“La plus belle des histoires”
Grotius’ Drama on Joseph in Egypt in the Tradition of the Theme

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“La plus belle des histoires”, the fairest of all stories. The words are taken from the Koran, the twelfth sura and introduce the story of Joseph the Patriarch.1 Few tales have broken their way into as many cultures as did the story of Joseph. And few can claim to have appealed, through the ages, to as many artists in both the literary and the visual arts. The theme of Jacob’s dearest son has captivated such various talents as Firdousi and Vondel, Macropedius and Thomas Mann, Ghiberti and Rembrandt. The story of Joseph’s life has been sung in epics and hymns, included in a triptych of plays, and presented in a sequence of novels. It has been depicted on frescoes in the Roman catacombs, on the mosaics of San Marco, in the wood of the Maximian-cathedra at Ravenna. It inspired the miniaturists of a Viennese manuscript, was embroidered in Coptic hangings, chased in the baptistry at Florence, vitrified in Chartres, petrified in Vezelay and carved into ivory at Sens.2

Clearly, the spell of the Genesis narrative accounts for many of these artistic outpourings. Man has always been fascinated by the tragedy of the pit at Dothan, the seduction scene with the wife of Potiphar, the wronged innocence, the prophecies from the dungeon, the love-story with fair Asnethe and the reconciliation of the brothers at Memphis. Or, as Goethe puts it in Dichtung und Wahrheit (I.4): “Höchst anmutig ist diese natürliche Erzählung, nur erscheint sie zu kurz, und man fühlt sich berufen, sie ins Einzelne auszumalen.”3

And so the artists did. They stressed the esthetic element, as did Firdousi who transformed the sober and austere narrative of the Koran into a heroic epic Yusuf and Zuleicha, or the ancient Jewish author from Egyptian

1 Sura 12.3.
extraction who wrote the highly popular mystical novel on Joseph and Asnethe.4

But the mission of Joseph’s life, interrupted by jealousy and passion, yet finally accomplished in piety and forgiveness, has also been deemed a perfect frame for moralization and allegory, and has been regarded as a mirror of life marking the ups and downs of man’s fate in truly dramatic dimensions. It is this, the ethical element, which has always prevailed in Western culture, for, despite its undisputable charms, it has patently not been the aesthetic element that warranted the diffusion of the Joseph story in Europe. The cradle of Western tradition was the biblical exegesis by Alexandrian scholars, who were wont to interpret the Old Testament in the perspective of the New: le miroir dévoilé. This interpretation dominates the scene for centuries, from the tripartite exegesis on the literal, moral and mystical level (on the analogy of body, mind, and soul), as found in the works of Origen, Tertullian and Jerome to the scholastic canon of quadruple interpretation including a historical level (which deals with facts only), an allegorical level (aimed at the prefiguring element), a tropological level (which addresses itself to the moralizing aspect), and finally, an anagogical level (so as to explore the mystical aspects of Revelation). Through Isidore, the Venerable Bede and Alcuin this school reaches its zenith a millenium later, in the 13th century.5 Steeped in scholasticism, this line also asserted itself in French mystery plays or the Heidelberg Passion, in order to finally influence sixteenth century school-drama. A major part in this tradition was generally allotted to the idea of the Joseph character as prefiguring the Christ. For He too was driven from his native soil, and betrayed and sold by his kindred – while Joseph’s elevation from pit and dungeon was considered the perfect counterpart of crucifixion and resurrection. Joseph’s wife Asnethe represented the Holy Church, whereas Potiphar’s wife pictured as the Synagogue.

Still, at least three other interpretations of the Joseph-episode found eloquent expression in European literature. Possibly the most sophisticated and most comprehensive study ever attempted was made by Thomas Mann, to whom the Joseph saga represents “Eine Psychologie des mythischen Bewusstseins, in dem das principium individuationis noch durch kollektive, archaische Verhaltensmuster bestimmt und dirigiert wird.” Critics have

4 See M. Philonenko Joseph et Asëneth (1968) and the German rendering of Firdousi’s Yusuf and Zuleicha by O. Schlechta-Wessehrd (1889). 5 On Origines see Migne PG 11 cc. 363-364 and PG 12 cc. 245-246; on Tertullian see Migne PL 2 c. 374; on Hieronymus see Migne PL 22 cc. 908; on Isidore see Migne PL 83 cc. 107, 273-274; on Venerable Bede see Migne PL 91 cc. 265-266; on Alcuin see Migne PL 100 c. 792.