

The Formative Feminine and the Immobility of God

Gender and Cosmogony in
Bernard Silvestris's *Cosmographia*

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The crafty penis fights against Lachesis,
Rejoins the thread Fate's hand has severed through.
The blood flows down to kidneys from the head
And there achieves the form of pallid sperm;
And Nature molds the liquid with such skill
That grandsires in similitude return. . . .
World needs no members but the human state
requires them; they must be supplied by Physis:
The head's melodic ears, its wakeful eyes,
And feet for going, hands to form and shape.

—Bernard Silvestris, *Cosmographia*¹

I have argued . . . that, for instance, within the sex/gender distinction, sex poses as "the real" and the "factic," the material or corporeal ground upon which gender operates as an act of cultural *inscription*. . . . The "real" and the "sexually factic" are phantasmatic constructions—illusions of substance—that bodies are compelled to approximate, but never can. What, then, enables the exposure of the rift between the phantasmatic and the real whereby the real admits itself as phantasmatic?

—Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*²

Intelligible Sexes and Unintelligible Divinities: Posing the Questions

Written in the mid-twelfth century, Bernard Silvestris's Platonic creation myth *Cosmographia* is in two parts: the first, or "Megacosmos," tells of the construction and ordering of the great world by Noys, also called

God's Mind, Intellect, Providence, Will, and Second Self. The second, or "Microcosmos," is the complex narrative of the construction of Man, the great World's microcosm, by the daughters of Noys. Let us begin *in medias res*, or indeed rather near to the end of things, by observing that the first created human being described in the closing lines of the *Cosmographia*, quoted above, clearly possesses male genitalia. Yet if the penis, in being shown to be created before the feminine genitalia, is valorized by its priority, it is nevertheless valorized only in the context of the human condition. On the one hand it is said to be the penis specifically that "fights against Lachesis," carrying on the primary work of reproduction and perpetuating the human race (the womb is not mentioned at all); but, on the other hand, it is pointed out (echoing *Timaeus* 33C-34A and 44D and E) that World (the macrocosm, the form prior to humanity, which humanity reflects) has no need of *any* limbs—thus, the masculine member, like the other bodily extremities, has no universal analogue (nor, so far as may be deduced from the *Cosmographia*, any divine one).

Bernard does not get so far as describing the first created woman, and we do not know in the terms of his myth how she might have been formed or represented. Yet if Femina as such is absent from Bernard's work, it may be remarked that there is no dearth of feminine sexual organs. The womb is frequently mentioned as a divine attribute shared by the three formative goddesses in the *Cosmographia*: Silva, Natura, and Noys. Womb figures as a certain generative aspect of the divine—an aspect that often seems to be represented as ontologically prior to the masculinity that it forms or engenders. Certainly this much may be said: it is feminine Silva who, with the help of feminine Noys, engenders masculine World; feminine Physis who, with the help of other feminine deities, constructs the physical body of masculine Homo. Within the time span outlined in the *Cosmographia*, we do not witness the construction of a human woman, yet all of the formative, active, and generative divinity that we have been allowed to see manifests itself as feminine.

I bring this up at the outset in order to gesture toward a problematic complexity of gender representation in Bernard's myth—a complexity that has yet to receive the attention it deserves. In the passage from *Gender Trouble* quoted in my epigraph, Butler puts a question to her audience: "What, then, enables the exposure of the rift between the phantasmatic and the real whereby the real admits itself as phantasmatic?" One may answer that the attribution of female body parts to immaterial divine beings exposes such a rift—or at the very least, may be used to expose such a rift if we

put the right questions to it. For if there can be such a thing as divine gender, in what does it *really* consist? In Bernard's Platonic context, should the human penis be seen as more or less phantasmatic than the divine womb? Put another way, why did the womb seem to Bernard the most appropriate figure for divine production and reproduction? Does the presence of feminine sexual organs in the divine realm imply, in some sense, somewhere else in the divine realm, a masculine alternative? And if so, then where does the phallus of God lie hid? (Or if God hasn't got one, then why not?)

These questions are in part disingenuous; I do think there is more going on in the *Cosmographia* than the focus on the presence or absence of a divine phallus allows one to grasp. Nevertheless, I wanted to begin by emphasizing how deeply issues of gendered embodiment are implicated in Bernard's lofty abstractions, in his considerations of the relations between divinity and the world.

My epigraphs place a quotation from Judith Butler in apposition to an extract from Bernard Silvestris in order to allow the play of certain resonances in both writings which seemed to me of interest. Butler's terms of reference are, of course, different from Bernard's, but similarities can be found in the way both allow us a glimpse beyond the corporeal ground of sex. In the writing of both we are encouraged to conceive of gender, even sex itself, not merely as something understood, but as something by which we understand.

In Butler's view, gender is best conceived as a matter of praxis; gender is, as she puts it, performative. In the arguments that Butler refutes, biological "sex" is somewhat dangerously seen as the real or solid ground underlying the more phantasmatic (and in principle escapable) cultural construction of "gender." But "sex" itself, Butler argues, is constituted in discourse as a form of knowledge. It derives its cultural power from an assumed reality of being that is supposed to underlie it and to be separable from the cultural knowledge that overlays it, but in fact is not.³ If Butler's position is that "sex," too, is knowledge, this is not to deny that biological sex is "real"; it merely makes it possible to identify our "knowledge" of "sex" as a political force because of the ways it appears to be ontological when it is in fact epistemological.

Exposing the rift between the phantasmatic and the real is not merely a matter of exposing what is false or misconstrued in the presumed object of knowledge, but also, to follow Butler's own practice, of tracing what knowledge *does*, or is made to do: it is a matter of examining the uses to which knowledge is put. In the *Cosmographia* we are able to examine a very spe-

cific use of knowledge in an allegory about the construction of the world. Bernard makes a direct link between knowledge and gender through this allegory: Noys is God's Mind, Wisdom, and Intellect. She is also feminine, and her gender, as I will argue, is crucial to the framework of Bernard's thought. In this chapter I would like to explore both what the connection between divine femininity and divine intellect meant to Bernard, and also what it might mean to us. I aim first and foremost for a clear reading of the *Cosmographia* that will emphasize issues of gender in the work that have so far tended to be either ignored or oversimplified—sometimes disastrously—by previous commentators. Beyond this, however, I would like to open out Bernard's writing so that it can engage with our modern conversation about gender and knowledge a little more freely. One reason for the resonance between Bernard's words and those of Judith Butler is that Butler's arguments in one aspect represent a recent development of a centuries-old conversation about Rhetoric and Truth—a conversation in which Bernard Silvestris, from another place and time, is also taking part.

