

THE BLESSED VIRGIN AND THE SUNBEAM THROUGH GLASS

THE image of the sunbeam through glass for Christ's incarnation is a product of the late Latin culture of North Africa. It expresses the idea that, as light shines through glass, but the glass remains perfect and undamaged, so Mary's virginity remained perfect and entire after she had conceived her son. What follows brings together examples of this theme in Irish, Welsh, and Cornish; discusses its origins and later development in Latin; and outlines its use in art, and European languages other than the Celtic ones.¹ Four Irish bards have been noted as using the theme:

- i. Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh (d. 1244), in a poem on Christ's Passion.

A Sbiorad Dé fa docht rún
ní hé do chorp an corp criadh
corp Moire rod léig n-a lár
mar théid tré chlár ngloine an ghrian.

[‘O Spirit of God, steadfast of will, not thine was the body which
Mary received within her, as the sun passes through glass.’²]

- ii. Muircheartach Ó Cionga (c.1580?), in a poem on Christ and the Virgin.

Coinne rúin is rífhriotail,
lúth toile ’n-a thréineitibh
le cóir ngráidh mar ghréineatail
do-chóidh san óigh d’éineitil.

[‘Borne on a wind of love and having the eagerness of desire in his
strong wings, the Lord with one swoop entered as a sunbeam
into the Virgin's womb; ’twas a meeting of love and princely
converse.’³]

- iii. Aonghus Ó Dálaigh (c.1600), working perhaps in West Munster.

Táinig Dia na Dhia féine
na broinn mar gha ngeil-ghréine
an uimhir do bhaoi na bruinn
gur dhuinigh mar chnaoi i gcrobhuing.⁴

[‘God in his divinity came to her womb as a bright sunbeam, and
became man the while he was in her womb, as a nut in its cover.’]

- iv. Aodh mac Conchonnacht Ó Ruanadha (c.1602), working perhaps in County Down.

¹ Cf. A. C. Breeze, ‘The Blessed Virgin and the Sunbeam through Glass’, *Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*, 2 (1991), 53–64.

² L. McKenna (ed.), *Dán Dé* (Dublin 1922), 53, 118, and cf. P. O’Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland* (Dublin 1988), 78. McKenna’s statement at xv that the image is used by St Ambrose (d. 397) is baseless.

³ L. McKenna (ed.), *Aithdioghluim Dána* (Dublin 1939–40), vol. i 224, vol. ii 133. I thank Meg Bateman for this reference.

⁴ L. McKenna (ed.), *Dánta do chum Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh* (Dublin 1919), 59; cf. O’Dwyer, *Mary*, 195.

Toirrcheas tharla dar siair mar sin
 ar dtriall ó thoil;
 fagháil a mic i gcéill nír chuir
 mar ghréin tre ghloin.

[‘Thus did her Child come to the Virgin of his own will; how she
 received him coming as a sunbeam through glass she told no
 man.’⁵]

The second and third of these examples can be set aside. They make no reference to glass, even if they derive from this image. But the first example, is of special interest, because it predates instances in many other vernaculars, as we shall see.

There are at least six examples of the theme in medieval Welsh. What may be the oldest occurs in a poem by Gruffudd Fychan ap Gruffudd ab Ednyfed (fl. c.1320? after 1373?) of Anglesey:

Morwyn vu ueir uwyn o vywn hundy gwydyr
 yn gwyw dal mab duw vry
 morwyn gynno hynn gein hy
 mirein wawt morwyn wedy.⁶

[‘A virgin was gentle Mary in a bower of glass, fit to receive the son of
 God on high, a virgin fair and brave before this, and (noble praise)
 a virgin after.’]

These lines are paralleled in medieval English and Latin lyric, which often represent the Virgin as a romance heroine. But the transformation of the glass window into a bower seems to have no parallel. Closer to the conventional image are lines on the Assumption in a poem by Iolo Goch (c.1320–c.1400).

Yr ysbryd atad, gennad gynnes,
 Efo â chwegair a’th feichioges,
 A Duw o fewn aeth yn dy fynwes
 Fal yr â drwy’r gwydr y terydr tes.⁷

[‘The spirit to you, a gentle messenger, made you conceive with a
 sweet word. God entered within your breast as sunshine’s augers
 pass through glass.’]

