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Weapons of Mass Instruction

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**Exempla and the Promotion of Religious Identity: Gerard of Frachet’s *Vitae Fratrum***

Abstract This paper will examine the pedagogy of the exemplary vignette as a means of "mass" identity formation within the Dominican Order and among its far flung supporters. In the process, I make the case that Cistercian Conrad of Eberbach’s earlier *Exordium Magnum* provided a model for a Dominican "memory" and the identity that shared memory was to ensure.

The *Vitae fratrum* was a work of Gerard de Frachet, Dominican of Limoges and, at the time of the compilation and publication of the work (between 1256 and 1260), provincial prior of the Dominican Order’s province of Provence. The work was preceded by two prologues, the first written by Gerard and the second by Humbert of Romans who had commissioned the work in his capacity as Master-General of the Order. The two prologues provide a context for the work, its practical intent, its form and its place within the literature of the religious life.

Gerard’s prologue began by citing the *exempla* provided by the fathers of the Old and New Testament. They filled the world with a copious abundance. Indeed, he said, it is as if the crowds of the faithful had been sated by loaves that the divine goodness had broken and commanded to be distributed by his ministers. In putting things this way, Gerard associated exemplary narratives with the multiplication of the loaves as recorded in John 6. Moreover, in so doing, he associated the apostles, who collected twelve baskets of scraps, with the Order of Preachers. Indeed, he positioned himself rhetorically as one of the ministers mandated by "divine goodness" to collect narrative scraps or fragments into baskets.

1 For Gerard de Frachet and his works, see, Thomas Kaeppeli, *Scriptores*, Volume 2, pp. 35-38.
2 Gerard’s prologue is found in *Vitae fratrum*, pp. 1-3.
unto the utility of his readers. These fragments were to be stories and the luminous deeds of the early friars who established the Order and effected its growth and present continuance. That is to say, the fragments were to be both narrative signs and the past things to which the narrative signs referred. The signal stories were to be drawn from within the Order, from what had happened to the Order, or from things that had come to be associated with the Order. The luminous deeds were of course the things themselves, i.e., the persons and events that the stories were about.

Humbert of Romans used his prologue to fill out the meaning of the utility that Gerard aimed to provide. This work was to provide content that was worthy and upbuilding so that many in future generations would be brought to salvation the more effectively this content was preserved in the memory via writing. Indeed, said Humbert, a similar motivation inspired Eusebius to write his *Ecclesiastical History*, Damascene to write the book of Barlaam, Cassian to write his *Collationes patrum*, Gregory to write his *Dialogus*. He went on to associate a number of other writers with this list: Jerome, Bede, Florus, Odo, Usuardus, Gregory of Tours, and Peter of Poitiers. It should be noted that among this list are authors and works that belong within what Alain Boureau in an important study of the Desert Tradition and the early Dominican Order has pointed out had come to be thought of as a discrete canon of religious literature traveling under the name the *Vitae patrum*.4

Humbert used his list of authors and works to identify a body of edifying writing that he was interested to adapt via Gerard’s *Vitae fratrum*. Boureau has argued persuasively, I think, that Humbert’s list marked out a hagiographical shift in emphasis from the life and sanctity of individual saints to religious communities.5 Moreover, he saw the importance of the Desert Fathers in the construction of both the *Vitae fratrum* and contemporaneous Dominican works like the *Legenda aurea* as a sign of the Dominican search for a model for its loose and consensual community. It was, in his view, this loose and consensual communal structure that allowed the Order to combine the communal prayer and contemplative discipline of a monastic community with a fully clerical life enabling a pastoral apostolate beyond monastery walls among the faithful and so to succeed where the earlier movement of Augustinian canons has failed.6

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3 Humbert’s prologue is found in *Vitae fratrum*, pp. 3-5.
4 Alain Boureau, “Vitae fratrum.”
5 Alain Boureau, “Vitae fratrum,” pp. 94-100.
Boureau speculated in addition that Gerard's portrayal of the role of the desert tradition within the primitive self-understanding of the Order accounted for what he saw to be the tepid reception it received from Humbert of Romans, for Gerard's portrayal pointed to pressures within the Order parallel to those that led to the emergence of the Spirituals among the Franciscans.\(^7\) One wonders about this latter speculation. There is nothing tepid about Humbert's prologue. Moreover, when the German Dominican Katerina von Unterlinden looked a century later for a literary model for the wonder stories she had compiled of the early heroines of her monastery, she chose as a matter of course Gerard's work, a choice proclaimed by her title, the *Vitae sororum*.\(^8\)

I wonder about other things in Boureau's article. In particular, I wonder about Boureau's contention that the intent of the *Vitae fratrum* was mimetic. I do not think that spiritual imitation was central to the purposes of the *Vitae fratrum*, though I willingly admit the self-consciousness of the work's literary mimesis. In order to justify my resistance to Boureau's contention, then, I turn to consider again Humbert's prologue in its relationship to Gerard's.