Divine Ideas: Scholarly Apprehensions of Noys's Gender

Modern readings of the *Cosmographia* have been marked not so much by controversy over Noys's gender (though there is some of that, too) as controversy about its importance. The textual evidence is clear enough: Noys is attended everywhere by feminine pronouns and adjectival forms. At the same time, however, it is reasserted at many points that Noys is a unity with God, that they are of one mind and coeternal: Noys is referred to as "imago nescio dicam an vultus, patris imagine consignatus" (an image, or rather a face stamped with the image of the Father—"Megacosmos" iv.5). Is her femininity, then, integral to Bernard's philosophical purpose, or is it mere window dressing, a traditional attribute of Sapiential figures but nothing more? To some, Noys's femininity has appeared an unconvincing attribute. Linda Lomperis remarked as recently as 1988 that "throughout most of the *Cosmographia* Noys's female status seems secondary, seems, in fact, to be suppressed by her constant and close association with God. . . . It therefore seems appropriate to say that although Noys may walk like a woman, she certainly talks like a man."⁴

In a work like the *Cosmographia* it would be curious if anything as foregrounded as Noys's gender should be found entirely insignificant; yet it has proven oddly difficult to see just what its significance is. The question

of the femininity of Noys has in the past been entwined with the question of the extent to which the *Cosmographia* should be read as a relatively orthodox Christian work, or whether it in fact represents a fundamentally pagan perspective. E. R. Curtius makes one such argument for the importance of the feminine principle in the *Cosmographia*.⁵ Perhaps predictably, Curtius's most extreme statements are the ones most often quoted: "Bernard," he writes, "represents a pagan Humanism which eliminates everything Christian except for a few ultimate essentials. . . . The whole [of the *Cosmographia*] is bathed in the atmosphere of a fertility cult, in which religion and sexuality mingle."⁶ Curtius here refutes a reading by Etienne Gilson, who in an attempt to rescue the poem from previous charges of paganism placed it in the tradition of hexameral literature and read Noys (against the textual evidence, but not for the first time)⁷ as masculine, and argued for an identity of Noys with the Logos.⁸ The *Cosmographia*'s most notable modern commentators thus set up between them an interesting duality of readings: either the work represented a fundamentally Christian handling of creation in the hexameral tradition, with Noys appearing as masculine Christ, or the work has little about it that is Christian, and the feminine Noys is a pagan fertility goddess.

Neither of these readings reflects with complete accuracy the Noys of Bernard's text, as subsequent readers were quick to point out. Yet it was Gilson whose opinion was to be most influential, in the sense that his representation of the work's Christianity has been accepted as the more fundamentally accurate. Other deficiencies of Gilson's reading have since been corrected; it is no longer possible to read Noys as masculine, though her christological affiliations continue to be argued.⁹ In an important 1948 article, Theodore Silverstein pinpointed Noys's most important antecedents: she is, he asserted, a composite of Minerva and the female figure of Sapientia in the Solomonic literature of the Bible.¹⁰ Silverstein thus insisted on Noys's femininity without deeply analyzing it. But in asserting Noys's Sapiential sources, Silverstein did succeed in demonstrating that Noys could be traced to a figure at once female and a traditional—if slightly esoteric—part of Christian mythology (in other words, that she could actually be Christian without being masculine, a point that seems to have taken a surprisingly long time to make). Brian Stock, in the only book length-study of the *Cosmographia*, allows that Curtius, Gilson, and Silverstein all provide useful clues to Noys's meaning,¹¹ but he does not comment on the discrepancies of gender between them or the overall significance of Noys's gender in the *Cosmographia*.¹² More recently, Winthrop

Wetherbee¹³ and Peter Dronke¹⁴ have contributed important insights to the study of the *Cosmographia*. Dronke makes the stronger case of the two for Noys's important femininity, emphasizing the work's rhetorical voluptuousness in a manner mildly reminiscent of Curtius and reading the work with his usual sensitivity, but he ultimately gives scant attention to gender in its philosophical aspect as a means of codification.

The most recent writer to comment at any length on the subject of gender in the *Cosmographia* is Jean Jolivet in his article "Les principes féminins dans la *Cosmographia* de Bernard Silvestre."¹⁵ To the critical conversation about the *Cosmographia*, Jolivet adds the enticing suggestion that Gramision (or "Granusion," as the word was rendered prior to Dronke's edition)—the earthly paradise in which Man is constructed by Physis—in fact represents the womb, or even the feminine genitalia.¹⁶ Jolivet also once again refutes Gilson's reading of Noys as masculine, writing that "in all the narratives in which she is implicated, in all the discourses where she is addressed, her femininity is more or less explicitly present, and inversely there is nothing to indicate a masculine character in her."¹⁷ But Jolivet addresses her significance in the work as a whole only briefly. His view is that "Bernard presents us with an absolute First Principle which surpasses all distinction of sex, and an exclusively feminine series of originary figures" whose reproduction "presupposes no masculine element."¹⁸

The implications of Noys as an exemplar of divine Femininity cannot adequately be unfolded without considering briefly the extent to which Jolivet is correct in asserting that the proliferation of goddesses in the *Cosmographia* "presupposes no masculine element"—whether, indeed, the *Prima Usia* surpasses (or suppresses) sex distinction entirely.¹⁹

Blinded by the Light: Evidence of Divine Masculinity in the *Cosmographia*

Certainly it appears to be so. It is true that where Tugaton is mentioned, it is defended from speculations about gender as it is defended from all other speculations: Tugaton ("the Good" in Greek) is the "inaccessible light," which "quia lumen se defendit a lumine, splendorem ex se videas caliginem peperisse" (because the light guards itself from the eye [or guards itself by means of light], it might seem to you that its splendor begot darkness from itself—"Microcosmos" v.3). But there do exist hints elsewhere in the work that this light may mean more than it speaks. Very bright lights are

often masculine, associated with great power and the capacity to fertilize. There is Sol, for example—

Inter Oiarsas Geniosque celestes quos eterna sapientia mundano vel decori vel regimini deputavit, Sol—illustrior lumine, presentior viribus, augustior maiestate, mens mundi, rerum fomes sensificus, virtus siderum, mundanusque oculus tam splendoris quam caloris immensitate—perfuderat universa. ("Microcosmos" v.13)

(Among the celestial Geniuses and Oyarses which eternal Wisdom destined to be classed as Glory or Rule of the World, Sol, brighter in light, more present in powers, more august in majesty, Worldly mind, sensitizing tinder of things, power of the stars, and eye of the World, infused the universe with an immensity both of splendor and of heat.)

