

The Transubstantiation of Spring

Veroniki Dalakoura,

translated by John Taylor

Saint Mary was Egyptian and lived in the sixth century, during the autocracy of Justinian. When she was twelve, she ran away from home and journeyed to Alexandria, where for seventeen long years she gave herself over to lust. According to the morals of the time, Mary was a whore. Yet she never received money from her ephemeral lovers. She earned her daily bread by handling the distaff, and in the evening her experienced fingers wielded Arabian embroidery needles with the same skill. When she was about twenty-nine, she was curious enough to travel with other pilgrims to Jerusalem. By carefully reading the *Dialogue* of Zosimas and the Saint, we learn that the remote goal motivating her voyage was not religious piety but rather a desire for new erotic adventures. Inside the small boat, and throughout the long trip, Saint Mary slept with all the young men whom she met—travelers, pilgrims, passengers, and sailors.

The errors of my youth appeared more intensely. What was retaining me in cities? Here was a voyage that would help me think

things over. And all my ancestors—Dorians, Ionians, Galatians—would themselves journey forth again in the flow of human time. I abolished the word “duty.” I forgot all the monuments and ornamentations of my Arabian fatherland.

*Red, red,
red of the plummeting sun,
red of the collapsing wall.*

My gender made language unnecessary. Symbols of anguish—father, mother—you dwell at the heart of an improbably small orchestra.

My story is simple. I wanted my plants to know sorrow, and they wished to take revenge: they died slowly, ultimately taking on the shapes of doomed human beings. This is how I experienced the drama of those sentenced to the galleys, how I observed the deaths of both brigands and the exonerated, how I forsook—with an indifference provoking deep commiseration—all poetic emotions.

Upon reaching Jerusalem and while she was waiting for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Saint Mary spent her spare time in the best way possible. She made love with all the foreign pilgrims and local inhabitants whom she met, though not in order to earn money or protection, but rather simply and solely in order to satisfy the passions of her lustful heart. When the feast day came, Mary arrived in front of the Temple with the many other pilgrims. They had all gathered before the Temple Gate, waiting for their turn to enter. But when Mary also headed for the entrance to the Holy Sepulcher, she felt an invisible force restraining her. Several times the Saint tried to cross the threshold of the Church. But this terrible force, like an armored breastplate of powerful men, prevented her from even moving forward toward the entrance; the very will of her humble feet remained paralyzed. Mary was frightened. She realized that all this was not happening by chance. The Holy Sepulcher, built by the hands of simple laborers, would not allow her presence there. Mary realized that after losing her rights to a humble grave, she was also now doomed to wander endlessly, unwillingly. She decided to change her life.

Her entrance now took place in triumph. The Saint knelt in

front of the relic of the True Cross and, remembering her vow, she left Jerusalem that very day.

The day of my birth was tragic. The only remarkable event of that melancholy day was my acquaintance with Arlette. Her smile was a sea in motion. Metamorphosed into a leaf, she spoke with the thick accent heard in the south of France, completely round polished stones falling from her lips. Wishing to enclose her beauty inside me, I decided to write a poem. I failed. Botticelli's Primavera had given birth to flowers from her own mouth, but I replaced them with an enormous snake. In a detail of the same painting, I noticed the black hand of winter tenderly, symbolically, touching the young woman's breasts. At the time, I thought that Arlette would be quickly forgotten, because even the most beautiful creatures whom we meet are voided by memory. Years ago in Thessaloniki, I met a marvelous young man. I immediately wrote down a description. Even now I remember the sweat stains around his armpits. But no longer can I admire his fortuitous handsomeness, which is shut up inside a round, infinitely closed world that is, at least, a harmonious sphere. Facing me now is the portrait of Sabina Poppaea. The movement of her right hand gives the veil covering her body the grace of a spontaneous aesthetic. Sabina Poppaea visibly embodies the vision of an apparently subjugated woman: like a queen during the Middle Ages, she hides her feelings with an almost tragic saintliness. The centuries do not exist for her; the death of her beauty triumphs.

I dreamt of a large wooden house. Spring called on it early, and it quickly forgot the agony of winter. I gave myself over to this dream. The next day, March 21st, the spring made its majestic entrance. It was no ordinary spring, verifying the myth of the four seasons. It quickly took on a face, that of Judith, and Holophernes's severed head was the icy head of winter. Oh, the red hair of that pathetic woman! What vanished musical phrase could draw out the special meaning of the Renaissance painting that captures her? In her right hand she holds an upright sword. She is a woman, yet also the entryway to mental and meteorological transformations. She had learned to hide: Judith-Spring's dress was olive oil in color. Nothing could remove her glance from the frozen shimmer of her dead victim's eyes. She thus needed a rather

average resurrection as if this—being deprived of majesty—were the sole remedy for deep bitterness. On Saturday afternoon her face became that of a little girl. She then threw her huge purple bonnet over a flower that the girl—long before her metamorphosis—had walked past, unsuspectingly. The bonnet completely covered the flower. I kept it in a glass for about ten days. In other words, I had ended up snipping it for no reason. As the flower slowly withered, I personified the suffering. I remembered this story in Matelles; my wish was beginning to come true. The incarnation of my desire, despite everything, filled me with melancholy. The last man whom I had loved lived on a distant continent, and his return would confirm a miracle.

(More deeply, the only thing that lust had accomplished was to create an infinite love of Nature inside me. While still a child, discovering the beauty of the countryside was so soothing that I could later limit my youthful desires.)

After Saint Mary had crossed the Jordan, she trekked into the remote reaches of the desert. There she lived for forty-seven full years. Her life was hard and strange. She never met up with other human beings. God was her sole spectator and companion, a Spirit whom she would glimpse among the sand dunes of her new fatherland whenever it appeared subtly, discreetly. She ended up attaining such a high degree of saintliness that she surpassed human nature and lived like an angel on earth: she could levitate calmly, walk on water without sinking, and while she was praying she would rise and long hover in the air. However, let us not forget the saint's human character at the onset. After accepting this extraordinary ordeal, Mary suffered much during the first seventeen years, which corresponded to the duration of her earthly erotic life. Her lust-crazed soul could not so easily repudiate the saliva of the mouths that she had tasted. Remembering them ever more vividly in her romantic heart, she masturbated away those first seventeen years in the desert, constantly tortured by her memories. When she had become an old woman, she came across a hermit priest, Zosimas. After she had told him her life's story in all its details, she asked him to bring her Holy Communion. At this point, the true mystery of the Saint's life takes shape. When the following year, the hermit brought the Holy Communion Sacraments to her on

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Holy Thursday, he found her lying dead at the appointed meeting place. These words were traced in the sand: “Abba Zosimas, bury Mary’s body in this place and pray for me. I died in the month of Farmouthi, on the first night when I was delivered from passion by taking Holy Communion.”

Later, while the poor old man was digging her grave, he saw a great lion squatting alongside her corpse.

Oculus meus memoria est.

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