A third passage comes from a praise-poem to the Trinity by Gruffudd Llwyd (fl. c.1380–1410) of Llangadfan, 14 miles west of Welshpool, Powys.

Magwyr lân, mygr oleuni,
 Mawr yr ymddengys i mi
 O len lefn hoydrefn hydraul,
 O wydr hirion belydr haul;

⁵ McKenna, *Aithdioghluim Dána*, vol. i 311, vol. ii 192.

⁶ J. G. Evans (ed.), *The Poetry in the Red Book of Hergest* (Llanbedrog 1911), col. 1295.

⁷ D. R. Johnston (ed.), *Gwaith Iolo Goch* (Caerdydd 1988), 139–40.

A'r llen a'r dröell honno
 Yn gyfan achlân ei chlo.
 Haws fu i'r un Duw no hyn
 Ym mynwes gwyndw meinwyn
 Anfon ei ysbryd iawnfaeth
 I Fair, fel rhoi mab ar faeth. . .⁸

[‘Great does the blessed enclosure appear to me in the smooth neatly-made delicate sheet, the bright radiance in the glass of long beams of sunlight; and the sheet and that turning is complete and entire in its composition. It was easier than this for the one God to send his nuturing spirit into the bosom of a fair slender shapely body, to Mary, like giving a boy to foster.’]

From the fifteenth century is an anonymous Marian poem in the style of Hywel Swrdwal (fl. c.1430–60), a poet associated with Newtown, Powys.

Bu Fair, o'r gair yn ddi-gêl,
 Yn feichiog, o nef uchel.
 Mal yr haul y molir hon
 Drwy ffenestr wydr i'r ffynnon.
 Yr un modd, iawnrhodd anrheg,
 Y daeth Duw at famaeth deg.⁹

[‘Mary was with child by the word without concealment, from high heaven. She is praised as sunlight reaching the fountain through the glass of a window; just so did God come to the fair foster-mother, a fair gift, a present.’]

About the same time the topos features in a poem by Ieuan ap Rhydderch (fl. c.1430–70), owner of estates near Lampeter and Aberystwyth in West Wales:

hoiw Fab Duw aeth yn hyfedr
 i'th fru fair ddawnair ddinydr
 fel haul wybr byw-lwybr baladr
 drwy ffenestr wauad-restr wydr.¹⁰

[‘God’s excellent son went most nimbly into your womb, Mary, a word swift and full of grace, like the sun of heaven, a ray’s living path, through a glass window in glorious array.’]

The comment on these lines by Jasper Gryffyth (d. 1614), the zealous Protestant cleric who transcribed what is now Bangor, University College, ms Gwyneddion 3, is worth noting. He made his views on other poems clear with such Latin marginal comments as ‘The vain opinion of the Papists’, ‘A fable’, and ‘The ignorance of the times in which this was first written, especially in theology’. But on the above passage he commented in Welsh, ‘It would be a pity to lose this poem for the sake of this excellent verse’, followed by the lines,

⁸ H. Lewis *et al* (ed.), *Iolo Goch ac Eraill* (2nd edn Caerdydd 1937), 151.

⁹ Lewis *et al*, *Iolo Goch ac Eraill*, 96.

¹⁰ I. Williams (ed.), *Gwyneddion 3* (Caerdydd 1931), 30.

Lumine solari nescit vitrum violari,
Nec vitrum sole, nec virgo puerpera prole.¹¹

Yet this couplet is medieval, despite its Protestant context. It derives from the circle of St Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), as discussed below. So the Bangor manuscript provides us with a curious encounter in Wales of the New Learning and the Old. A final Welsh instance of the topos comes from a poem by Hywel ap Dafydd ab Ieuan ap Rhys (fl. c.1450–80), poet to the earls of Pembroke at Rhaglan Castle, Gwent:

myned val manay o des
vn dyw vyn yn dy vynwes
yn dri gwisgi lle gwasgaf
drw wydr hayl belydr haf
ay eni n vab ay enw n fwyn
ywch wen vair achwi n vorwyn.¹²

[‘The one God passed, a nimble three, like spots of sunshine into your bosom, a place most confined; the beams of the summer sun through glass. And he was born a boy and for you, holy Mary, was called beloved, while you remained a virgin.’]

