



Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis

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CHAPTER

VI Perpetual Contest

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Abstract

This chapter presents a reading of the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. It contends that it is in its literariness, its narrative structure, its fantasy character, and its metaphorical insistence on unavowable themes, that the proto-feminist radicality of the text can be assessed. The most characteristic narrative strategy of literary fiction is the ‘transparent mind’: the account of visions that no one else can see. The chapter attempts to make the case for such an assessment. The mode of Perpetua’s martyrdom — a contest with beasts — informs the interpretation of her story. It starts from the premise that in this text the notion of *contest* can be a structural device in more than one way. The most interesting of all these forms of contest is perhaps the one that affects the status of Perpetua as a narrator: the contest between narration and description. This contest shapes the one that informs Perpetua’s choice for this particular martyrdom: the contest between male and female, or rather, the contest for masculinity. This analysis combines narratology, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction in a voluntarily anachronistic appropriation of this text.

Keywords: [Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis](#), [Perpetua](#), [narratives](#), [contest](#), [martyrdom](#), [masculinity](#)

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The first autobiographical text written by a woman is the account of the last days of the life of the Carthaginian martyr Perpetua. The text is a favourite of historians and theologians but has not yet been studied with the help of contemporary literary tools. However, inspired by Dorrit Cohn’s reflections on the distinction between fiction and (auto)biography on the one hand, and by her analysis of ‘transparent minds’ on the other, I will contend that it is in its literariness, its narrative structure, its fantasy character, and its metaphorical insistence on unavowable themes, that the proto-feminist radicality of the text can be assessed. The most characteristic narrative strategy of literary fiction, not only in the period of realist writing, but also in other periods is the ‘transparent mind’: the account of visions that no one else can see. This chapter aims to make the case for such an assessment.

The mode of Perpetua's martyrdom, a contest with beasts, will inform my interpretation of her story. I will start from the premise that in this text the notion of *contest* can be a structural device in more than one way. The idea of contest is applicable to both technical narrative devices and thematic structures, as well as to the interaction between them. The most interesting of all these forms of contest is perhaps the one that affects the status of Perpetua as a narrator: the contest between narration and description. I will speculate that this contest shapes the one that informs Perpetua's choice for this particular martyrdom: the contest between male and female, or rather, the contest for masculinity. The analysis combines narratology, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction in a voluntarily anachronistic appropriation of this unique document, which will be defended at the end.

1. Double introduction

The narrative of Perpetua is framed on both ends by contests.¹ In the first paragraph of the text, the contest concerns *time*,² in the final episode of the story, it concerns *beasts*. Could there be a common ground between these two contests? And could that common ground in turn draw attention to contests of other kinds in the text? Finally, could the notion of contest have a much deeper structuring effect on this text than the anecdotal level of the contest with the beasts, and the introductory function of the story itself, suggest? These are the questions I will address in this chapter.

As for the frame of, or preliminaries to, the text itself, the introductory remarks opposing two moments in time, antiquity and 'more recent', set up a contest indeed. From 'prior claim' and prestige of antiquity on the one hand, to the idea that recent events 'contribute equally' to the goals of story-telling, we are confronted with a competition whose outcome is the power of the story which follows. That this contest is not brought to a decision at the end of the narrative is not important; this happens all the time with contests. The contest with the beasts, for example, while not evaluated in terms of victor and loser either, is repeatedly called a contest. In fact, the outcome of the contest between martyrs and beasts is displaced in this case. The martyrs' victory is not over the beasts, but over the Devil which the beasts represent;³ yet victory there is, on the side of those who by definition could not win.

Similarly, the contest between antiquity and recent times does not lead to the victory of recent history but to that of the story that serves as its exemplar. That is, if we take the analogy between the two contests one step further, the story takes the place of one party in this contest, thus undermining the idea of contest itself, just as the martyr replaces the other party in her contest with a force within herself. Hence, although their opponents were declared winners from the outset, neither victor can lose.

Other contests that I will for now only enumerate are, on the level of the textual structure, that between the narration of Perpetua's story by an external narrator and her own account, and, within her own text, the contest ↴ between narration of events and description of visions; in Cohn's terms, between narration of events and psychonarration. On both levels there is an implicit contest between recounting and writing, between narrating and seeing, and between happening and predicting. Within the story there is a contest between old men and young men, between divine and earthly fathers, between the mother-position and the child-position, between pleasure and suffering, and between masculinity and femininity. Among all these contests the crucial one between 'Christians' and 'pagans' almost gets lost sight of. If a story 'about' a contest is set in a structure based on contest, we can happily speak of the contest as an iconic sign, the actual contest with the beast being the *mise en abyme* of the story.⁴ But what if the story and what it is 'about' compete as well? What if we don't even know what the story is about, since its structure perpetually undermines the dichotomies of form-content, or sign-meaning, in what is maybe the master-contest of this text, its fight against itself?