The Sun, in keeping with his mythological character, is of course masculine—the "infusing" of the world with splendor and heat. Yet Sol, as worldly mind and eye, may be seen to refer as much through mentality to Noys as through fire to Tugaton. The worldly genders, even where humanity or animality is not in question, are subordinated to, and not precise analogues of, the divine ones.

A more explicit identification of fire or light with the power to impregnate comes in Bernard's description of the ethereal fire that surrounds the cosmic orb:

Quicquid enim ad essentiam sui generis promotione succedit, ex celo—tanquam ex deo vite—subsistentie sue causas suscipit et naturam. . . . Ignis namque ethereus, sociabilis et maritus, gremio Telluris coniugis affusus, generationem rerum publicam, quam de calore suo producit ad vitam, eam inferioribus elementis commodat nutriendam. ("Megacosmos" iv.1-2)

(Whatever succeeds in the promotion to being of its own race takes its nature and causes from heaven, as if from the God of life. . . . For the ethereal fire, sociable and husbandly, having been shed into the lap of his wife Tellus, supplies the common generation of things, which he leads forth to life from his own heat so that it may be fostered among the lower elements.)

Here, more than in the description of Sol, the fire is identified both with divinity and seed. Yet the homely images effectively obviate any strong comparison between the ethereal fire and the Inaccessible Light; the impregnation of Tellus is different, an act more animal and less austere than any we are able to imagine between Noys and Tugaton, the Will and Goodness of God.

Beyond a general association between bright light and the fertilizing power of seed, suggestions of a masculine character in Tugaton or

the *Prima Usia* are quite difficult to find. The fact that Noys "divine voluntatis semper est pregnans" (is always pregnant with the divine will) (I.iv.14) suggests that her daughters do have a paternity of sorts.²⁰ Bernard also occasionally refers to God using the epithet "Father" (three times in "Megacosmos" iv). For the most part, however, the highest aspect of God, the First Being or Goodness, is not represented in such a way as to encourage reference to human genders. On the contrary, the reader's perception of any equivalence between the First Being and a specifically masculine potentiating principle is fairly carefully deflected.

The strongest evidence for a masculinity in God above and beyond what we can see is Bernard's continued insistence on the femininity of Noys. Where specific attributes of God cannot be forced from anything Bernard says about God, they may perhaps be teased out of the statements describing the relation of Noys to God and to the other feminine deities who are their daughters.

The Difference Which Is Not One: Noys/God and Their Daughters

Two characteristics of Noys are recurrently marked: first, that Noys is an identity with God, differing from God only in the visibility of her labor, but not in the will which is their mutual being; and second, that the femininity of Noys is a positive quality that descends from Noys through *Natura* to *Silva*. The interdependence of the goddesses has been emphasized by Dronke and Jolivet, and the identity of Noys with God has been brought out in a variety of ways by many commentators, yet a more detailed reading of the lines and passages that suggest these relationships is still necessary to show how theological questions are being identified with questions of gender and consequently resolved.

The opening lines of "Megacosmos" provide a case in point. Here Nature begins her petition to Noys for the ordering of *Silva*, the primordial chaotic state of matter:

Congeries informis adhuc, cum *Silva* teneret
Sub veteri confusa globo primordia rerum,
Visa deo *Natura* queri mentemque profundam
Compellasse Noym: 'Vitae viventis imago,
Prima, Noys—deus—orta Deo, substantia veri,
Consilii tenor aeterni, mihi vera *Minerva*.' ("Megacosmos" i.1-6)

(When Silva, unformed mass, still held
the swirling origins of things in antic heap,
Nature seemed to complain to God, addressing Noys,
deep mind: "You, image of living life, Noys/God,
from God first risen, substance of the truth,
sense of eternal purpose, my Minerva true.")²¹

In this passage we find first the equivalence "Noym, mentem profundam" and then the string of nouns by which Nature both addresses and identifies Noys (I leave out some of the modifying phrases): *imago/Noys/Deus/orta/substantia/tenor/Minerva*. No English translation can adequately suggest the abruptness with which grammatically opposite genders are thrust together here in Latin, especially in the line "*prima Noys deus orta deo substantia veri*." However this line is parsed, the masculine "deus" makes emphatic contrast with the grammatical femininity that surrounds it.

As I have rendered the line, feminine "Noys" and masculine "Deus" are bound together by the bracketing modifiers "*prima . . . orta*," insisting on the indivisibility of Noys and God, something to which Bernard forces our attention from the outset. Yet despite the identity claimed for Noys as God, or perhaps because of it, the grammatical gender contrasts cannot pass unnoticed. Mundanely speaking, the difference between Noys and God is, simply, a difference of gender. But because God and Noys are also, divinely speaking, an identity, one might say that this is a difference that is not one—a difference (to play on Irigaray's sense) both nonexistent and manifold.

The difference may be called manifold because of the manner in which Noys shares her substance with the other goddesses, Natura and Silva. Dronke has noted that all Bernard's feminine theophanies are related and interdependent: Noys is Natura's "source of inspiration—her 'true Minerva'—but also her mother. As Noys . . . is God's firstborn . . . and herself divine, so Natura is 'the blessed fecundity of the womb of Noys,' . . . and Silva is 'Natura's most ancient aspect, the tireless womb of generation.'"²² The passages Dronke points to here all will be given more detailed analysis, but one thing may be singled out for emphasis right from the start: the key point of contiguity between the three goddesses (Noys, Natura, and Silva) is an anatomical one: it is the womb. As Noys is herself divine, but also always and slightly differently "pregnant with the divine will," so the other two goddesses share in the divinity of Noys specifically through the mark of the feminine, the womb.

