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Guibert of Nogent, *Monodies and On the Relics of Saints: The Autobiography and a Manifesto of a French Monk from the Time of the Crusades*. Translated by Joseph McAlhany and Jay Rubenstein, with introduction and notes by Jay Rubenstein. New York: Penguin Books, 2011. xl + 355 pp. Suggestions for further reading, map, notes, and index. \$20.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-14-31630-2.

Review by Bruce L. Venarde, University of Pittsburgh.

“No one would call the years 1060 to 1125 in France the ‘Age of Guibert,’” begins Jay Rubenstein’s introduction to this book, which offers a translation both of Guibert’s memoir of his own life and times, completed in 1115, and one of his theological treatises finished a few years later. Probably not, but McAlhany and Rubenstein offer us a Guibert of Nogent who is very much of his times in a fashion that makes him and his world accessible to scholars, students, and other readers in the twenty-first century. That is a significant accomplishment and, indeed, a gift.

Guibert’s biography can be summarized briefly. He was born around 1060 (as Rubenstein sensibly argues, against the usual dates of 1053 or 1064) near Beauvais, in northern France. A member of the lower nobility by birth, Guibert lost his father as a very young child and his mother, in pursuit of a spiritual life and to avoid familial pressures to remarry, left his upbringing in large part to a teacher named Solomon. When Guibert was a teenager, both his mother and Solomon entered religious life at the local monastery of St-Germer-de-Fly, the former as a hermit outside the church, the latter as a monk. After toying with the idea of a knight’s life, Guibert entered St-Germer and became a monk. At St-Germer, the young Guibert, inspired by visits from Anselm of Bec, the famed theologian who was later archbishop of Canterbury, began to write his own theological works, the first of which was completed before he was twenty.

After laboring in complete obscurity at St-Germer well into middle age, Guibert was elected in 1104 abbot of Nogent-sur-Coucy, founded less than half a century earlier. Nogent was about 100 kilometers east of St-Germer, not far from the major political and ecclesiastical city of Laon. Guibert was exiled from Nogent for about a year, ca. 1107-1108, but he returned to guide the monks there until his death, ca. 1125. In the meantime the abbot took part in local and regional affairs and composed a number of theological tracts plus the fascinating and startlingly original *Monodies*, a spiritual autobiography of a kind not seen since Augustine of Hippo wrote his famous *Confessions* more than seven hundred years earlier.

It is the *Monodies* that have attracted the most attention in the modern period, which is somewhat ironic since the work survives only in a seventeenth-century copy, and that apparently incomplete: of its three books, the second is only about a quarter as long as the other two and lacks what the roughly chronological order of the narrative suggests would have been an account of Guibert’s early years as abbot of Nogent, including the circumstances of his exile and return. But what survives is a treasure trove, including in less than 200 pages, detailed recollections of a strange and difficult childhood and youth, Guibert’s involvement in ecclesiastical politics of the early twelfth century, including an encounter with Pope Pascal II, many anecdotes concerning miracles, saints, demons, and witches, and an account of civil strife, indeed a destructive urban revolution, in Laon in the year 1112.

It is the childhood, the anecdotes, and the revolt at Laon that have fascinated readers since the first English translation of the *Monodies* nearly a century ago. Unfortunately, Guibert has not been especially well served by that translation and its subsequent revision by John Benton in 1970, still in print. Benton's tendentious introduction to what he called *Self and Society in Medieval France* makes Guibert the subject of a Freudian analysis. But the translation and its introduction make Guibert sound like a complete wacko, unhealthily obsessed with his mother, tormented by the demons and witches that populated his mind and world, only capable of expressing himself in a fashion that betrayed a disordered mind. That is the Guibert to whom I and many others were introduced. Working with extraordinary care to make Guibert's difficult and purposefully archaic Latin accessible and lucid without blunting his very real pain and regrets, McAlhany and Rubenstein give their readers much more freedom to understand and interpret Guibert by their own lights.

None of this makes Guibert any less fascinating. His *was* a world of witches, demons, and miracles, starting with the spell cast on his newly married parents that meant their marriage could not be consummated for seven years. Guibert muses frequently about sex and sexuality, his own included. He recounts with shame a youthful phase of writing poetry in which "I sank to using some rather obscene words in composing short pieces" (p. 54) composed not only to impress others but also, he hints, for his own sexual gratification. Think that using underwear as a masturbatory aid is something new? Guibert introduces us to a man who used his mistress's sash for self-gratification, on a pilgrimage to Compostela, no less (p. 175).

But sinners do pay for their sins: Guibert becomes depressed and physically ill. The pilgrim, under instruction from the devil posing as St. James, cuts off his own penis and then kills himself with the same knife. It would be easy to understand these and other tales as products of an Age of the Grotesque, but Guibert has other purposes. Understanding his troubles as divine punishment, Guibert's interest in "useless pursuits" disappears, and after a vision of the Virgin and St. James before God's throne, the pilgrim is restored to life: "Thus at God's command I returned to this world to bring about my own correction and to proclaim their message" (p. 176). These and dozens of other stories are meant to instruct and to assure the reader (and doubtless Guibert himself) of God's attention, mercy, and justice in a world full of evil and temptation to sin.