There is also a reference in Cornish to the sunbeam through glass (a reference this writer owes to Brian Murdoch, of the University of Stirling). In the fifteenth-century miracle play *Beunans Meriasek*, Teudar, the pagan king of Cornwall, is putting arguments against the Virgin Birth: St Meriadoc (seventh-century bishop of Vannes, on the south coast of Brittany), who is on a missionary journey to Cornwall, is refuting them. So Teudar says,

erbyn reson yv in beys,
heb hays gorryth thymo creys
bones flogh vyth concevijs
in breys benen.

[‘Against reason it is in the world, without a man’s seed, believe me, that a child should ever be conceived in a woman’s womb.’]

Meriadoc replies:

avel hovle der weder a
heb y terry del wylsta
indella crist awartha
a thuth in breys maris.

[‘As sun goes through glass without breaking it, as thou seest, so Christ above went into Mary’s womb.’¹³]

¹¹ Williams, *Gwyneddion* 3, vii, 350; 14102 in H. Walther, *Proverbia Sententiaeque Latinitatis Medii Aevi* (Göttingen 1963–7); R. L. Greene (ed.), *The Early English carols* (2nd edn Oxford 1977), 356.

¹² E. S. Roberts (ed.), *Llanstephan MS 6* (Cardiff 1916), 158, with an emendation from John Lloyd-Jones, *Geirfa Barddoniaeth Gynnar Gymraeg* (Caerdydd 1931–63), 687.

¹³ W. Stokes (ed.), *Beunans Meriasek* (London 1872), 48–9; cf. B. Murdoch, *Cornish Literature* (Cambridge 1993), 110.

Murdoch notes that the Latin loan *concevijs* points to a learned source for these lines. The likely source is the confrontation of Christian and Jew in John Bromyard's *Summa praedicatorum*, as argued below.

When we turn from Celtic instances of this topos to the question of its origins, we find a full account seems never to have been written. One can see why. An exact theologian would not use this image. It might suggest Christ did not take flesh of his mother, but passed through her (in the coarse phrase of the Paulician heretics of seventh-century Armenia) 'like water through a pipe'.¹⁴ The theme seems to have originated amongst North African Christians, since the oldest and most influential text for it features in a sermon, falsely attributed to St Augustine (354–430), which begins 'Sanctus hic cum declinat', and contains the passage:

Solis radius specular penetrat, et soliditatem eius insensibili subtilitate pertrahit; et videtur intrinsecus qui extat extrinsecus. Nec cum ingreditur dissipat, nec cum egreditur violat; quia et ingressu et egressu eius specular integrum perseverat. Specular ergo non rumpit radius solis; integritatem Virginis ingressus aut egressus vitiare poterat veritatis?¹⁵

The sermon abounds in oddities. Its prolixity is marked by vivid, abrupt expressions; recondite vocabulary; bizarre etymologies; unfamiliar versions of Bible texts; and polemics against Jews and Manichaeans. These provide strong evidence for a North African provenance of the fifth or sixth century, though an attribution to St Augustine must, of course, be ruled out.

This strange 'African' sermon, first published (from an eleventh-century copy at Monte Cassino) in 1836, was little known in the middle ages. Yet its ideas gained enormous popularity, because they were amongst the sources of a second sermon spuriously attributed to St Augustine. This latter sermon, beginning 'Legimus sanctum Moysen populo dei', was written probably in sixth- or seventh-century Italy (or perhaps France). Barré regards the text as coming either from the circle of St Caesarius of Arles (c.470–543), who spent periods at Ravenna and Rome, or the circle of Gregory the Great (c.540–604). In any case, it incorporates the above passage from our North African sermon wholesale. The influence of the 'Legimus' sermon was soon reinforced by the incorporation of much of it, including the 'Solis radius' passage, into a third sermon, a Marian one beginning 'Exhortatur nos dominus deus', spuriously attributed to St Ildefonsus of Toledo (c.610–67), but probably written in Italy in the earlier seventh century.¹⁶ This was also extremely popular in the middle ages.

Barré has made clear the scissors-and-paste nature of these two later sermons, as well as the modest intellectual endowments of their unknown authors. Yet they enjoyed an influence out of all proportion to their merits, not least in giving European circulation to the metaphor of sunbeam and glass in their North African source. In Britain and Ireland this source had especial influence, because it was included (from the 'Legimus' sermon) as an Advent reading in the Sarum

¹⁴ D. Gray, *Themes and images in the Medieval English religious lyric* (London 1972), 101, 258–9.