Noys opens her response to Nature's plea with an address that links the two of them both divinely and anatomically:

Et tu Natura, uteri mei beata fecunditas, nec degeneras nec desciscis origine qua, filia providentiae, mundo et rebus non desinis providere. ("Megacosmos" ii.1)

(And you, Nature, blessed fruitfulness of my womb, you do not degenerate nor withdraw from the origin on whose account, daughter of Providence, you cease not to be provident with respect to the world and its things.)

The phrase "uteri mei fecunditas" might be taken simply as a circumlocution for "daughter," but the abstract noun ("fecunditas") implies more than this. Nature is not merely the fruit of the womb of Noys, but its very fruitfulness—in fact, the womb itself. Nature's desire is in precisely this sense original and originary; it is the desire of the first Form or Idea of the Womb in Noys for the begetting of the Cosmos. Noys further emphasizes the reflection of herself in Nature in the paronomastic articulation "filia providentiae. . . non desinis providere." Within this phrase, Nature can be seen to enact in the verb "providere" the Providence of which Noys is the nominal form. In one aspect, Noys is simply the ontologically prior Divine Idea of Nature. Yet Noys is bigger than Nature, and Noys's larger function is elaborated in the passage immediately following:

Porro Nois ego, dei ratio profundius exquisita, quam utique de se, alteram se, Usia prima genuit—non in tempore sed ex eo quo consistit aeterno—Noys ego, scientia et arbitraria divine voluntatis ad dispositionem rerum, quemadmodum de consensu eius accipio, sic mee administrationis officia circumduco. ("Megacosmos" ii.1)

(I, Noys, the deeply sought-after reason of God, a second self whom the First Being begot from self, not in time, but from that which is eternal; I, Noys, the divine will's knowledge and judgment for the disposition of things, just as I gather from his agreement [consensu] (with me) [or: from our unanimity, co-meaning], so do I carry out the office of my administration.)

Having at first identified herself so intimately with Nature, Noys now reminds us again of her consensus with God: she is coeternal with God, an "other self," not a creature but, rather, as in Plotinus, an overflowing of the primal divinity from the oneness of being into the alterity of thought.

The desire some scholars have shown to identify Noys/Deus with Christ/Logos is easily understood; such an identification would fall within the traditions on which Bernard's work draws.²³ Yet it must be pointed out how carefully Bernard himself avoids the temptation to make such a connection explicit. Among the many epithets attached to Noys (Mens, Intellectus, Scientia, Sapientia, to name a few) we do not find anywhere the one that would link her indisputably with Christ: Verbum. Had he wished to do so, Bernard could have made the connection patent, but he does not. Indeed, in a narrative of this length, written by a Christian rhe-

tor and dealing with the subject of the creation of the world, one might think that Word is conspicuous by its absence.

But the difficulty of identifying Noys with Logos in the framework of Bernard's poem goes beyond this. It is not simply that the word "verbum" is absent, not simply that the persons of the Trinity are elsewhere represented,²⁴ not simply that Bernard's Noys is feminine and the Logos masculine—for this situation would pose no intrinsic problem if Noys's femininity had not already come to mean something beyond itself. Noys is not the First Being, but more specifically the Other Self of the First Being; like Christ she is begotten of God's Self, but she differs from Christ in this: although she IS God, she is not ALL of God that there is. Her specific function (the administration of God's Idea) cannot be other than God (for thinking and doing are not distinguishable in God); and yet this function also cannot be God itself, for Noys is manifestly in motion, while the Prima Usia rests in the eternal stillness preceding number, motion, and quality. Noys's femininity here *does* imply a distinction from the persons of the Trinity. In one aspect, the womb she shares with Natura and Silva marks the lack by which she falls short of being the entirety of God. More positively put, it marks that twinning of the primal unity which allows the world and its creatures to come into being.

As one descends the chain of being, the primal unity becomes increasingly diversified, though it continues to reflect the whole in each of its aspects. Thus, in the terms offered by the *Cosmographia*, we see the functions of Noys gradually split apart. Yet each feminine figure can be seen to cast back reflections of goddesses higher up the chain. Just as Noys is God, but not all of God that there is, so Nature is Noys, but not all of Noys that there is; and, finally, Silva is Nature, but not all of Nature that there is. "Erat Yle," writes Bernard,

Nature vultus antiquissimus, generationis uterus indefessus, formarum prima subiectio, materia corporum, substantie fundamentum. ("Megacosmos" ii.4)

(Hyle was the most ancient face of Nature, tireless womb of generation, first understratum of forms, matter of bodies, foundation of substance.)

Hyle, "the most ancient face of Nature," is, as it were, an earlier version of that goddess, a chaotic and indistinct rendering of her, identical in their shared uterine function but temporally prior to the ordered fecundity that Nature both instances and seeks. The identity of Nature and Silva helps to explain why Nature speaks so confidently and intimately of Silva's desire for order and form: Nature pleads her own case; Silva's desire is hers or,

more properly perhaps, is her. Silva herself lacks the discrimination that would motivate the articulation of a preference for one form over another, for beauty over chaos.

This lack of discrimination in Silva is associated with the power and copiousness of her fertility, but simultaneously with a certain malign tendency. Of all the goddesses, Silva is the only one in whom can be detected any trace of a character that comes close to being not-God:

Quemadmodum quidem ad conceptus rerum publicos parturitionesque pregnabilis est et fecunda, non secus et ad malum indifferens est natura. Inest enim seminario quedam malignitatis antiquior nota, que prima cause sue fundamina facile non relinquat. ("Megacosmos" ii.6)

(Indeed to the extent that [Silva] is commonly pregnable and fecund for the conception and birth of all kinds of creatures, so also is her nature without special regard for evil. For there is in her seed-bed a certain quite ancient character of malignity, which does not easily relinquish the first basis of its cause.)

