Introduction[1]

It is now, my dear and Reverend Father, that I can truly say I have put my heart into your hands and rendered my soul visible to your eyes

From behind the awnings of time, at last is revealed in these words a spiritual beauty curtained from history since the seventeenth century. Taken from MS 1409 of the archives of La Société des Missions Etrangères in Paris, they spring from the pen of a young woman who arrived in Paris in 1642 as a refugee from her homeland, to lead a secluded life in the Marais quarter of that city, plying the needle and thread so as to earn a living as a dressmaker. Finally, reaching for the heights of spiritual perfection and in obedience to the behest of her confessor, she recorded her spiritual experience in writing. Unsigned, and with all proper and place names left blank (except for a few: Paris, Dijon, Annonciade, Ursulines), MS 1409 was found only in the past thirty years by the then archivist of the Missions Etrangères, Father Jean Guennou; the relatively recent discovery of this hitherto unknown text determines the following way of introducing this, its first English translation: *You Looked at Me: the Spiritual Testimony of Claudine Moine*.

The imagination of those interested in the fabulous is easily excited by the discovery of an unknown manuscript without an author. They ask: 'How old is the manuscript?' and 'Who wrote it?' It is these questions that are discussed in this Introduction, for it is generally accepted that a story not vouched for by a principal participant defies belief. A certain contract, it would seem, is arrived at between the writer and the reading public; they take on the role of members of a jury who must hear what happened from the witness's own lips and who will accept neither hearsay evidence nor inspired guesses. But the words of Claudine are no fable. It is true that God usually reserves for himself the knowledge of the high summits and profound depths of some privileged souls who will only be known to us in Heaven. For example, what do we know of St Joseph and the many saints devoted to the hidden life? But occasionally, a grille is unsealed, a gate broken open in front of us; and the time arrives for some Sleeping Beauty to come back to life among us, putting their heart into our hands and rendering their soul visible to our eyes. The author of the above words, who awakes for us at this moment in history, has slept for over 300 years and speaks the French of the mid-seventeenth century.

Anxious as we always are to identify ourselves with some form of life that is real and historical, that has a true heart and soul in it, the words of Claudine evoke in us something of the author's own deep sense of identity and the unmitigated truthfulness

of her soul's experience as she writes about it. Writing with authority - for she evidently experiences in her person what her heart and soul had revealed to her confessor - she displays in these words to her confessor the fortunate, albeit uncommon, combination of a spiritual vision and a writer's ability. She was as dexterous with the pen, it would seem, as she was with the needle and thread, and these words illustrate the dual characteristic of spiritual depth and literary ability reflected in her writings as a whole: a very special blend of spiritual vision and theological understanding - a rare fortune nowadays, which can only be something of a treat for the reader.[2]

Generally, in presenting to the public a work of a writer, it is customary to begin with a biography, trying to clarify the thought of the author through the circumstances of the author's life and the historical influences of the times in which he or she lived; then to treat of the work in question in the context of the author's general output, if any; and finally to move on to discuss the sources and leading ideas of the work. But in this present case we are forced to do the reverse: we must try to work out the biography from the content of the work itself. This means that, notwithstanding the fact that a cursory glance at the first few pages of the manuscript will tell us that the author was born in 1618, is a woman and is the eldest of three children in her family, that she lost her mother when she was 8 or 9 years of age and that her family had considerable private means, for all intents and purposes we are confronted here with an unknown work and an unknown author.

What air of authenticity, then, has this manuscript? How credible is the experience described in it? For in the above words the author is saying to her confessor that she has completed the work of recounting for him the great favours God granted her in her life. It was on one day in Paris - most likely sometime around the feast of All Saints 1642 - that she perceived in herself a presence, that is the experience of a force new to her. She will guard the impression forever after that her life consisted of two very distinct phases: the one before and the other after that moment when, as she says, 'you looked at me'. This is how she describes it:

> We were about one year in Paris when, O my God, with those eyes of infinite and extraordinary mercy, you looked at me; for which, my Lord, I am exceedingly grateful to you. I do not know what day or month it was. But well I do know, that all of a sudden I felt a great desire for virtue and perfection.