Gerard had spoken of the reader's utility. Humbert glossed the term to mean the reader's upbuilding or edification. Hence, Humbert's citation of so many edifying authorities. Edification, however, entailed in turn two consequences: consolation and spiritual progress. Consequently we could say that it was, at least on one level, the prospect of his Order's consolation and spiritual progress that drove Humbert to put out a call for *memorabilia dominicana* at the general chapter held at Paris in 1256, that drove him to commission Gerard de Frachet to compile, select and edit from the mass of stories that were sent in response to Humbert's call, and that produced the *Vitae fratrum* as the result of Gerard's prodigious effort.\(^9\)

The consolation provided by the *Vitae fratrum* must be seen in turn against the backdrop of what was by the mid-thirteenth century a growing opposition to the Order centred upon certain secular masters of

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\(^7\) Alain Boureau, “Vitae fratrum,” p. 99.

\(^8\) A recent thesis has given extensive attention to the connections between the *Vitae fratrum* and the later *Vitae sororum*. See, Lynne Alexandra Griffin, “Ex Exemplis Illustribus”

\(^9\) Humbert refers in his prologue to an *admonitio* of the order's general chapter held in 1256. The text of the *admonitio* is published in *Acta capitulorum generalium*, p. 83. The *admonitio* of 1256 is itself a re-issue and adaptation of an *admonitio* of the previous year, published in the same volume, p. 77.
theology in Paris and their clerical allies. Its consolation traded upon the widespread hagiographical distinction between res admiranda and res imita-
tanda.10 Consolation was to be had in the presence of so many stories of wonder. Step by step these stories led the reader to the sense that here among the sons of Dominic was to be found a place touched by the power of God's gracious hand, for here one saw over and again the spectre of men whose opaque wills had been burned away to reveal that clarity that the contemporary Dominican Thomas of Cantimpré would term "the luminous rays of Grace."11 No matter what was being said in the circles of the world about the Order of Friars Preacher, it was impossible to doubt an Order blessed by so many visitations of wonder, an Order accosted by so much demonic envy, an Order gifted by so much sturdy perseverance, among the august assembly of its heroes to be sure but also among its nameless brothers whose deeds had been preserved but whose names had been lost. Indeed, the latter brothers are so num-
merous in and so central to the Vitae fratrum that John Van Engen has suggested one best understands the work as an effort at "collective biog-
raphy."12

The friars whose deeds are preserved in the work's exempla illustrated the glorious possibilities of the Dominican practice of religion. Most often their lives were present only in fragments. But each fragment was at the same time a host in whose verbal elementa, as in a relic, the whole life was somehow present. And what was true of the individual fragment was equally true a fortiori of the compilation of fragments collated and ordered with respect to each other that constituted the work as a whole. The reader was intended to gasp at the presence of men so thickly graced. He was invited to gape and shake his head. Each fragment was meant to breathe the spirit of wonder, was to be judged mirabile. The consolation so engineered could be distilled in an admiring question. How could the subject of such wonders have anything to fear from its detractors? Surely they were blind and doomed to fail.

At this very point consolation passes into spiritual profit, for the reader's proper awe was no merely passive phenomenon. Rather, the Dominican reader was to find in such robust examples an all-comprehending longing, a zeal, to live up to such high excellence, even as the Order's detractors, were they to read the work, would be forced

10 Richard Kieckhefer discusses the distinction in Unquiet Souls, pp. 12-14.
12 See, John Van Engen, "Dominic and the Brothers." Boureau makes a similar point.
(surely) to live down their failure to attest the presence of divine workmanship in the weight of so much wonder.