Silva does not contain evil in any positive sense but is rather simply indifferent to it. The indefatigable fertility of her womb is itself a kind of perversity: she holds nothing back. She is an extreme expression of the plurality and motion that has its beginning in Noys, but unlike Noys, so charged is Silva with her own force that she literally cannot contain herself. The malign mark in her, the character of perversity, comes about not through her association with the nature of matter, but rather through her association with the nature of plurality. The power to proliferate, represented by womb, is visible in Silva at its ungoverned extreme, unlimited and wanton. But it is the same plurality, represented by the same womb, by which Noys differs—insofar as she differs—from her God-self.

In "Megacosmos" iv we learn that Noys is emitted as a ray of the inaccessible light itself, and yet her light is different from its source in that it does not blind. She is

imago nescio dicam an vultus, patris imagine consignatus; hec est dei sapientia, vivis eternitatis formitibus vel nutrita vel genita. De sapientia consilium, voluntas consilio nascitur, de divina mundi molitio voluntate.

Porro dei voluntas omnis bona est. (I.iv.5)

(some kind of image, let me say rather a face stamped with the image of the Father;²⁵ she is the Wisdom of God, nourished or born from the living tinder of eternity. From Wisdom is born purpose, from purpose will, from the divine will the setting in motion of the world.

Moreover the will of God is entirely good.)

If Noys differs from the inaccessible light by being more visible, this visibility is also the *sine qua non* of movement in the world, a capacity indistinguishable from the motherhood of Noys. The femininity of these theophanies does not gesture simply at something of a nurturing character, though at certain points it is made to do that, too; nor does it refer to a dichotomy of matter and form, since form resides in Noys and matter in Silva. What womb marks chiefly is plurality and motion, or the potential for plurality and motion, as distinguished from the immobile unity of Being.

There are three phases in the setting in motion of the world: (1) the ordering of Silva by which her son, Mundus, is begotten; (2) the production of Endelichia, the World-Soul; and (3) the marriage of Endelechia to Mundus. The second step, the creation of Endelechia, is preceded by another passage describing Noys. This description of Noys is really a kind of prelude to Endelechia, an introduction to the aspect of Noys from which she is formed:

Erat fons luminis, seminarium vite, bonum bonitatis, divine plenitudo scientiae que mens altissimi nominatur. Ea igitur Noys summi et exsuperantissimi est dei intellectus, et ex eius divinitate nata est Natura, in qua vite viventis ymages, notiones eterne, mundus intelligibilis, rerum cognitio prefinita. . . . Illic in genere, in specie, in individuali singularitate conscripta, quicquid Yle, quicquid mundus, quicquid parturiunt elementa. . . . Quod igitur tale est, illud eternitati contiguum, idem natura cum deo nec substantia est disparatum. Huiuscemodi igitur sive vite sive lucis origine, vita iubarque rerum, Endelichia, quadam velud emanatione defluxit. ("Megacosmos" ii.13)

(This was the fount of light, seed-bed life, good of goodness, plenitude of divine knowledge which is named the mind of the most high. Thus she, Noys, is the intellect of the high and preeminent God, and Nature was born from her divinity.²⁶ In [Noys] [were] the images of living life, the eternal notions, the intelligible world, predefined cognition of things. . . . There was written out in kind or species, in individual singularity, whatever Hyle, World, or the elements give birth to. . . . What exists in this way is congruent to eternity, of an identical nature with God, and not disparate in substance. And thus, from the origin of this sort of life or light, there flowed forth the life and splendor of things, Endelichia, as by a kind of emanation.)

Endelichia, the World-Soul, is identified with and mirrors Noys's loftiest qualities. Like Noys, she is feminine, but since Endelichia is emanated (rather than born) from Noys, she is not conjoined to Noys by the uterine function that binds and identifies Noys, Silva, and Nature. Endelichia is "propinquis et contiguus ad Noym natalibus oriunda" (risen from lineage near and contiguous to Noys—"Megacosmos" ii.15)—drawn forth from God itself, or from Noys in her God aspect. Yet we see how near to, and

indeed indivisible from, the God aspect is what I have called the womb aspect: the distinction is a matter of emphasizing the eternal stability or immobility of the forms pre-born in Noys, rather than her administrative or motive capacity. Whether as the stable container of forms or the motile administrator of ordered progress, Noys remains the mirror of kind and species and "whatever Hyle, World, or the elements gave birth to." Notions of plurality in the *Cosmographia* always bear something of a feminine stamp, however closely they are joined to the Godhead.

In the passage above, the problematic phrase "et ex eius divinitate nata Natura" gains some of its ambiguity from the fact that it is drawn from the dual-gendered God passage of the Hermetic *Asclepius*—a work whose influence on the *Cosmographia* it is now time to consider in slightly more detail.

"Do you mean that God is of both sexes, O Trismegistus?":
The *Cosmographia* and the *Asclepius*

Dronke has noted that the *Asclepius* was, of all Bernard's sources, probably the most important to him. It is chiefly on account of its references to the *Asclepius* that Curtius formed the impression that the *Cosmographia* was "bathed in the atmosphere of a fertility cult"; yet the *Asclepius*, while clearly esoteric and clearly non-Christian, does not really present us with a fertility-cult theology any more than Bernard does. This Hermetic treatise, which was circulated in Latin translation among the works of Apuleius, takes the form of a dialogue between Hermes Trismegistus and Asclepius (though really it is more of a monologue on the part of Hermes, with Asclepius asking occasional questions). The passage in which Trismegistus asserts that God is of two genders clearly had some importance for Bernard because he quotes a number of its phrases verbatim. I quote here certain relevant segments of the dual-gendered God passage:

Hic [Deus] ergo, solus ut omnia, utraque sexus fecunditate plenissimus, semper voluntatis praegnans suae parit semper, quicquid voluerit procreare. Voluntas eius est bonitas omnis. Haec eadem bonitas omnium rerum est ex divinitate eius nata natura, uti sint omnia, sicuti sunt et fuerunt, et futuris omnibus dehinc naturam ex se nascendi sufficiat.²⁷

(Therefore God alone, most full like all things with the fecundity of both sexes, always pregnant with his own will, always procreates whatever he wills. His will is all goodness. This goodness of all things is the nature born from his divinity; so

that all things may [continue to] be as they are and were, he furnishes from himself the nature of being born to all things in futurity.)