No Christian theologian has ever denied that the elect will have a vision of God in the state of final beatitude. Is it not the cherished yearning of every Christian believer to know and see God in himself, as he is? It is in fact a fundamental truth attested to by scripture: 'My dear people, we are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed; all we know is, that when it is revealed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is' (I John 3:2). But the same scriptures, the same Epistle of St John (4:12), affirms that 'No one has ever seen God.' And St Paul himself points out that God 'alone is immortal, whose home

is in inaccessible light, whom no man has seen and no man is able to see' (I Tim. 6:16). Is this vision of God as he is, then, reserved exclusively to the eternal life, or can it have its beginning here below, in this life? And moreover, the question that challenges us all today, is there a personal God who truly loves us and draws us to himself as to our final end? Not the projection of her own imagination, nor the result of the activity of her own mind, Claudine Moine's awareness of a new presence and force within herself is a testimony to the fact that God really exists and that a true union with him is possible, even in this life. With her eyes open to vision beyond the range of normal sight, she testifies to the fact that she has seen God and that her word is true. But Dante in the first Canto of the *Paradiso* points out that the person who has been in Heaven and seen things has neither the knowledge nor the power to relate them when he descends from there, because, as Dante says, as it draws near to its desire, our intellect enters so deep that memory cannot go back upon the track (cf. *Paradiso*, Canto I, lines 6-9). And again in the *Paradiso*, Dante, confessing that his vision was greater than his speech could show (Canto XXXIII, lines 55-6), says that, through abounding grace, he presumed to fix his look through the Eternal Light so far that all his sight was used up, and that in its depth he saw gathered together there, bound by love in one single volume, that which is dispersed throughout the whole universe (ibid., lines 82-7). He was experiencing the Trinity, in which, as in a knot (line 91), he now saw the meaning of all existence. Speech is scant indeed, and how feeble is one's conception when it is a question of relating such wonderful things. This is indeed Claudine's task also.

To say whether her testimony is true or not we rely solely on the integrity of her own word; and, as in the case of our acceptance of the Apostles' testimony to the risen Christ, its verisimilitude can only be attested to in the positive by those who find in her a kindred spirit by testifying with her, and with all the witnesses in the life of the Church down the ages, to having had the same experience in their own lives. We may be navigating on a stormy sea; but, 'Behold, he who keeps Israel will never slumber or sleep' (Ps. 121:4). It is true, God has eyes; he looks at us, and everything is changed - all is calm. 'How beautiful you are, my love,/ how beautiful you are!/ Your eyes behind your veil,/ are doves;/ your hair is like a flock of goats / frisking down the slopes of Gilead' (S. of S. 4:1). 'Is the inventor of the ear unable to hear?/ The creator of the eye unable to see?' (Ps. 94:9.) For God indeed looked at Claudine: 'those eyes of infinite and extraordinary mercy' gazed upon her, and she awoke spiritually to behold his form, Christ. Bearing testimony in these words to this real experience of God, Claudine also echoes the same sentiments of St John: 'Something which has existed since the beginning,/ that we have heard,/and we have seen with our own eyes;/ that we have watched / and touched with our hands:/ the Word, who is life - / this is our subject./ That life was made visible:/we saw it and are giving testimony,/ telling you of the eternal life / which was with the Father and has been made visible to us' (I John 1:1-2). 'We are writing this to you,' says St John, 'to make our own joy complete' (I John 1:4). So intimately connected with her spiritual vision was Claudine's need to bear testimony to it, that it would falsify it entirely if she could not speak about it.

Speak about it she did, to her confessor; and, under obedience to him, she agreed to write about it.

This so far is the history, and this the life, of Claudine Moine; now perceiving within herself a presence on a day in Paris in 1642, looked at by those eyes of infinite and extraordinary mercy. This is the history, and this the life, of Claudine Moine, appearing from behind the awnings of time to put her heart into our hands and render her soul visible to our eyes. For the reader who has never entered the world of seventeenth-century France, it has to be a revelation; and for the reader who is familiar with this area, it can only be praised for its unique example of everything that was great in the spirituality of seventeenth-century France. Not a history, not a treatise in theology, not even the traditional spiritual autobiography or story of a soul, this work presents us with a word that depicts the most simple spiritual ideas with the utmost accuracy, to which the above words of her conversion testify. Perhaps her experience is too private, has too personal a value to be of much interest to a wider public. But this is a judgement readers must make for themselves if they will read Claudine's fascinating testimony with an open mind. Some may feel that this text would have done better had it been written as a treatise rather than in its present form. But the author of this manuscript is speaking from the inside out, from her own experience, and reflecting in a very definite way upon this very special action of God in her life. Claudine in a sense becomes her own parent spiritually, in so far as, being reborn, it is this time a question of her own choice.[3] She also becomes her own theologian in as much as she reflects upon her spiritual experience. This is its fascination, its invitation to us to bring us beyond language into the truth, beyond the story into the real, and finally beyond the self into God. Its content, then, is its true biography, a spiritual testimony: the Spiritual Testimony of Claudine Moine.