¹⁵ A. Hamman (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina: Supplementum* ii (Paris 1960), col. 922.

¹⁶ H. Barré, 'Le sermon "Exhortatur" est-il de Saint Ildefonse?', *Revue bénédictine*, 67 (1957), 10–33.

Breviary.¹⁷ The importance of this would be difficult to exaggerate. It is thus likely the main source here for Welsh and Irish poets (but not the Cornish one) was the liturgy. It is also noting that the treatment of this point by such scholars as Norton-Smith and R. L. Greene is unsatisfactory. The first quotes the ‘Solis radius’ passage from ‘sermon iii’ of St Ildefonsus; but ‘iii’ is his error for ‘xiii’, and the text is in any case not by Ildefonsus. As for Greene, he states that ‘the most authoritative use of the figure’ was that of St Augustine, quoting the ‘Solis radius’ passage from the Sarum Breviary. But St Augustine has nothing to do with it.¹⁸

Yet if Anglicists can blunder, so can Latinists. Barré showed the ‘Exhortatur’ sermon was written probably in the seventh century. Yet some years previous Díaz y Díaz had described it as late, seeing the image of sunbeam through glass as ‘a consequence of the Marian movements of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, appearing as such in MS Soissons 123 (114), of the twelfth century, and Munich Clm. 9727, of the fifteenth century’.¹⁹ Art historians also err. Hirn describes the figure as occurring ‘from the start of the ninth century’. The treatment by Millard Meiss of medieval Latin texts is also unsatisfactory.²⁰

It is thanks to Barré that we can now push the origins of the theme right back to the sixth or even fifth century. One early example of its influence is of special interest. Although Ildefonsus did not write the ‘Exhortatur’ sermon, it was known in Toledo in his time, because it is one of the sermons in the *Homiliae Toletanae* collection of that date. The sunbeam theme even figures in a verse by St Eugenius of Toledo (c.600–57), bishop of Toledo immediately before Ildefonsus. Presumably Eugenius took the idea from the copy of the sermon still extant in the *Homiliae Toletanae*, or from its exemplar.

Ut Phoebus specular intrans corrumpere nescit,
sic Christum generans virgo Maria manet.²¹

One wonders how far this epigram, typical of the Latin culture of Visigothic Spain, helped spread the figure of the sunbeam. Eugenius was ‘a prolific versifier, much read in England and by the Carolingians’, as Raby observes. Riou has published a paper on the circulation of five poems by Eugenius, so it is a pity his further account (based on the study of 180 manuscripts) of the influence of Eugenius’s complete *Libellus diversi carminis* (in which our verse appears) seems not yet to have appeared.²²

¹⁷ R. T. Davies (ed.), *Medieval English lyrics* (London 1963), 377; Greene, *The Early English carols*, 348.

¹⁸ J. Norton-Smith (ed.), John Lydgate, *Poems* (Oxford 1966), 148; Greene, *The Early English carols*, 348.

¹⁹ A review by M. C. Díaz y Díaz in *Revista española de teología*, 12 (1952) 280–1.

²⁰ Yrjö Hirn, ‘La verrière symbole de la maternité virginal’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 29 (1928), 33–9; M. Meiss, ‘Light as Form and Symbol in some Fifteenth-Century Paintings’, *The Art Bulletin*, 27 (1945), 175–81; Yrjö Hirn, *The Sacred Shrine* (London 1958), 244; Carol Purtle, *The Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck* (Princeton 1982), 33 n.60.

²¹ S. Alvarez (ed.), *Corpus Marianum Patristicum* vi (Burgos 1981), 427, citing F. Vollmer (ed.), *Eugenii Toletani episcopi carmina* (Berolini 1905), 261.

²² F. J. E. Raby (ed.), *The Oxford book of Medieval Latin verse* (Oxford 1959), 461; and Y.-F. Riou, ‘Quelques aspects de la tradition manuscrite des *Carmina* d’Eugène de Tolède’, *Revue d’histoire des textes*, 2 (1972), 11–44.