This sounds like a deconstructionist qualification of the text.⁵ Such a qualification is by no means based on some marginal figure. Rather, it is based on a central figure–contest. This figure makes the story a highly problematic self–reflexive text whose initial contradictions generate the others. The subversive quality of this figure is not its particular shape contest, —but its status as central figure. Central, hence constructive, yet figural, hence, supposedly, marginal. The initial contradiction of the text is generated by the problematics of gender played out by Perpetua, whose heroism oscillates between female and male endeavours; this is not surprising since, on the one hand, her heroism is socially framed by a confirmation of her sex, while, on the other hand, her case as exemplar is only possible if she transcends her sex.⁶

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2. The contested status of narrative

2.1 Framing Contests

The very first paragraph of the text sets out to obscure the content of the story to follow. Not only is the result of the contest between antiquity and recent times left undecided, since the story replaces one of the parties, but the function of the story is also left unclear, based as it is on one ambiguity after another. The story is supposed to be a ‘proof’ of God’s favour, but ‘proof’ can mean both evidence and test; as an exemplar, the tale must ‘cause the edification of man’ (*Passio* 1.1), but this can maliciously be read with different accents, depending on whether God, too, needs strengthening—depending on whether the ‘test’ meaning of the word ‘proof’ is joined to its ‘evidence’ meaning. Recounting the exemplars of faith is being opposed to writing them down, the latter activity being geared toward honouring rather than ‘proving’ God, and comforting rather than strengthening men.

The means of comforting is recollection, one of the instances of psychonarration Cohn analyses: the evocation of the past in a present visionary act, recorded out of time by writing.⁷ Writing is then both recording and fixing the exemplar. By the same move, the temporal aspect inherent in narrative, in recounting, disappears; it loses the contest between it and the contingent testimonial narration supposedly prior in time. I will contend that this contest is won by writing, precisely because writing can get rid of time; it is this contest that, by its relation to gender, generates all the others.⁸

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The primary contest, not represented but acted out in the story that Perpetua recounts (writes?), is introduced and, again, framed by a remark, not from the narrator, but from God: ‘the young shall see visions, the old shall dream dreams’ (1.4). This contest is plural, intricate, and self–defeating: it opposes visions to dreams and youth to age. So far, so good; the reader is warned about a thematic contest (age–groups; old men versus young) and a literary one (modes of focalization: to dream versus to see).⁹ The remark ↴ also opposes the narrated past to the future that initiates it, since it will be in the last days that God will ‘pour out of My spirit upon all flesh’ (1.4), allowing the visions that will be presented as Perpetua’s past. This contest between past and future is already complex and contradictory. But the contest between ‘dreaming dreams’ and ‘seeing visions’ is the most interesting one, since it affects the reading of the narrative to follow, which is a narrative of visions.

2.2 Considering Genre

Setting aside the fact that the text is written—by whom?—we can attribute two generic qualifications to Perpetua's text, both limit-genres of literature: autobiography and testimony. Integrating these two, we can approach it primarily as an autobiographical, testimonial narrative, its self-referentiality being its value as exemplar. American slave-narratives belong to this genre, and the difference between a non-autobiographical testimonial novel and an autobiographical one immediately appears when we compare the well-meaning, but in many ways dubious, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Frederick Douglass' autobiography.¹⁰ However, the reliability of the testimony is not the only important difference between the two narratives. Somehow, Douglass' narrative is generically different from *Uncle Tom*, and not just because of the voice, the use of 'first-person', and the self-referentiality it entails. Making up a story to illustrate a point (*Uncle Tom*) is easier, or so it seems, than illustrating a point with a real life, because the autobiographical narrative lacks the teleology of a conclusion that only the narrator's death could provide. Douglass' narrative is hardly a narrative in the sense that *Uncle Tom* is. It is much more a series of visions, of disconnected events, each of which has a persuasive value. In other words, if we can take Douglass' text as exemplary in this sense, testimony and autobiography work against narrative structure. Cohn, then, is right to challenge the conflation of all discourses as fictional. It is not so much the substance as the structure of a text that makes it fictional.