It is important therefore, as an attempt to answer the above questions, to point out the following characteristics of the text as a key but not a hindrance to the reading of this translation. For I believe that a close and informed reading of the text will reveal the author, and that the wise reader will find that the surest guide to Claudine Moine is her own words. But first, the history of the text; then some words on the possible sources behind it; and finally, I shall comment on the opening words of the manuscript as a key to the understanding of the author's spirituality.

The dressmaker of Paris

There is scarcely a repository of ancient documents, above all in Paris, that does not contain some spiritual writings. Since their creation in 1658, the rich archives of La Société des Missions Etrangères in Paris have acquired a significant number, from many different provenances. Many of these writings are, of course, very commonplace and trivial, and would not merit publication. But MS 1409 is an entirely different matter.[4] First, however, two important matters must be clarified: How old is the manuscript? Who wrote it?

The last page of the manuscript answers the first question. On this page is written:

> This manuscript belongs to Abbé de Choisy, who lent it to Madame la Marquise on 14 July 1686; then to Madame la Présidente de Némod on 25 August 1696; then to Monseigneur 1'Evêque de Rosalie on 9 September 1706.

The handwriting of Abbé de Choisy can be authenticated from the many examples of it that are to be found in the archives of the Missions Etrangères. Any mystery about the presence of this manuscript in the archives can be eliminated by pointing out that the Bishop of Rosalie, Monseigneur Artus de Lionne, returned to the Missions Etrangères, where he died in 1706. Further, Abbé de Choisy had retained an apartment there from about 1686. One way or the other, the presence of the manuscript (which belonged to Abbé de Choisy) in the archives of the Missions Etrangères does not pose any great problem; and the attendant information at least establishes the fact that it goes back to the seventeenth century, the century of the lost original.[5] But who wrote it?

At the end of the first part of the manuscript two capital letters, 'N.N.', substitute for the Christian name and surname of the author. It appears, then, that this manuscript stems from a lost original and is, so far, the only manuscript available. All further research undertaken to find the original has been unsuccessful. But this should not deter us from considering the second question: Who wrote it?

In the Marais quarter of the busy city of Paris of the seventeenth century, somewhere between the Place des Vosges and the then newly-built baroque church of St Louis, in which she attended daily Mass and listened to the great sermons preached there, lived a dressmaker. Clothed in the simple dress her poverty limited her to, she plied the needle and thread to earn her living. Yet, this is the kind of person in whom is revealed to us the rich spiritual heritage of seventeenth-century Paris: Claudine Moine.[6] As we looked at MS 1409 together, Father Guennou pointed out to me the following passage as the one that launched him on his research to find this Sleeping Beauty.[7]

> Finally, not seeing our way of putting our affairs in order, we, that is my sister and myself, desired to leave home and work as domestics while waiting for a peaceful end to the war. With this in mind, I took the opportunity of writing to the Ursulines. For it happened that, some people from [Vesoul], who were sent as hostages to the Count of [Grancey] until such time as the amount of money which had been agreed upon with him was paid, had to pass through [Langres]. For on account of the war, and all communications having been destroyed accordingly, it was about four years, I believe, since I had last let the Ursulines have any news about me. I conveyed to them, then, the state of our affairs and the plan we have to work as domestics.

This passage matches up with an episode in seventeenth-century French history.[8] 'The year 1618', writes C.V. Wedgwood, 'was like many others in those