We can compare the epigram by Eugenius with the Latin couplet, probably by an associate of St Anselm, in the sixteenth-century Gwynedd manuscript at Bangor. R. W. Southern calls the figure of glass and sunbeam 'a simile much used in the school of Anselm', where Jewish objections to Christian belief were a matter of concern. This particular Anselmian couplet was given wide circulation by *Summa praedicatorum*, a handbook for preachers compiled in the second quarter of the fourteenth century by John Bromyard, a Dominican. He uses it in the same way as Anselm's disciple, as the response to a Jew's objection to the Virgin Birth (even though by Bromyard's time Jews no longer existed in England, Edward I having expelled them). In fifteenth-century manuscripts the Jew's verse is placed in the mouth of a heretic, as follows:

Nunquam natura mutare solet sua iura,
Ut virgo pareret quin virginitate careret.²³

This Anselmian dialogue must have been familiar to the unknown author of *Beunans Meriasek*, where the pagan Teudar is the antagonist. Because Hans Walther collected examples of these couplets from manuscripts in Paris, Basel, Munich, and Prague, the Cornish priest who wrote *Beunans Meriasek* and the Elizabethan parson Jasper Gryffyth were, in their use of them, part of a truly European mode of expression.²⁴

Other Latin texts show how common the figure was in the middle ages. Meiss quotes it from what he took to be the work of St Bernard (1090–1153).

*Sicut splendor solis vitrum absque laesione perfundit et penetrat eiusque soliditatem insensibili subtilitate pertraicit nec cum ingreditur, violat nec, cum egreditur, dissipat: sic Dei verbum, splendor Patris, virginum habitaculum adiit et inde clauso utero prodit.*²⁵

But the words in italic are not original to St Bernard. They are from our 'African' sermon of the fifth or sixth century. Nor is the text itself by Bernard. It does not appear in the microfiche concordance of his work. Meiss quotes it from Anselm Salzer, *Die Sinnbilder und Beiworte Mariens* (Linz, 1886–94), 74; Salzer quotes it from Christian Stamm, *Mariologia* (Paderbornae, 1881), 131. One wonders who the real author was. Quoting Meiss, Carol Purtle speaks of Bernard's 'use' of this topos. No doubt art historians will be repeating this error for many years to come.

An early example of the sunbeam through glass topos in a hymn occurs in the work of Adam of St Victor (c.1110–c.1180), a (Breton?) monk of the abbey of St Victor, near Paris. In his sequence *Splendor patris et figura*, sung at his abbey on 30 December, he declares:

Si crystallus sit humecta
Atque soli sit obiecta,

²³ John de Bromyard, *Summa praedicatorum* (Lugduni 1522), s.v. 'Maria' art. 17; Greene, *The Early English carols*, 356.

²⁴ Williams, *Gwynedd* 3, vii, 350.

²⁵ Meiss, 'Light as Form and Symbol', 176.

Scintillat igniculum:
 Nec crystallus rumpitur,
 Nec in partu solvitur
 Pudoris signaculum.²⁶

The same figure occurs in a later hymn by Alexander Neckam (1157–1217), student at St Albans, teacher at Dunstable and Paris, and from 1213 abbot of Cirencester.

Intrat vitrum radius
 et non violatur
 vitrum, sic castissima
 verbo fecundatur.²⁷

The topos also features in the anonymous thirteenth-century hymn *Salve, porta crystallina*:

Sicut vitrum radio
 solis penetratur,
 inde tamen laesio
 nulla vitro datur,
 Sic, immo subtilius
 matre non corrupta,
 deus dei filius
 sua prodit nupta.²⁸

To these examples from northern Europe we can add one from an anonymous Spanish sequence, familiar in the manuscript and printed massbooks of Seville, though the oldest copy is in a manuscript of c.1305 at the University of Genoa.

Sicut solis radius
 Penetrat innoxius
 Et transit ulterius
 Per fenestram vitream,
 Sic, immo subtilius,
 Intrat et suavius
 Transit Dei filius
 Per aulam virgineam.²⁹

Moving from Spain to Scandinavia, we find the same image in the *Revelations* of St Bridget of Sweden (c.1302–73). In her first vision, Christ told her, *Quia sicut Sol vitrum ingrediendo non laedit, sic nec virginitas Virginis in assumptione humanitatis meae corrupta est*, ‘For as the sun penetrating a glass window does not damage it, the virginity of the Virgin is not spoiled by my assumption of human

²⁶ G. M. Dreves and C. Blume (ed.), *Ein Jahrtausend Lateinischer Hymnendichtung* (Leipzig 1909) i, 260; J. Dagens, ‘La métaphore de la verrière’, *Revue d’Ascétique et de mystique*, 25 (1949) 524–32, p. 526.