In this passage alone we may note three phrases used by Bernard at divergent locations in the *Cosmographia*. In all cases, Bernard uses these phrases in ways that modify, grossly or slightly, their sense. I have already noted how Bernard alters the phrase “always pregnant with his own will” to render a distinction between Noys (who is always pregnant) and God (whose will she gestates).

In the description of Noys that precedes the account of the emanation of Endelichia, Bernard uses the phrase “ex divinitate eius nata natura.” Here also we observe a modification of sense on Bernard’s part. In the *Asclepius* there is no personification of Nature, though the word “natura” is invariably used to point to the specific qualities of gender and engendering that Bernard’s personified Natura embodies. Thus, here in the *Asclepius*, the goodness of God’s will is linked indissolubly, if abstractly, both with the “nature born from his divinity” and with the “nature of being born.” In the *Cosmographia*, the context of the phrase “et ex eius divinitate nata est Natura” (the capital letter is Dronke’s) does not make it at all clear whether “eius” refers to God or Noys. The following “in qua” clearly refers to Noys and yet seems to link Noys to the precedent “Natura”—thus the more obvious rendering (which Dronke seems to prefer), “Nature was born from her (i.e., Noys’s) divinity,” is rendered problematic by the relative pronoun that follows.

The rendering “[Noys] was the nature born from his divinity” seems on balance more likely. Because of the quotation’s original context in the *Asclepius*, however, there is an indissoluble link forged between this particular nature—which is the goodness of God (Noys)—and the function of engendering specific to Noys, but more specific still to Natura. Though the pronoun “eius” remains ambiguous, there is really not much doubt that Bernard intended the word “natura” to invoke both goddesses and to effect a fusion of their functions. Thus, even while the passage specifically dissociates Endelichia from the womb function of Noys, it emphasizes the importance of that function by its momentary conflation of Noys and Natura.

While other of Bernard’s sources reflect the notion that time mirrors eternity in the ceaseless engendering capacity of Nature, it is chiefly from the *Asclepius* that Bernard derives the philosophical correlative that there must be eternal gender corresponding to worldly gender. Bernard shares with the Asclepian author, too, some of that reverence for the procreative

act that renders it not merely necessary, but holy, a divine *mysterium*. In the *Asclepius* we read,

Impossibile est enim aliquid eorum, quae sunt, infecundum esse: fecunditate enim dempta ex omnibus, quae sunt, impossibile erit semper esse quae sunt. . . . procreatione enim uterque plenus est sexus et eius utriusque conexio aut, quod est verius, unitas incomprehensibilis est, quem siue Cupidinem siue Venerem siue utrumque recte poteris nuncupare.

Hoc ergo omni uero uerius manifestiusque mente percipito, quod ex domino illo totius naturae deo hoc sit cunctis in aeternum procreandi inuentum tributumque mysterium, cui summa caritas, laetitia, hilaritas, cupiditas amorque diuinus innatus est.²⁸

(For it is impossible for any of the things that exist to be infertile; for if fertility is withdrawn from all things which exist, it will be impossible for the things which exist always to exist. . . . For each sex is full of procreation, and it is the connection of both of them, or more properly speaking, their incomprehensible unity, which you may rightly call Cupid or Venus or both.)

This therefore should be grasped in mind more truly and manifestly than any truth: that from God, the Lord of all Nature, is discovered and bestowed on all things this mystery of eternal procreation, in which the sum of charity, happiness, delight, Eros and divine love is innate.)

But if Bernard shares in Hermes's appreciation of voluptuous heterosexual union as described here, still it may be remarked that Bernard carries the notion of divine gender a good deal further, from a philosophical standpoint, than the Asclepian author. The dual-gendered God passage in the *Asclepius* is relatively short and, in terms of the prior subject matter of the work, it even seems a bit startling. The gendering of God appears in some respects almost as an afterthought, a product of Hermes's reflection on the necessity of point-for-point congruence between the eternal realm and the perpetuation of divine forms in time. The influence of this particular passage on Bernard is out of proportion, in fact, to its importance in the *Asclepius* itself. While the Asclepian author emphasizes the inaccessibility and incomprehensibility of the godhead in properly Platonic fashion, he nevertheless refers to God throughout (and even within the dual-gendered God passage) in masculine terms: God is pater, dominus, administrator, effector, gubernator—and is masculine in all pronouns. The masculinity of divine referents and pronouns is characteristic also of the *Timaeus*, which provides the chief precedent for the topos of God's inaccessibility.

Bernard, by contrast, is much more careful of gender than the Asclepian author. His references—whether to feminine Noys, inaccessible

Tugaton, or high Father—are usually clear and deliberate, and where there is conflation or ambiguity of gender referent, this appears also to be deliberate rather than, as in the case of the *Asclepius*, the result of unstated assumptions about divine gender (or simple thoughtlessness). Bernard's use of gender as a means of codifying certain properties of the divine, though it remains largely implicit, is more coherent and philosophically consistent than the explicit assertion of gendered divinity found in the *Asclepius*.

Concluding Observations, or, An Impudent Glance at God's Hidden Pudenda

To the extent that plurality and motion are identified with the feminine in the *Cosmographia*, unity and immobility—as superior and more perfect qualities—become identified with the masculine. This identification may be read consistently through Bernard's narrative, though he never gives it explicit articulation. The identity of the First Being with the masculine is supported both by occasional references to the paternity of God and by a generalized association of masculinity with fire and bright light. As in the *Asclepius*, the duality of masculine and feminine functions in the eternal realm of the *Cosmographia* parallels the earthly duality; from the *Asclepius* Bernard derives the notion that the gendered work of God is a perfect mirror of the divine because the Godhead itself is gendered. But Bernard's mythos differs from the Asclepian author's in rendering as feminine the forces that are responsible for setting the world in motion. In this sense, the femininity of Noys is not merely required as a corollary of earthly genders, but also required by the very hiddenness and immobility that makes the First Being most perfect.