Now it is tempting at this point to identify a friar's consolation with res admiranda and to identify his spiritual profit with res imitanda. I hesitate to do so, however. The spiritual profit that the Vitae fratrum traded in is not synonymous with mimesis. Rather, spiritual profit resulted from the very presence of res admiranda properly acknowledged. That is, profit accrued simply from receiving in awe the inimitable wonder of the Order's early heroes, for that awe was to instill in awe-filled friars a zeal to be suitable participants in the whole graced by such excellence. One could, of course, say that zeal-for-"x" is precisely a mimetic response, but again I resist. For the frater communis who read these exempla a right did not put himself on the same plane as Dominic, Jordan of Saxony, or the many early heroes of the Order, at least not as persons. His zeal was neither emulative nor competitive. Rather, the simple friar was to invest his awe-inspired zeal in his Order: that is, that subject capacious and excellent enough to bear such awesome Presence. It was to be a worthy member of an Order so blessed that was to fill him with zeal. Alain Boureau is aware of this zeal. Moreover, he recognizes it as a point of contact between the Vitae fratrum and the complex of sayings and lives of the Desert Fathers that circulated under the name of the Vitae patrum. The latter too in Boureau's telling is oriented toward the presence of wonder and the readers' awe-filled response of zeal to be worthy of a way of life that was archetypically blessed with such inspired Presence.13

In one sense, there is nothing to be wondered at in Gerard's appropriation of the desert tradition. After all, monastic reform groups from the late eleventh-century had consistently seen themselves as "a new Egypt." Nevertheless, Alain Boureau would speak of an important difference inherent within Gerard's appropriation. By comparing the treatment of the Desert Fathers in the Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach's Dialogus miraculorum to that of the Vitae fratrum,14 he asserts that Caesarius was interested above all in the miracles found in the Vitae patrum. At the same time he was dubious of their value as sources for the invention of exempla: "miracles are not to be turned into exempla' (miracula non in exempla tractanda).15 Exempla are first and foremost particular bits of story that can be used in multiform ways in the rhetorically inventive movement from particular to particular. While the Cistercian

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13 This is another point made by Alain Boureau in "Vitae fratrum," 98-100.
14 Alain Boureau, "Vitae fratrum," p. 82.
15 Cited in Alain Boureau, "Vitae fratrum," 91.
Caesarius was committed to receiving wonder from the heroes of yore; Gerard, by contrast, was committed to construct wonder around his Order via his movement from *exemplum* to *exemplum*, even when the material used in the *exempla* came from stories of the heroes of yore, for the focus of ancient wonder is upon its recent recrudescence in the Dominican *fragmenta* that preserve in their scrappy way the whole life of Dominican religion.

I wonder about the disjunction between Gerard and Caesarius. Dominican religion was in its first half century self-consciously built up as a collation of the constitutive elements of the whole literature and tradition of avowed religion. For example, A.H. Thomas has alerted his readers to the importance of both the Praemonstratensian and Cistercian Orders and their regulative traditions to the framers of the oldest Dominican constitutions. Moreover, it seems clear to me that the *Vitae fratrum* was structured to the model of Cistercian exemplars, perhaps even Caesarius’s.

Gerard had started his prologue by likening the *exempla* of the biblical Fathers to loaves given to the mass of the faithful, loaves that were broken and distributed to them and by which they were sated, leaving twelve baskets of scraps to be collected. “Divine goodness” spoke, Gerard affirmed, and said “Collect the fragments lest they perish (Jo. 6, 12).” The same pericope constituted the first line of the prologue of the *Dialogus miraculorum*. There, Caesarius had explained that he was in the habit of telling novices of the miraculous events that had occurred within the order in their time and that occur, in fact, daily. His custom had led to being asked to write his stories down for there would be terrible damage if they were forgotten and lost, since they were deemed up building in their effect. He sought confirmation for the project from his superiors. It was then that he remembered the command of our Savior that he cited in the prologue as an epigram of the work as a whole: “Collect the fragments lest they perish.” He, too, in this project, was to break bread and distribute it to the crowd of readers. Indeed in his fraction too the loaves explaining the difficult questions surrounding the scriptures and the outstanding acts of the modern era, produced crumbs enough to fill twelve baskets, represented literarily by the work’s twelve distinctions. Moreover authoritative wonder stories like those gleaned from the desert tradition where to deepen and confirm the recrudes-

16 See, A.H. Thomas, *De oudste constituties*.
17 *Vitae fratrum*, 1.
cence of wonder within Caesarius’ own and contemporary Cistercian form of religion.

