Ascetic Blood: Ethics, Suffering, and Community in Late-Medieval Culture

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Do not say, I will repay evil; wait for the Lord, and He will rescue you.
— Prov. 20:22

The body’s fundamental vulnerability supported monastic communities whose members took ascetic disciplines to violent extremes. Subjects given to penitential self-wounding, like lashing the skin with rods, explored this vulnerability even while they were often encouraged to set limits to what might, after all, become a danger to the life of the ascetic. This encouragement came as a result of the shifts and destabilizations inherent to limits: committed ascetics routinely sought out ever more extreme disciplines. The self-inflicted wound — the torn flesh, the superficial or deep laceration that was not allowed to heal (or was miraculously healed) — suggests an ascetic’s fascination with the boundary or limit (the skin) separating the self from the world. Yet the wound also remade that world. In their making and healing, opening and closing, wounds identified the cutaneous border as a site of radical alterations that occurred elsewhere, both within and beyond the confines of the flesh, and that enacted the ascetic’s re-conceptualizations of self and the community.

Within the medieval context, numerous thirteenth-century biographies reveal an enduring preoccupation with the ever-wounded, ever-healing body. These texts are also themselves the products of dynamic movements across cultural and communal localities. With the exception of the recluse Wilbirg of St. Florian (†1289), all of the ascetics discussed below are of northern extraction — all hail from the Low Countries. Thomas of Cantimpré, described by Barbara Newman as “a tireless promoter of religious women,” authored the vitae of Christina the Astonishing (†1224) and the Cistercian nun Lutgard of Aywières (†1246).1 Strong religious affiliations (Cistercian against Benedictine,

for instance) and even the border between secular and religious culture are frequently suppressed in these works. This comes in large part because, for Thomas, who wrote for “a broadly conceived network of spiritual friends,” these deeply embodied forms of spirituality served, if not as recruitment, at least as powerful living exempla to offset the rising cultural power of secular, and specifically commercial, establishments in the region.²

The lives of these three women intersect at several points. Christina’s life represents a bewildering series of twists and turns, including her miraculous death and resurrection, aimless wandering, and begging – behaviors interspersed with accounts of wounds generated by fire, brambles, scalding water, and whatever else her imagination conjured. Lutgard, a beguine turned Cistercian prioress, repeatedly afflicted herself with penitential wounds, but also suffered passively as a ruptured vein drenched her clothing in blood. The body of the anchoress Wilbirg, who was outdone in self-wounding only by her fourteenth-century counterpart Dorothea of Montau, was rarely free of deep scratches from whips, and pus-filled wounds generated by iron belts.³ Wilbirg also survives a stab-wound obtained when trying to defend herself against a would-be rapist. Partly through such suffering, these women sought to share the punishments of those suffering in purgatory, but they all also prophesied, again with the edification of their communities in mind. Wounds thereby helped sustain the bond between heroic distinction and collaboration in the salvation of others.

At the same time, as Newman suggests, the unusually extreme self-wounding depicted in the Life of Arnulf of Villers (†1228) was intended to encourage the Cistercian community at Villers not to imitate Arnulf but to accept more rigorous discipline.⁴ By heroically self-wounding, ascetics adopted behaviors

² Newman, Thomas of Cantimpré, 19.