The principles that Bernard invents and elaborates fall within the broad outlines of the tradition of feminine inferiority, and yet there is a novel aspect to this secondariness in the codependence of the genders, of unity on diversity, stillness on motion. If the secondary being, Noys, is less perfect, is different—even by the time of a breath—from the First Being, this imperfection is not merely a falling away from unity but also a doubling into power: without Noys there could be no setting in motion of the world. God, in a certain sense, cannot make a move without Noys, which is no reflection on him, of course, since God IS Noys. Noys, then, may be seen as that which allows the First Being to remain immobile and to move—to remain one and yet to be and engender plurality.

Bernard was one of a group of twelfth-century French writers to engage newly and actively with Plato, particularly with the *Timaeus* and the various commentaries that surrounded, elaborated, and Christianized Plato's cosmogonic myth.²⁹ Bernard was certainly not alone in his philosophical concern with the problem of the emergence of plurality from unity, intelligibility from Being (which arose in large part from this new concern with the *Timaeus*), nor was he alone in recognizing gender as part of the framework of knowledge, or playing with a parthenogenetic model of divine creation.³⁰ However, his scientific myth is singular in its use of gender to facilitate, rather than merely complicate, the elucidation of the theological and philosophical problems with which he and other twelfth-century thinkers were engaged.

Judith Butler suggests, among other things, that the "corporeal" ground of sex should not be seen as independent of the gendered "inscription"—the knowledge by which sexual politics operates. Sex and gender, the ontological ground and its epistemic performance, are in humans so entirely codependent that a notional separation between them can have no other function than the political. One of the interesting things about Bernard's allegory is that in his macrocosm, too, the ground of being and its active performance, the *Prima Usia* and *Noys*, seem to be codependent in a similar way. It is not that Bernard asserts this: in fact, considerable rhetorical power is spent in asserting the opposite, asserting that Being is primary, that it needs no Other. But it is an inescapable fact of his cosmos that without *Noys*, the *Prima Usia* would be unintelligible even to itself.

But the allegory has another level. If Womb is a necessity, it is a necessity chiefly because without it the divine would also be unintelligible to us. Or rather, it would be even more unintelligible than it is. Knowledge, diversity, *Endelechia*, womb, sex, flesh—all aspects of *Noys* or her emanations—are thus our necessities, not divine ones at all, and Bernard's poetry recognizes this, too. Gender must be projected into the macrocosmic realm because it is crucial to the microcosmic, or human, realms; the reflection of the one in the other is not allowed to be incomplete. Neither, however, is it allowed to be perfect, literal, point for point. As sex is necessary to reproduction of species in the mundane world, so divine gender must be necessary for the reproduction of divine Ideas. But since our earthly knowledge is insufficient to compass the limits of divine knowledge, this reflection in Bernard's allegory is broken up, differentiated, mobile. If *Noys's* womb is a mark of secondariness, it is not, as it might be in human terms, a mark of powerlessness, but the reverse; indeed, this rep-

resentation of the power of womb in the divine realm has the paradoxical effect of inverting certain normal aspects of human quasi-biological gender. The womb, normally interior and invisible, is here what we see, while the penis, normally exterior, does not reveal itself. The receptive womb is what acts, while the active penis is immobile.

I would prefer not to rest in the literality of this reversal, however; it is appropriate that something more nearly approximating Bernard's viewpoint should be heard in my conclusion. And so I will point out once again that if World needs no members, it cannot be assumed that Noys's womb is in even the vaguest sense a literal attribute. Its recurrent marking is not really a logical extension of microcosm into macrocosm, but rather a paradoxical one. Noys's womb is double Nature's single name, a kind of floating anchor that allows Bernard to recognize a distinction in the divine realm that is functional only from the human perspective: a distinction of flesh. In Platonic terms, this does not mean the distinction is not real. It is the flesh, rather, that is phantasmatic. The index of what is real in gender is necessarily the womb, the secondary, which is to say, the distinction rather than its embodiment: that by which we understand.

Bernard was occupied with a common twelfth-century problem in his concern with the derivation of plurality from unity, and his rendering of Noys as God's second self falls within the broad tradition of feminine secondariness. Yet Bernard's allegory is in certain ways unique. This is not merely a comment on its artistry, but also on the peculiarity of his gender ontology and on the theological motivations behind it. Because Bernard's notion of divine gender is removed from, other than, the necessities of flesh that mirror it, the secondary gains in meaning and power precisely what it loses in "naturalness." It is interesting to speculate on how much the opening lines of Alain de Lille's *De planctu nature*, with their violent diatribe against the unnatural grammar of homosexuality, may be a reaction not merely to the innocence of Bernard's cosmos, but also to the potentially dangerous implications of Bernard's playful cosmogony, with its floating womb, its feminine mask of God, and its divine gender liberated from sexual necessity.

If gender is praxis, if it is constituted in performance, then the writing of an allegory that compasses, among other things, divine gender, must be seen as part of this praxis. For allegory, too, is praxis, and Bernard's cosmogonic narrative—in playing with the marks and masks of gender, in shifting this binary construction of knowledge to gods and divine Ideas (whatever else it also does)—must serve the reader as a concrete reminder that it is not merely in our flesh we live, but in our knowledge of it.

Notes

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1. Militat adversus Lachesim sollersque renodat
Mentula Parcarum fila resecta manu.
Defluit ad renes, cerebri regione remissus,
Sanguis, et albetis spermatis instar habet.
Format et effingit sollers Natura liquorem,
Ut simili genesis ore reducat avos. . . .
Membra quibus mundus non indiget, illa necesse est
Physis in humana conditione daret:
Excubias capitis oculos, modulaminis aures,
Ductoresque pedes omnificasque manus.

"Microcosmos," 165-82. All quotations drawn from Bernard Silvestris, *Cosmographia*, ed. Peter Dronke. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 146.

3. Butler's discussion of recent writings on genetic sex determination emphasizes the way gender informs the scientific questions asked and answered about sex: "The conclusion here is not that valid and demonstrable claims cannot be made about sex-determination, but rather that cultural assumptions regarding the relative status of men and women and the binary relation of gender itself frame and focus the research into sex-determination. The task of distinguishing sex from gender becomes all the more difficult once we understand that gendered meanings frame the hypothesis and the reasoning of those biomedical inquiries that seek to establish 'sex' for us as it is prior to the cultural meanings that it acquires" (*Gender Trouble*, 109).