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The generic starting-point of autobiographical testimony, which I assume to be a pretty general reading attitude, entails by itself a number of resistances to narrative. As narrative, it engages the desire for the ending, in conflict with the desire to defer the ending,¹¹ while as testimony, it freezes narrative stream to still description. Autobiography's self-referentiality and its narrativity are a source of tension in retrospect; that is, when we as readers are in a position to summarize the story—when the story contains its own unnarratable ending—it entails the death of its narrator. Since Perpetua's death *constitutes* her story—that is, her story as testimony of her martyrdom—the genre is in contradiction with its own project. That is a first reason why the voice can only be accorded to Perpetua for a brief time, an episode, framed by the voice that will put the testimony to persuasive use, bracketing the autobiographical mode. This is, consequently, why I had to begin, and will have to end, with a discussion of the framing narrative, why I cannot isolate the testimony.

3. A Reading of the Text

3.1 Realism and Paternity

Now what is Perpetua doing when she tells this story? First, there is not really a story. It starts *in medias res*, with 'While we were still under surveillance' (3.1), and then it proceeds with a dialogue in which she talks to her father in two terms: the visual—'Father, do you see this container here, for instance: this pitcher or whatever it is?'—and the verbal, the narrative—'It can't be called anything other than what it is, right?' (3.1,2).¹² Her appeal to realism is well known from rhetorical traditions. We all know that a vase is not a mind; rather, a *body* is often compared to a vase, a vessel, a pitcher. The vase of her body could be filled with either a pagan or a Christian mind. Calling the thing by its name does not have the realistic effect that she seeks. On the contrary, her naming seems to be magic that turns a loving father into a devil ('ruses of Satan': 3.3) who wants to pluck out her eyes.¹³

What this failed appeal to realism also stages is the contest between story and description. Perpetua wants to discuss her martyrdom in terms of the (realistic) description of what she is. Her father's response, however, does not address her in the same mode. Instead, he acts rather than talks, thus prodding the story into movement again. The character of her father functions this way throughout the narrative. The rhythm

p. 140 of the alternation of narration of events and description of visions is related to the father. The presence versus the absence of Perpetua's father inaugurates the staging wherein her visions will take place.

Perpetua's relationship with her father turns out to be very special. He loves her more than he loves his wife and his sons—another contest—and when she does not respond to his love by giving up her faith, he starts to behave quite differently: either hating her or identifying with her, being victimized like herself; maybe, let's face it, he is competing with her. She in turn rejects him, feeling great relief at being separated from him. Later on, she feels sorry for him, a feeling that is invariably phrased as 'What a pitiful old man' (6.5). As her own youth is emphasized on many occasions, there seems to be a competition in this domain, a competition introduced already in the Lord's framing prediction: the young shall see visions and the old shall dream dreams. Predictably, the gender-neutral Latin is translated into male language in English, but since in the same statement the distinction between men and women is made, this translation is particularly unfortunate. The gender-neutral plural is needed in order for Perpetua to insert herself into the category of the young who see visions.

3.2 Away from Femininity

The position of the relatives in the story gets more complex when we think of the other relatives evoked: her brother and fellow-martyr, her younger brother prematurely killed by an illness, whose horrifying description foreshadows Perpetua's martyrdom itself, her mother, to whom she speaks in her anxiety, and her baby, who signifies her motherhood as well as her detachment from it. All these characters, except the dead brother, appear at the very beginning of Perpetua's narrative. The movement away from her father toward her motherhood via the evocation of her own mother is, however, less a choice *for* motherhood than a choice *away* from daughterhood; it is more negative than positive. Once the baby has been taken good care of, she is not only willing to give him up, but happy to be relieved of this earthly tie. In a traditional, ideological view, this movement away from her father does not lead to her maturity as a 'real' woman, a mother that is, but, as we shall see, to her detachment from femininity.¹⁴

p. 141 This deviant development is, I contend, what precludes the classic autobiographical narrative from unfolding. Narrative fiction and psychobiography stand at opposite ends of a scale. The series of visions that structure the text, breaking the narrative unfolding in time and each taking away one aspect of Perpetua's femininity, eventually bring out a masculine aspect in Perpetua, as a symptom, a trace, of the difficulty of getting rid of gender. In her first vision, she evokes a ladder, intertextually related to Jacob's ladder. Jacob's dream,¹⁵ I remind you, was a dream of ambition, of promise of election, an election that, in *Genesis*, could only befall men. This intertextual reference begins Perpetua's contest for masculinity, but that contest does not go very far yet. The dragon, and its obvious association with Eve ('it [her seed] shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his [!] heel,' Gen 3.15, King James Version), reconfirms Perpetua's femininity, as does her brother's leadership. When she arrives in the garden, a substitute father with the same grey hair that her worldly father is pitied for, one who does not reject but praises her choice, is waiting for her.