The turbulent nature of Guibert's society is clearest in book 3 of the *Monodies*, which for the most part concerns what he calls "the tragedy of Laon" (p. 108), the establishment of a commune and the bloody violence that came in its wake. The communal movement was an agreement by citizens to pay a lump-sum tax that freed them from other, often capricious exactions by local lords. Its initial results in Laon were disastrous, thanks in no small part to psychotic violence committed and abetted by Thomas of Marle, like Guibert a member of the lower nobility. The revolt happened shortly after the murder, before an altar in the Laon cathedral, of a pious local citizen at the behest of the bishop. Guibert himself was asked to give a sermon of reconciliation in the sullied church, but it did little to stem disorder and, of course, it earned the abbot the enmity of the bishop and his associates. Here we have an early account of medieval urban revolt from an eyewitness, and a comparison to a totally independent portrait of Thomas de Marle by Suger in his biography of King Louis VI suggests that Guibert's accounts are reliable. Certainly Guibert has his own take on these events: the declaration of a commune is a pernicious novelty, as its disastrous results make clear. Guibert is a conservative, suspicious and critical of events around him. This bias does not prevent him, however, from being a reliable reporter whose account makes interpretations of other than "new and therefore bad things" possible.

In addition to a fresh and supple *Monodies*, McAlhany and Rubenstein have given us the first complete translation of one of Guibert's theological tracts, *On the Relics of Saints*. Guibert's ostensible purpose is to demonstrate the utterly vacuity of claims by monks of St-Médard in Soissons to own one of the teeth of the child Jesus. Guibert gets to the heart of the matter only in the third of four books in his treatise.

Beforehand, he writes more generally on saints, relics, and miracles before devoting a long section to Eucharistic theology (“On the Bipartite Body of the Lord”). The end of the treatise is essentially about spiritual contemplation and the challenges it poses for humans, who have only what he calls the “outer world”—the world visible and perceptible to us—as an entryway to “the inner world.” Guibert’s arguments about the alleged tooth of St-Médard in book 3 are both theological and historical. To think that there could be such a relic flies in the face of the theology of the body laid out in the first two books, and Guibert also asks some very sensible questions, e.g., who would have possibly, at the time, had any interest in preserving the baby teeth of someone not yet known to be anything out of the ordinary? Indeed “She [the blessed Virgin] would not have preserved those things” since she had plenty to worry about besides keeping souvenirs (p. 262).

On the Relics of Saints is not easy reading, but it does much to deepen our appreciation of Guibert’s passion for religious ideas and his acquaintance with so many of the vital issues of his time. It is, then, an invaluable counterpart to the *Monodies*, introducing the reader to the kinds of intellectual problems that were such a feature of Guibert’s era. It also presents what strikes me as a very gentle view of human attempts to connect with the divine. Intention matters to Guibert (as it did to his slightly younger contemporary Peter Abelard: see n. 67 to p. 217). “[A]nyone who invokes God uncertainly annoys him, but if he faithfully beseeches the one whom he believes to be a saint but who is not a saint, then he still appeases God” (p. 216). Furthermore, mangling of Latin by “men with too little learning” is readily pardoned, for “God is not overly concerned with grammar” (p. 217). Coming from a member of the socio-economic elite who is a virtual abyss of learning—witness the great number of pagan and Christian texts Guibert quotes or cites in the *Monodies*—such tolerance for lesser people is striking.

I have probably already interpreted too much in a review of a book presenting primary sources. (Guibert does positively beg for interpretation.) To move toward the end, let me offer two precise examples to demonstrate the excellence of the translation, one reason it invites editorializing. In book 3 of the *Monodies*, Guibert famously wrote of developments at Laon that *Communio autem novum ac pessimum nomen sic se habet*. Earlier translations have made this “Commune’ is a new and evil name.” That would seem to suit Guibert’s tendency to equate novelty with sinfulness. Here, though, it is translated: “Commune’, however, was a new name, and the worst possible one, for what it was” (p. 127). This emphasizes *sic se habet* as a means to justify a more literal “worst possible” for *pessimum*, explaining in a note that this is Guibert the ironic observer at work. What was supposed to create unity instead ended up destroying a city, which is why the word is the worst possible.

The first sentence of Book 4 of *On the Relics of Saints* reads “Interioris mundi statum, quem visio externa non capit, imaginatio ulla non concipit, sola nimirum virtus contemplationis attingit.” The translation is “No gaze directed to the outer world can capture the state of the inner world, nor can any act of imagination conceive of it. It can be reached, of course, only through the faculty of contemplation” (p. 271). Here Guibert’s very dense Latin is broken down into manageable thought-units and judiciously recast to put them in more obvious relation to one another, even doing something daringly counterintuitive by rendering the active as passive. The result is three beautiful and accessible phrases. They slightly underplay the grammatical centrality of *imaginatio* while making it not simply “imagination” but “the [human] act of imagination.” That sets up the reader for remarks a few sentences later on the limits of imagination, Guibert’s understanding of which, different from ours in the twenty-first century, is then helpfully explained in a note.

In the hands of McAlhany and Rubenstein, Guibert becomes a more intelligible and appealing figure and writer than he has been before. All those stories about demons and devils are still great fun to read and ponder, and it is difficult not to experience a twinge of *Schadenfreude* at the travails of a man who so frankly describes himself (okay, his younger self) as smart, handsome, and well-born, indeed possessed

of “outer splendor”(p. 35). But there is much, much more here, only a small fraction of which I have mentioned. As Rubenstein puts it: “Nearly nine centuries after his death, Guibert remains a distinctive voice, capable of moving, infuriating, and disturbing audiences” (p. viii). This splendid volume is a most attractive invitation to hear and ponder that voice.

If Penguin reprints the book, it could emend “comitial” to “comital” (p. xv). The “city of Anjou” (p. 151) is Angers. D’Achery becomes Dachery on p. 298, n. 61. In n. 50, p. 312, the matter is surely servile descent, not servile dissent. In n. 48 on p. 331, the sentence that begins “These hypothetical” seems to have lost a noun or gotten otherwise scrambled. In n. 74 on p. 333, I believe there should be a closing quotation mark after “otherwise.”

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