4. Linda Lomperis, "From God's Book to the Play of the Text in *Cosmographia*," 70, n.44. This footnote responds to an article by Jean Jolivet, on which I comment later.

5. Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 108-13.

6. *Ibid.*, 112.

7. Brian Stock points out that he repeats a mistake made previously by von Bezold: *Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century*, 87; Friedrich von Bezold, *Das Fortleben der antiken Götter im mittelalterlichen Humanismus*, 79.

8. Etienne Gilson, "La cosmogonie de Bernardus Silvestris," 5-24.

9. See esp. Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, "Alain de Lille et la *Theologia*," 121-22 for remarks on Bernard; and more recently Jean Jolivet, "Les principes féminins dans la *Cosmographia* de Bernard Silvestre," 296-305.

10. Theodore Silverstein, "The Fabulous Cosmogony of Bernard Silvestris,"

110.

11. Stock, *Myth and Science*, 88.

12. It may be noted here that in terms of the Sapiential tradition, the gender

of Divine Wisdom itself is far from stable. Instances abound of identification between Wisdom and Christ/Logos as well as between Wisdom and the Holy Spirit. On Wisdom see d'Alverny, "Alain de Lille et la *Theologia*" (noted above) and "Le symbolisme de la sagesse et le Christ de Saint Dunstan." Additionally, it was not unusual in the twelfth century to find Christ represented with a variety of feminine attributes quite independently of his links with divine Wisdom. Caroline Walker Bynum's essay "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother" provides key references. In such an atmosphere, complete gender consistency would hardly be expected of Bernard, and it is perhaps unsurprising that consistency was not looked for when so much else seemed to be at stake. Nevertheless, what we find in Bernard's work is, in fact, consistency: a consistency that makes it possible to read the polyvalent Noys with more care than Sapiential figures necessarily invite.

13. See the introduction and notes to Wetherbee, trans., *The "Cosmographia" of Bernardus Silvestris*.

14. See the introduction and notes to his edition, cited above in n. 1.

15. In *L'homme et son univers*, ed. Wenin, 296–305.

16. Jolivet, "Les principes féminins," 301–4.

17. Ibid., 300: "Dans tous les récits où elle est impliquée, dans tous les discours qui lui sont adressés, sa féminité est plus ou moins expressément présente, et inversement rien n'indique en elle le moindre caractère masculin."

18. Ibid.: "Bernard nous présente donc un Premier absolu qui dépasse toute distinction de sexes, et une série de figures originelles exclusivement féminines"; and 301: "... ces divers modes de production ne supposent aucun élément masculin."

19. The question of whether God is essentially masculine or "surpasses sex distinction entirely" is problematic from very early on in the Hebrew tradition, as Howard Eilberg-Schwartz points out in *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism*. Eilberg-Schwartz argues that the Hebrew prohibition of images of the deity may be read more particularly as a prohibition of images of God's phallus; he suggests that in the context of an extreme monotheism, where the one God is understood to be masculine but has no feminine counterpart or consort, the problems surrounding revelation of God's body are implicated as much in homoeroticism as in spirituality.

20. It may be noted that the line from the *Asclepius* to which this refers makes no distinction of persons; Asclepius's God (referred to here with a masculine pronoun, "hic") is always pregnant with *his own* will (*Asclepius* VI.20, in A. D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière, eds., *Corpus Hermeticum*, vol. 2. All references are to this edition.

21. Dronke suggests a variety of options for punctuating and construing these lines: "prima" could be taken with "imago," and Noys separated by commas from "prima" and "Deus," giving "You, first image of living life, Noys, God risen from God" (thus Wetherbee's translation is construed, if not worded). I have here translated the construction that Dronke prefers, taking "prima. . . orta" to bracket "Noys/Deus."

22. Dronke, introduction to *Cosmographia*, 31.

23. As d'Alverny has shown; see articles cited above, n. 12.

24. A point made by Silverstein, "Fabulous Cosmogony," 108.

25. Wetherbee sees this phrase as evidence of a deliberate distinguishing of Noys from the true Logos (*Cosmographia*, 153, n. 124).

26. Thus Dronke. The line is somewhat ambiguous and might also be rendered "and she is a nature born from his divinity" (as Wetherbee construes it); however, a suggestion of the goddess Natura clearly seems intended. See the discussion below.

27. *Asclepius*, 321.

28. *Ibid.*, 321-22.

29. See Stock, *Myth and Science*, 237-73, for a comparison of Bernard's philosophical concerns with those of his contemporaries, Thierry of Chartres, William of Conches, and Daniel of Morley. Stock's analysis emphasizes differences between the three writers in style and habit of thought. A more recent analysis of Thierry of Chartres by Peter Dronke brings Thierry's neoplatonizing tendencies more sharply into focus. Though Dronke does not mention Bernard Silvestris except in passing, his chapter illuminates the kinds of philosophical problems Thierry felt himself to be confronting in a way that shows Thierry's concerns to be somewhat more similar to Bernard's than Stock allows; Dronke, "Thierry of Chartres," 358-85.

30. Dronke, in the article cited above, quotes Thierry of Chartres: "The divine persons are designated in the masculine gender, though they could be designated by these names: mother, daughter, and gift (*donatio*), like the things they intimate—namely, omnipotence, wisdom, and benignity." It is interesting that this point enters into Thierry's discussion by way of a comment on how names for God are metaphors transferred from human experience: "... the names 'Father,' 'Son,' 'Holy Spirit' were first given to created things," says Thierry, and "transferred to God by way of a likeness." The issue of God's gender rises to bridge the gap between the Neoplatonic necessity of divine inscrutability and the human necessity of intelligibility, as I have suggested is also, if differently, the case with Bernard. Dronke notes that Thierry's openness to the use of feminine names for God seems to represent a modification of an earlier view. See Dronke, "Thierry of Chartres," 365 and footnote 28. Quotations are from Thierry's *Glosa* v.22; Dronke refers to the edition by Nikolaus Häring, *Commentaries on Boethius by Thierry of Chartres and His School*, 297.