This father, too, is identified with the nursing mother Perpetua, as he feeds her. The product he gives her—curds, or cheese—mediates between pre-Oedipal 'natural' milk and culture. When she comes to herself, the taste of something sweet is still in her mouth.¹⁶ Psychoanalytic critics would see a pre-Oedipal, imaginary remembrance evoked by this phrase, and milk-product would become mother-milk. Has the father been eliminated only to reappear as so 'good' a father that he becomes a mother? I think that the relevance of this nurturing father lies also elsewhere, in Perpetua's position before him/her. For the development of Perpetua away from femininity, the most important aspect of this taste is its position in the pre-Oedipal realm, which brings Perpetua back to the stage *before* sexual difference. But the milk-product is cultured, not entirely 'natural'; the regression carries traces of what was left behind.

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After this vision, the narrative goes on to describe a second encounter with Perpetua's father. This time his love turns not devilish but marital. He behaves as a suffering spouse rather than as a tyrannical parent. And as a spouse; the role he takes on is less that of a husband than that of a wife. He becomes quite feminine himself, crying, kissing her hands, and shedding tears. The statement that 'he was going to be the only one in my whole family who would not rejoice at my martyrdom' (5.6) is highly ambiguous if we look at it within the isotopy of relationships. Does she mean that he alone loves her as a real woman would love, or that he alone blames her for her martyrdom? These two meanings seem contradictory, but are actually compatible, since they function on two different levels of the story—the historical-religious one, with which I am less concerned in this chapter,¹⁷ and the gender-oriented one that my deconstructionist-psychoanalytic framework allows me to emphasize.

The third meeting with her father initiates a new phase in the development of their relationship. Carrying her baby now, he seems to be appealing to shared parenthood. The sacrifice he asks of her, on the historical-religious level, is of course the pagan sacrifice of renunciation of her religion; on this level, it is also an allusion to Abraham's sacrifice, since Perpetua, too, is ready to give up her child for her God. This promotes her to the position of the patriarch, the most masculine and the least maternal of biblical characters, just as her evocation of Jacob's ambition-dream of the ladder had foreshadowed.¹⁸ The father-become-mother keeps the child, and Perpetua goes to the next phase of her experience, to her next vision, when she is '...not subjected to the torment of anxiety for my baby and sore breasts as well' (6.6). That is, she is relieved from all that emphasized her femininity.¹⁹

3.3 Back into Infancy

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Perpetua's second vision involves another relationship with a relative, her dead younger brother Dinocrates. This vision, even more than the first, is descriptive rather than narrative. She sees her brother because she identifies with him: he comes out of a dark hole, as she has herself been locked up in a dark hole—and has come out of it, for that matter. In light of the previous vision which ended with the taste of pre-Oedipal sweetness in her mouth, we can consider both the sex and the smallness of the brother as contributing to Perpetua's development away from gender. If that development is an acceptable suggestion, then we can even see in the wound on his face the symbolic marker of his pre-gendered position, as a possibility of femininity. The water then even suggests a pre-natal memory, stimulated by the long time that has elapsed between this vision and the last time Perpetua saw or thought of the boy. Radical separation, the abyss between them, will be overcome in her next vision.

Perpetua's second vision of Dinocrates, which is the third of the series, emphasizes not only the relief of his suffering by bringing the water within his reach, but also his childishness, expressed by his playing. Between these two visions there is, exceptionally, no narrative interference by the father; only a brief narrative fragment, recounting a single event, is interposed. The event itself, Perpetua's transfer to a military prison, is not without masculine overtones, while the *games* mentioned in this passage will be echoed in the play of the child in the vision, opposing that masculine and guilty play to Dinocrates' genderless, innocent play. It is noticeable that the later description of Perpetua's attitude during her fight with the beasts is more reminiscent of the childish play of her brother than of the masculine game of fighting wild animals. She simply never fights: she wins the game by adopting a dream-like, regressive attitude, the recounting of which requires a most astonishingly 'modern' psychonarration. After this third vision, the father intervenes again. He is now overwhelmed with sorrow and makes a scene that we would be tempted to call hysterical. The father has lost all of his paternal power, throwing himself on the ground and tearing hairs from his beard. But the most significant change in his attitude regards the contest over words that Perpetua initiated in her first encounter with him. He gives in to her model of representation, ceasing to promote narrative and trying in his turn to use language as magically as Perpetua had. As she recounts it: 'He started...saying the kinds of things that would move the whole of creation' (9.2).