²⁷ Hirn, *The sacred shrine*, 244.

²⁸ Hirn, *The sacred shrine*, 244.

²⁹ Dreves and Blume, *Ein Jahrtausend* ii, 278.

form'.³⁰ This Latin version soon appeared in Swedish: *i iomfrunna inälwe swa som solin skinande gynom renastan sten älli glas*, 'into the Virgin's bosom like the sun passing through a transparent stone or glass'.³¹

Another instance comes from the hymn *Dies est laetitiae / in ortu regali* edited by Mone from a fifteenth-century manuscript at Trier, in Germany.

Ut vitrum non laeditur
sole penetrante,
sic illaesa creditur
virgo post et ante.³²

By the close of the middle ages confusion had arisen, and some hymns were quoting others. Hence the hymn *Mira Dei caritas, Deus incarnitur*, in a manuscript of 1477 (now at Utrecht University) from the Utrecht Charterhouse, quotes the verse figuring in the thirteenth-century *Salve porta crystallina* mentioned above.³³ Other Latin examples occur in proverbs.

Sol penetrat vitrum, penetratur, non violatur:
Sic cum prole sua non est violata Maria.
Sol vitrum penetrat, penetratum non violatur
Nec vitrum sole nec viro puerpera prole.
Ut sol non violat vitrum, per idem tamen intrat,
Sic de prole sua non est violata Maria.³⁴

When we turn from Latin to medieval vernacular literature, there is no shortage of examples. In English they occur in the Harley Lyrics, Thornton Manuscript, Lydgate, N-Town Cycle, and even Herrick's *Noble Numbers* of 1647.

As sunbeams pierce the glass, and streaming in,
No crack or schism leave i' th' subtle skin:
So the divine hand worked, and brake no thread,
But, in a mother, kept a maidenhead.

In French early examples of it (some secular) occur in the Anglo-Norman poems of William Adgar, writing in the late twelfth century at Barking, Essex; in *Cligés*, written in 1176 by Chrétien de Troyes; in the *Queste del Saint Graal* (c.1225); the work of Huon le Roi (c.1250), of Cambrai in northern France; the poems of Rutebeuf (fl. 1250–80); and many later writers. It makes a surprise appearance in French renaissance poetry, in Marot, and also in Ronsard, who uses it to praise the purity of Marguerite de Navarre (1492–1549), grandmother of Henry IV of France. In the seventeenth century it was still popular with such French spiritual writers as Bérull, Bourgoing, Lessius, Olier, and Pierre Camus. In Provençal the topos

³⁰ Hirn, *The sacred shrine*, 245; Meiss, 'Light as Form and Symbol', 177.

³¹ Hirn, 'La verrière', 35 n.1.

³² F. J. Mone (ed.), *Lateinische Hymnen des Mittelalters* i (Freiburg 1853), 63.

³³ G. M. Dreves and C. Blume (ed.), *Analecta hymnica* (Leipzig 1886–1922) xxxi, 142; Gray, *Themes and images in the Medieval English religious lyric*, 258 n.23.

³⁴ Walther, *Proverbia*, 29914c, 29917, and 32574.

appears slightly later than it does in French. It is used by Folquet de Lunel, born near Montpellier, active until 1284; by his contemporary Peire de Corbian, born near Bordeaux; and other writers.³⁵

In Middle High German it appears as early as the late eleventh century in a manuscript later in the possession of the Premonstratensian house at Arnstein, in the Rhineland. It also features in the poetry of Walther von der Vogelweide (c.1170–c.1230), Heinrich von Lauffenberg (c.1360–1466), and many others. Besides German examples Meiss notes a Dutch one, from a fifteenth-century hymn.³⁶

In Italian the figure is put to secular use in a love poem by Giacomo da Lentini (fl. 1233–40), court official of Frederick II and founder of the Sicilian school of love lyric. He used it in a sonnet (a form he may actually have invented) to answer the question he poses himself; how could the image of his beloved have passed through his eyes to his heart? (In this he resembles Chrétien de Troyes.) The Marian use of the topos occurs in *Laude di Cortona* of c.1260 and (a famous example) in Tasso's minor poetry. Another, exuberant example may be mentioned here, in the humanist Latin of the Neapolitan poet Jacopo Sannazaro (c.1456–1530), in his 'ambitious attempt at a Christian epic' *De partu virginis*.³⁷

