useful. At the same time, the military model used to describe Christian society is far from a pure metaphor.

For the leaders and the subordinates are the religious men and the laity: *tam praelatis quam subditis, videlicet saecularibus et spiritualibus viris*, expressions taken up again in *prelatis, id est rectores. . . . subjecti vero, id est milites sub milicia constituti*. The example of virtuous pagans must impel the spiritual leaders to rival them in chastity, justice, and piety, just as it should move the subordinate laymen to demonstrate their superiority to them in all good

actions. Yet what follows in this advice to good Christian soldiers is addressed to real soldiers, because it reiterates the specific advice John the Baptist gives them in the Gospel of Luke. The spiritual leaders, to whom the author returns in closing, are urged to contemplate the example of the pagans: these wise and pious men, who were nonetheless blinded by the devil, allow us to understand the extent to which the advent of Christ was just and necessary and invite us to give thanks to the true God, Creator of all things, and to praise His works.

By considering the *praelati* as spiritual leaders and the *subditi* or *subjecti* either as laypersons subjected to spiritual leaders or as real soldiers, the Archpriest lays out his conceptualization of society, clerical as well as military, governed by religious leaders, while laymen are called metaphorically to be soldiers of Christ, yet also have fundamentally military occupations.

The ambiguity between the metaphor of combat used to depict the exemplary Christian life and the real struggles to which the Christian might be called had a long posterity in spiritual and literary contexts. It is thus not insignificant that it appears at the opening of a text that belongs to the prehistory of our romance of chivalry and adventure. To take an example from outside the domain of romance, it was to be deliberately maintained and developed as stylistic ornamentation and as an element in a demonstration by Saint Bernard in the *De laude novae militiae*. Let me recall the well-known opening of this treatise:

Novum militiae genus ortum nuper auditur in terris, et in illa regione, quam olim in carne praesens visitavit Oriens ex alto, ut unde tunc in fortitudine manus suae tenebrarum principes exturbavit, inde et modo ipsorum satellites, filios diffidentiae. . . . Novum, invquam, militiae genus, et saeculis inexpertum, qua gemino pariter conflictu atque infatigabiliter decertatur, tum adversus carnem et sanguinem, tum contra spiritualia nequitiae in caelestibus. Et quidem ubi solis viribus corporis corporeo fortiter hosti resistitur, id quidem ego tam non judico mirum, quam nec rarum existimo. Sed et quando animi virtute vitiis sive daemoniis bellum indicitur, ne hoc quidem mirabile, etsi laudabile dixerim, cum plenus monachis cernatur mundus. Ceterum cum uterque homo suo quisque gladio potenter accingitur, suo cingulo nobiliter insignitur, quis hoc non aestimet omni admiratione dignissimum, quod adeo liquet esse insolitum? Impavidus profecto miles, et omni ex parte securus, qui ut corpus ferri, sic animus fidei lorica induitur. Utrisque nimirum munitus armis, nec daemonem timet, nec hominem. Nec vero mortem formidat, qui mori desiderat. Qui enim vel vivens, vel moriens metuat, cui vivere Christus est, et mori lucrum? Stat quidem fidenter libenterque pro Christo; sed magis cupit dissolvi et esse cum Christo: hoc enim melius.<sup>2</sup>

(It is said that a New Chivalry has just been born unto us, in the very land where long ago the Word of God took on flesh; in these blessed places where, with His powerful hand, He dispersed the princes of darkness, the sword of the stalwart will soon finish exterminating the last of their minions. By this I mean the infidels. . . . A New Chivalry indeed, and such as the world has never known until now, destined to lead, relentlessly, a double combat, against flesh and blood, and against the spirits of darkness. That a man should consecrate all of his bodily strength to the struggle against a corporeal enemy, that is no rare occurrence, and I am hardly surprised by it; the same is true if a man deploys the forces of his soul against vice and the seductions of the demon, for the world is full of monks who wage this struggle; but those for whom my admiration is truly ineffable are those heroes of unheard-of audacity who, filled with courage, have girded themselves with the double baldric and the double-edged sword. The knight who has in a single gesture clad his soul in the breastplate of faith, and his body in arms of iron, is secure on all fronts and can remain intrepid. Thus doubly armed, he fears neither man nor demon. Far from fearing death, he desires it; Christ is his life, death his profit; of what should he be afraid? He lives in confident surrender to God. He could have but a single preference: to be freed from the bonds of the flesh and complete his union with Christ.)

I could have ended this citation with *nec daemonem timet, nec hominem* (he fears neither man nor demon), but that would not do justice to Saint Bernard. For the magnificent cadence of his exordium shows that he is not taken in by this literality of the combats of the faith: the familiar formulas inspired by Saint Paul; the life in Christ for which the price of death is nothing; that union with Christ to which every Christian for whom death is an advantage aspires—all of this is valid for everyone, all of this is the vocation of every man, and not just of the warrior-monks. Here is a case where the opening ambiguity, which purports to promote the cause of the Templars, ultimately—in a reversal that hints at the reservations of Saint Bernard—concludes by bringing their life round to the universal model of the Christian life.

Of course this ambiguity between the metaphorical struggle of the Christian life and the real battles of chivalric life was to loom especially large in the *chansons de geste* and in vernacular romances. While offering no general observations on that theme, I would simply recommend a rereading, in light of the prologue to the *Historia de Preliis*, of the prologue of the *Conte du Graal*. I do not do it here because everyone knows the latter text by heart and has one's own ideas about it. It is quite apparent, however, that the Archpriest Leon's prologue accords pertinence and a precise meaning to the parallel between Philip of Flanders and Alexander the Great. In contrast, one perhaps

also senses in the prologue to Alexandre de Paris's romance a deliberate intention, almost a provocation, that carefully seeks to eradicate any allusion to Alexander's paganism and on the contrary presents him as one chosen by God.

As for the *Conte du Graal*, it is not by chance that Chrétien, at the beginning of a romance on Charity—for that is the subject of the romance—emphasizes that Philip of Flanders embodies the charity that was lacking in Alexander. For anyone who reads Leon in the meditative and spiritual frame of mind that was Chrétien's can see that the difference between Alexander and his Christian emulators lies in the fact that for the latter Charity is not just any Christian virtue; it is not even, we might say, just another theological virtue. It is the very nature of God (Saint John), and it is God present from within this world (Saint Paul: "When I was a child . . . I shall know as I am known"; the difference is between awaiting in faith and hope, and God already totally present in Charity). Nor is it by chance that Chrétien pretends—deliberately, of course—to confuse Saint John and Saint Paul, or rather brings them together in order to emphasize that they are saying the same thing. The emulation of ancient chivalry incites one to surpass it in God and God alone, that is, to live in Charity.

## Notes

1. Cited from *Alessandro*, pp. 16–18.
2. *Tractatus de laude novae militiae*, 1–22, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, vol. 3, *Tractatus et opuscula*, ed. J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1963), p. 214.