3.4 Maleness and Pleasure

The fourth vision is the crucial one for Perpetua's development away from femininity, as it is for the contest between youth and age. The vicious looking Egyptian is not explicitly described as old, but the introduction of the 'handsome young men' (10.6) to be Perpetua's seconds and assistants suggests such an opposition. The Egyptian's mission is to represent the Devil, but the Devil had been previously identified with her father. He literally mediates between the father, described as diabolic in the first encounter, and the dragon of the first vision, the more traditional representation of the Devil.

p. 144 The key sentence for my interpretation of the text is: 'And I was stripped down and became a man' (10.7). One way of explaining this striking element with reference to the social background would be to invoke chastity. Perpetua being a woman, the following scene would have been impossible. And that scene is one of pleasure. The pleasure of being rubbed with oil, the closest we will come to sexual pleasure, has to be mitigated by the transsexual change. But even then, the desire for this pleasure expressed in the vision is striking enough for a martyr so far only interested in the masochism of martyrdom.²⁰ I am inclined to make more of it, to see in this transformation the expression of a real desire for masculinity as the definitive discarding of femininity, a desire motivated by the yearning for pleasure. This has, of course, a social background: in the pre-text of the ancient Roman world,²¹ the pleasure of being naked and rubbed by handsome young men is accessible only to men. In order to accede to that pleasure, Perpetua had to become a man.

The sexual nature of this scene needs further elaboration. Its sexuality is, again, masculine: the beautifully adorned man of marvellous stature who appears in the amphitheatre is inordinately tall not only because he is another incarnation of the father, a function symbolized by his position as arbiter. He is tall also because he represents the sudden growth of the penis in erection. His purple tunic, beltless, with two stripes running down the middle, emphasizes his oblong form without interruptions. Of course, this interpretation, as bold as a voluntarily anachronistic interpretation can possibly be, does not exclude the other, more self-evident interpretations of this figure. One such interpretation would identify him with God. But given the intertwining between Perpetua's search for pleasure and her voyage to God, the motherly father of her first vision, the ambivalence of this figure is not surprising. To push this a little further, if this man represents an erect penis, his head is logically the top, and his feet, to whose attractiveness so much attention is drawn, the testicles. But this positive figure of masculine sexuality is positive precisely in that it carries femininity.

The description of the fight with the evil Egyptian does not represent any form of anxiety or displeasure. On the contrary, the fight is represented as *light*, as an 'unbearable lightness of being', beginning with 'to let our fists fly' and including actual flying, according to Freud a quite frequent representation ↵ of sexual arousal in dreams;²² there is also a representation of actual intercourse (she 'grabbed his head': 10.11). Perpetua comes down to earth in victory, a pleasurable ending of the event. The tall man has now lost his imaginary stature and is simply referred to as 'the trainer,' while he addresses her as 'daughter' (10.13). In other words, after this amazing fantasy, Perpetua is back in normal life—as it should be, but isn't 'really'.

The text we are looking at is so interesting for its passages of psychonarration because it contains the fictionalizing device of representing minds in the *plural*. If one takes a look at the parallel vision of Saturus, a male participant in this voyage toward martyrdom, one can immediately assess the difference. Unlike Perpetua's, his vision is entirely void of any sensuality. The vision is filled with the clichés of paradise: splendid but sexless angels, 'rose trees and all kinds of flowers' (11.5). The angels are wearing white robes like Perpetua's arbiter/trainer/penis, but nothing associates these robes with any gender-related aspect of the angels. Saturus' vision is, like Perpetua's earliest vision, concerned with the contest between old men and young men, a contest that is resolved outside sensuality by the vision of 'a kind of white-haired man who had snowy hair and a youthful face' (12.3) whose feet he did *not* see. The father-figure is multiplied by the elders and aged men who send the martyrs out to play. We recognize this motif from Perpetua's third

vision, the one where her *little* brother was cured and as a result began to play. In other words Saturus also regresses back into pre-gendered, pre-historical, pre-Oedipal infancy, but for him this love is simple. If we believe Perpetua's evocations, overcoming gender is a double fight for a woman, who cannot simply go back to infancy but has to move to infancy via masculinity. Why would this be?

3.5 Writing Sexual Difference

p. 146 In the visions, we see that the regressions always leave a trace, a *writing* of sexual difference. In her first vision, Perpetua identified not only with Jacob but also with Eve, and the milk of pre-gendered identity was already processed, hence, gender-bound. In the second, the dark hole was ambivalent—both frightening prison and secure uterus—and the wound suggesting the female sexual organ was graphically represented on her little brother's face, and deepened by the abyss that separated them. In the third vision, that wound was healed but, emblematically, left a scar. In the final, fourth vision, sexual difference is only overcome after the pleasure of the *Other*, male sexual experience is integrated into the female experience: the erection of the tall man, the transsexual change, and the flying sensation. When she comes down ↴ and steps on the Devil's head, she has overcome the limitations of her femaleness as well as the wickedness of bad, devilish, fatherly maleness. Compared to Saturus' itinerary, hers is a much more complex and difficult one, as the route toward sexual identity is a more tortuous one for women in a society where maleness is the norm and femaleness the deviation.