Caesarius wrote his prologue as if the connection between the verse of John’s Gospel and the collection and arrangement of edifying exempla had just come to him in the course of attending to the project to hand. If this impression holds I would be tempted to think that Gerard had Caesarius’s prologue in mind in the invention of his own. On the other hand, it is entirely possible perhaps even more likely that the connection between the multiplication of the loaves and subsequent gathering of twelve baskets of scraps was a literary commonplace shared by Caesarius and Gerard. So I must stop short of identifying the Dialogus as one of Gerard’s sources. Nevertheless, Gerard did use a Cistercian model. He used Conrad of Eberbach’s Exordium magnum as his organizational model. The filiation is confirmed by comparing the architechtonic and historical stimulus for the two works.

The Vitae fratrum was divided into five parts. The work’s Part One marshalled prophetic evidence from the scriptures and Christian history to illustrate and confirm that the Dominican Order came to be as a fulfillment of divine intent. The paradigmatic excellence of the Order was then personalized in terms of its founder Dominic (Part Two) and its second Master-General Jordan of Saxony (Part Three). Part Four illustrated and confirmed the typical concatenation of circumstance that led the early friars to renounce the world to give themselves over to the Order. It also illustrated and confirmed the typical pattern of demonic assault and temptation that the early friars faced and overcame. Finally, Part Five recalled the many remarkable ends achieved by the early friars and of the heavenly signs that accompanied their passing.

The Exordium magnum, a work compiled, in all likelihood, in the last period of Conrad’s life (1206-1221), was divided into six distinctions. The first distinction marshaled evidence from the scriptures and Christian history to the effect that the Cistercian Order was created as the fulfillment of divine intent. Distinction Two illustrated and confirmed the paradigmatic excellence of Cistercian religion from the stories of wonder associated with the life of its greatest saint, Bernard of Clairvaux. Distinctions Three and Four treated the dissemination of that excellence and its principle divisions among the generation of Cistercians created by the life and words of Bernard. Distinction Five illustrated and confirmed the presence of the virtues and demonic temptations typical

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This is the editor’s contention to be found in Exordium magnum, p. 2*
of healthy Cistercian life. Finally, Distinction Six treated the wonder-stories surrounding the death of virtuous Cistercian monks and their death's immediate aftermath.

These parallel descriptions underline that Gerard of Frachet used the Cistercian treatise as a model in the compilation of his *Vitae fratrum*. Part One and Distinction One line up seamlessly as do Part Two and Distinction Two, Part Four and Distinction Five, and Part Five and Distinction Six. In addition, if one views Distinctions Three and Four of the *Exordium magnum* as a unit dealing with the continuity of excellence between St. Bernard and his immediate successors in a relatively loose monastic hierarchy and Part Three of the *Vitae fratrum* as dealing with the continuity of excellence between the Order's founder St. Dominic and his immediate successor in a very tight hierarchy, then Distinctions Three and Four of the *Exordium* line up rather well with Part Three of the *Vitae fratrum*. This latter comparison makes the matter of literary dependence rather difficult to avoid.

Moreover, the circumstances surrounding the production of the *Exordium* were strikingly similar to those in which the *Vitae fratrum* was produced. This similarity underscores the appositeness of Gerard's choice of literary model. We remember that Humbert of Romans' call for *memorabiliæ dominicanae* was made during the first public outbreak of the mendicant-secular controversy, i.e., in the middle of the Order's struggle against the attacks of William of St. Amour and his university and ecclesiastical supporters. It is not hard to see Humbert's commissioning of the *Vitae fratrum* as part of an effort to shore up his Order in the face of assault. Similarly, the *Exordium* was also compiled from pre-existing Cistercian material with as one of its goals the confirmation of the Cistercian practice of religion in the face of a long Cluniac literary campaign to cast doubt upon the Cistercian Order's beginnings and a shadow upon the bright memory of its greatest early saints. Here was a work well designed to model the literary task Gerard de Frachet had been handed by his Master-General: providing consolation and spiritual progress to the members of an embattle form of religion. The chosen vehicle for this task of mass instruction was the wonder-story and its native affectivity. One of the more lyrical songs composed by Canadian musician

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20 For the controversy occasioning the compilation of the *Vitae fratrum*, see M.M. Dufeil, *Guillaume de Saint-Amour* and Edward Tracy Brett, *Humbert of Romans*, especially pp. 12-40.

21 The occasion for the compilation of the *Exordium* is clear from its prologue in verse. See, *Exordium magnum*, pp. 1-4.
Bruce Cockburn in the immediate afterglow of his conversion to Christ­
ianity was entitled "Love Will Find a Way." Gerard would have
amended the title slightly. For him, as we see, in his *Vitae fratrum*, awe
will find a way.

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