In Spanish poetry the figure appears first in *Loores de la Virgen* by Gonzalo de Berceo (c.1195–c.1265), working in La Rioja, to the west of Navarre; in the *Cantigas* of Alfonso X of Castile (1221–84); in Spanish prose, in book two of *Libro de los estados* by Alfonso's nephew, Juan Manuel (1282–1348), and in the Spanish version of the *Elucidarium* of 'Honorius Augustodunensis'. In Catalan it appears in *Vita Christi* (translated into Spanish in 1496) by Francesch Eiximenis. In later Spanish, it appears in the work of Gómez Manrique (d. 1490), Íñigo de Mendoza (d. c.1507), Juan de Padilla (d. 1520) of the Seville Charterhouse, Luis de León (d. 1591), St John of the Cross, Lope de Vega, and Calderón (who treats it with baroque energy). It figures too in the work of the postmedieval Portuguese poets Agostiño da Cruz and Fernao Alvarez, and the prose writers Sousa de Macedo and Manoel Bernardes. So the Irish instance in Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh takes its place with other European poets of the thirteenth century and earlier. Though used by twentieth-century Spanish and Catalan poets, its last appearance as a serious theological concept must be in *Nuevo Ripalda en la Nueva España* (Jérez, 1951), 22, the 35th edition of the famous catechism (first published at Burgos in 1591) by the Jesuit, Jerónimo Ripalda.³⁸

³⁵ Cf. H. Becker, *Die Auffassung der Jungfrau Maria in der altfranzösischen Litteratur* (Göttingen 1905), 21; F. J. Oroz (ed.), *La lírica religiosa en la literatura provenzal antigua* (Pamplona 1972), 130, 372–4.

³⁶ A. Salzer, *Die Sinnbilder und Beiworte Mariens* (Linz 1886–94), 71–4; F. von der Leyen (ed.), *Deutsche Dichtung des Mittelalters* (Frankfurt 1962), 136, 742; O. Sayce (ed.), *Poets of the Minnesang* (Oxford 1967), 107.

³⁷ G. Contini (ed.), *Poeti del Duecento* (Milano 1960) vol. i 76, vol. ii 15–16; J. Sparrow and A. Perosa (ed.), *Renaissance Latin verse* (London 1979), 157.

³⁸ J. Rodríguez, *Fray Íñigo de Mendoza y sus 'Coplas de Vita Christi'* (Madrid 1968), 305, 534; R. P. Kinkade (ed.), *Los 'Lucidarios' españoles* (Madrid 1968), 113; R. B. Tate and I. R. Macpherson (ed.), Juan Manuel, *Libro de los Estados* (Oxford 1974), 235; B. Dutton (ed.), Gonzalo de Berceo, *Obras completas* (London 1975), iii, 107; L. M. Herrán, *Mariología poética española* (Madrid 1988), 365, 498–9; *Las Edades del Hombre: Libros y Documentos en la Iglesia de Castilla y León* (Burgos 1990), 401–2.

As far as examples in art are concerned, the earliest one mentioned by Meiss is at Dijon, in Broederlam's *Annunciation* of 1394–9. It also appears in representations of the Annunciation in the *Très riches heures* of the Duc de Berry; a painting by the Master of Flémalle in the Mérode Collection; and paintings by Jan van Eyck in the church of St Bavo at Ghent, and in Washington.³⁹ At the same time as poets in the Celtic languages were using this theme, then, it was also being used in some of the most sophisticated art of the entire middle ages.

Although a full account of the topos of the sunbeam through glass would provide material for a monograph, particularly if it included material not mentioned here from Eastern Europe and elsewhere, enough has been done to show what such an account would look like, and how it would include some of the most famous names in Western literature and art. But it would also include poetry in Irish, Welsh, and Cornish, each using this ancient Latin metaphor for its own purposes to honour the Blessed Virgin and her Son.

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³⁹ Meiss, 'Light as Form and Symbol', 176–8; cf. B. Madigan, 'Van Eyck's Illuminated Carafe', *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 49 (1986), 227–30.