Perpetua's last vision is not only the vision of the contest for spiritual victory over bodily mutilation that she will enact in the scene of her actual murder, where she does not even realize that the contest with the beast—the mad heifer—has already taken place. It is not only the contest between the pain of reality and the pleasure of her vision, a pleasure that will replace the pain of her actual martyrdom. It is also the contest for descriptive victory over narrative suffering. However hard they try, the spectators of the contest do not *see* the event of her suffering, and the narrator of the final scene can only explain this by emphasizing Perpetua's absent-mindedness—a regression to both the pre-Oedipal stage and to the vision—that represents her escape from what historical reality tries to do to her.

Historical reality needs the narrative mode to structure its unfolding in time. It is that collaboration between temporality and historical reality that Perpetua chooses to undermine. Her narrative is narrative only to the extent that it shows how poor the narrative mode is, compared to the descriptive mode that takes Perpetua out of time, out of victimhood, into an atemporal realm that is both pre-gendered and pleasurable.

Two moments in the concluding narrative, the final section of the frame, confirm that Perpetua's contest is related to gender not only for herself but also for the others, the lustful sadistic onlookers. At the same time, they emphasize the distinction between narration and psychonarration, between biography and autobiography, between fiction and the realm where fiction and non-fiction is a void distinction: fantasy. First, Perpetua and the other female martyr, Felicitas, are exposed to a female animal, in order for their sex to match that of their antagonist. This contest is set up as a 'real' game, with 'fair' rules. But when the two women are stripped naked, the mob is shocked to see their female vulnerability. Perpetua is then described as 'a beautiful girl,' which, as a young mother, she is not 'really'. By contrasting her to Felicitas, 'fresh from giving birth and with dripping breasts' (20.2), the narrator shows that he has understood Perpetua's devolution: her separation from her child—her breasts were dripping there—is seen as a regression to an earlier stage. It is the moment of emerging femininity—adolescence and maternity—that the onlookers are objecting to, not the suffering of established femininity that they, as amateurs of pornography, would have loved to see.

Perpetua wins this contest, too. The sadism of the crowd, which she had ridiculed right before the spectacle, is frustrated, both by her chaste concern for her appearance, her refusal to let her female body be exposed,

p. 147 and, by her dream-like unconsciousness, her refusal to let her suffering be exposed. ↪ However hard he tries, the narrator ultimately cannot *write* the martyrdom of this woman. He can only write how she escapes it.

4. Considerations of Method

Although I have cheerfully endorsed the charge of anachronism, my reading of the text is less anarchistic than it may seem, as I hope to argue in this concluding section. I started out by defining a guiding theme contest—and by specifying a defining genre that challenges established literary categories—autobiographical testimony. The narratological distinction between narration and description encompassed the equally narratological distinctions between telling and seeing, and between narration of events and psychonarration. The problematic status of the genre as self-contradictory matched the problematic status of the text as, if I may say so, self-contesting, in all senses of the word. Thus, generic and narratological considerations led to a deconstruction of the status of the genre and of narrative from the start.

In a second step, I came to see a relationship between the technical, narrative, and scriptural devices of the text, and the links the narrator and the heroine of the story are involved in. These connections are as self-deconstructive as the previously mentioned ones. The awareness of this problem on the thematic level brought me to a psychoanalytic third step, the examination of Perpetua's move away from her sex. This move was complex for her, because she not only had sex to transcend, but she also had to move beyond it through masculinity. As we have seen, this detour was harder, but also more rewarding, because it led to positive pleasure, rather than the simple, infantile evocation of paradise that represented Satorius' regression.

For an important contingent of feminists—mainly historians—psychoanalysis is an objectionable framework, less for its male biases than for its anachronism. Indeed, the historical contingency of Freudian thought has been amply demonstrated for many of its aspects—although not so much for its major foundations. Interpreting an ancient text within such a framework runs the risk of forcing it into an early twentieth-century bourgeois patriarchal mould. To this objection, eight answers can be addressed: two defensive, three aggressive, two *ad hoc*, and one historical. I will simply enumerate these answers, thus positing, denying, and defending the anachronism of my endeavour.

- (a) *The supplementary-relativistic defensive reply.* The historical reality of the text may be partially bracketed but is not violated by my interpretation.
- p. 148 (b) ↪ *The universalist defensive reply.* Freud assumed that all people have sexual fantasies, generated by the discrepancy between motoric and mental development of the infant, even if those fantasies are socially and historically embedded and shaped. I have drawn upon one aspect, the 'universalist' assumption, while tacitly presupposing the other, its embedding in social reality.
- (c) *The relativistic aggressive reply.* Why would we accept all other contemporary models of textual interpretation—no model devised by us can be truly 'native'—to confront ancient texts with, and not the psychoanalytic one? What are we denying, when we refuse the latter, about the relevance of sex?
- (d) *The post-relativistic aggressive reply.* What position are we taking if we deny peoples in other times and cultures the sexually informed fantasy life that we then reserve for ourselves? Such a denial involves ethnocentrism.
- (e) *The post-modern theoretical aggressive reply.* Why would we be open only to what we know already, to a clone of our own thought, rather than addressing the question of what this 'ahistorical'

interpretation can bring us?

- (f) *The hermeneutical ad hoc reply*. The insistence, in *this* text, on family relations interwoven with erotic fantasies suggests that the Freudian framework is relevant.
- (g) *The feminist ad hoc reply*. Shying away from psychoanalysis is denying the strong concern with gender, and the difficult but particularly fulfilling access to sexual pleasure for women, in the historical context inscribed in this text.
- (h) *The historical reply*. 'History' involves two sides: the past of the 'object' and the present of the 'subject'. 'Seeing' is the most appropriate act to bring these two together. Both need to be acknowledged, in order to let the two interact, rather than pretending to an objectivist position of security outside the object. The historical position of the reader *now*, my own that is, is inscribed in what for a long time was an aporetic problem of reading, but where the lack of feminine subjects has now been overruled by feminism. Hence the need for 'wild' readings, as a historical requirement for changing cultural constraints today, readings whose wildness can be compared to Perpetua's wild fantasies: delineated yet stretching the limits imposed upon them.

p. 149 That Perpetua's move away from femininity would lead her, not so much to give up sex as to enjoy it in the only way she could have access to it, turns this story of victimhood into a story of victory, not only, not even primarily, in the religious sense, but also in two other senses. First, her victory over gender-limitations makes her possibly, in the end, a proto-feminist heroine. Second, her victory over narration makes her in the same sense a proto-post-modern. Thus, the contest set up in the beginning between ancient and recent times is brilliantly won by her, as she moves way beyond the recent past into the future of vision and the present of writing.²³

Notes

- 1 I distinguish between the beginning and end of the text, in which the author introduces and supplements Perpetua's narrative, and her own testimony proper. I consider the latter the main text, while the former is an ideologically alien (male-religious) appropriation of it.
- 2 For time as a historical versus a narrative category, see P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols (Chicago, 1984–8).
- 3 The Devil is often called 'the beast'. The actual beasts function as a metaphor of the Devil, but that conventional metaphorical relation is modified in Perpetua's divisions. It is remarkable that the explicit metaphorical presence of the Devil is related not to the beasts but to a man, the Egyptian, in the last vision, while the actual beast Perpetua is confronted with is a female animal.
- 4 For the term *iconic sign* or *icon* see C.S. Peirce, 'Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs', in R.E. Innis (ed.), *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology* (Bloomington, 1985), 1–23. For the term *mise en abyme*, see L. Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire: Essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris, 1977) and M. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto, 1985). The passage from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* which D. Cohn quotes (*Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, 1978), 50), wherein Aschenbach's hallucinated vision of a tiger is psychonarrated, seems to me a similar case of *mise en abyme*. It asserts the founding importance of vision in the story, both in its insistent use of the verb 'to see' and in the destructive power of its actual vision.
- 5 For a survey of deconstruction as a critical approach, see J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca and London, 1983). Examples of deconstructionist criticism are legion: see e.g. B. Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, 1987); C. Chase, *Decomposing Figures: Rhetorical Readings in the Romantic Tradition* (Baltimore, 1986).
- 6 This transcendence is facilitated by the appropriation of the narrative in the frame, but remains problematic nevertheless, thanks to Perpetua's insistence on, and sharp awareness of, her martyrdom as within sexuality.
- 7 A strong example of a text whose recollecting/comforting function predominates over its historical function is the Song of Deborah in Judges 5. See A. Globe, 'The Literary Structure and Unity of the Song of Deborah', *Journal of Biblical Literature*

- 93 (1974), 493–512; M.D. Coogan, 'A Structural Analysis of the Song of Deborah', *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 40 (1978), 132–66; M. Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (Bloomington, 1988).
- 8 On the 'contest' between writing and speech, see J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978). On the relation between writing and gender via the 'historiographic project', see Bal, *Murder and Difference*.
- 9 On the term 'focalization', which replaces the traditional term point of view, see Bal, *Narratology*. The act of seeing is a favourite case of the 'subverbal states' (Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 46) rendered in psychonarration. It comes close to the ideal of the window, lens, mirror, or camera as metaphor of the transparent mind. As the ideal of platonic deception, as well as of positivist perception, seeing is the ideal mediation between pure subjectivity and pure objectivity.
- 10 For a feminist critique of this novel, see J. Tompkins, 'Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History', *Glyph* 8 (1981), 79–102.
- 11 Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York and Oxford, 1984) is an attempt to develop a narrative theory on the basis of the psychoanalytical concept of the desire for ending and the need for deferral. The theory, appealing because it tries to relate form and content in a novel way, fails by its blindness to questions of gender and the exclusive focus on male preoccupations it entails. For my review, see Chapter 2 in D. Jobling (ed.), *On Storytelling* (Sonoma, 1991).
- 12 This dichotomy generates tension in this text. For a discussion of the word-image opposition, see W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1985); M. Bal, *Reading 'Rembrandt': Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, 1991).
- 13 The relationship between blinding and castration-anxiety as established by S. Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *Collected Papers*, vol. 4 (New York, 1959), 368–407, is evidence for Perpetua's tendency to self-identification as male.
- 14 Rather than referring to the many excellent discussions of femininity as either essential nature or social construct, I wish to draw attention here to what I consider a wonderfully sharp piece of feminist thought, Evelyn Fox Keller's book *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, 1985). Although Keller's study is devoted to the problem of gender as related to science, the way she goes about discussing the issue of gender is exemplary for what I take to be the most fruitful position.
- 15 The concept of intertextuality was introduced into western critical thought by J. Kristeva, 'Poésie et négativité', in *Sémiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris, 1969), 246–77, and *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York, 1984). For a critical discussion, see J. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca and London, 1981).
- 16 Moders readers cannot help thinking of Proust's famous 'involuntary memory' aroused by the taste of a madeleine cake soaked in linden-blossom tea, an episode in *Remembrance of Things Past*, 3 vols (New York, 1981) that has become the emblematic passage on metaphor and its metonymic motivations. See e.g. G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An essay in Method* (Ithaca and New York, 1980). The rhetoric of the madeleine-cake episode is discussed by E. van Alphen, *Bij wijze van lezen: Verleiding en verzet van Willem Brakmans lezer* (Muiderberg, 1988). And to complete this post-modern anachronism: the sweetness left by the cheese can be best imagined if we combine Perpetua's and Proust's experiences in the idea of cheese-cake.
- 17 My approach to this text may indeed be perceived as aggressively different from the more obviously relevant historical-religious approaches. It goes without saying that my choice does not imply that I find those other interpretations less useful: on the contrary. I have simply chosen to limit myself to the present approach in order to show that, even though the historical-religious approach is more directly obvious, mine can contribute to the realization of the still-vital importance of concerns of gender and its relation to narrative, or more specifically, to psychonarration.
- 18 It is relevant to note that the episode of Jacob's dream, in which the ladder appears, takes place when Jacob is still very far removed from the patriarchal status he will later acquire. The dream—a vision—foreshadows his future, just as Perpetua's visions foreshadow hers.
- 19 Susan Harvey Ashbrook's work on 'Transvestite Saints' shows that this withdrawal from gender is a generic feature of medieval saint narratives; see her 'Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story', in L. Coon *et al.* (eds), *'That Gentle Strength': Historical Perspectives on Women and Christianity* (Charlottesville and London, 1990), 36–59, and S.P. Brock and S.A. Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1998²), 19–26, 40–62 (the Life of Pelagia of Antioch), 142–9 (the Life of Anastasia).
- 20 The term 'masochism' is voluntarily anachronistic. Historically speaking, it would be absurd to apply this term to martyrs; yet the combination of suffering and pleasure the term emphasizes is pertinent here. The question, of course, is the nature of the pleasure; in the present case, it is arguably sexual. Hence the appropriateness, if qualified, of the term.
- 21 Of the various alternative terms to indicate the reality informing texts, van Alphen's proposal *pretext*, in *Bij wijze van lezen*, seems the most appealing to me, since it implies both a temporal and an anti-mimetic aspect, while also expressing the idea that the text leans on it, exploits it, only to gain its own status in its difference from it.
- 22 S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York, 1965).
- 23 This is the slightly updated and corrected version of M. Bal, 'Perpetual Contest', in D. Jobling (ed.), *On Storytelling*

(Sonoma, 1991), 227–41.