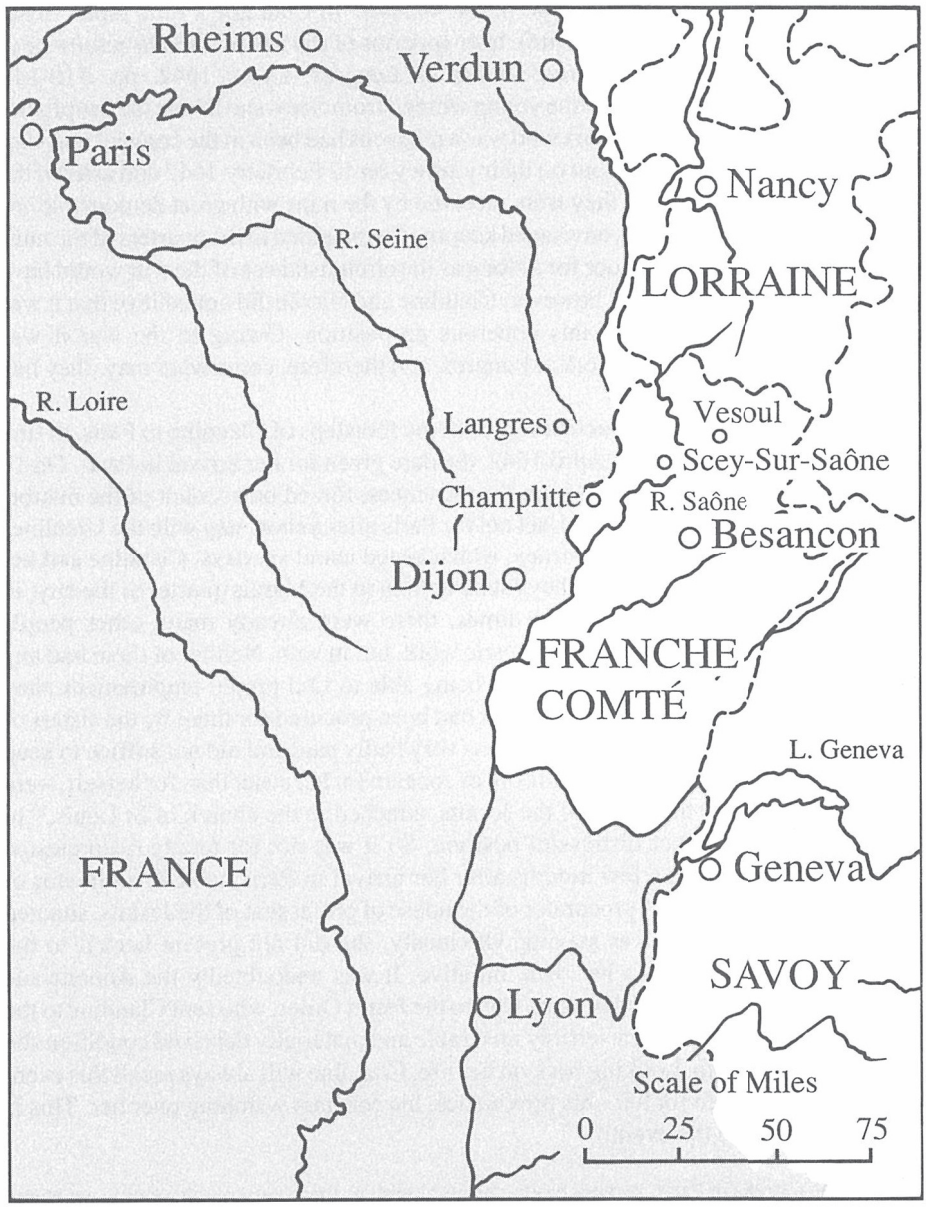
uneasy decades of armed neutrality which occur from time to time in the history of the Empire.'[9] On 17 January of that year, the author of this manuscript was born; and on 23 May of the same year the revolt in Prague took place, the date traditionally assigned to the outbreak of the Thirty Years War.[10] During the Thirty Years War the city of Vesoul,[11] already ruined by the demands and taxes of the war, was summoned by the Count of Grancey, in September 1641, to pay a thousand crowns (*écus*) ransom under the penalty of being pillaged by the French troops. Vesoul capitulated; but not being able to get together the necessary amount of money, the city had to provide twelve hostages whom the Count of Grancey convoked at Scey-sur-Saône, on 30 September, before dispatching them to his castle, situated to the south-west of Langres. The author of this manuscript, then, wished to take advantage of this situation in order to have a letter sent to the Ursulines, where she had been a boarder at school. She had no idea when writing her letter to the Ursulines that it was going to lead eventually to her coming to Paris.

From these pieces of information, we come to two conclusions about the identity of the author: she lived in Scey-sur-Saône, where the Count of Grancey had summoned his hostages before conveying them to his castle at Langres - the only town on the route of the hostages where a convent of the Ursuline sisters is to be found; and her name was Claudine Moine - for it only remained to consult the parish register of Scey-sur-Saône to find out that she was the daughter of Mathias Moine and Jeanne la Brune. A thorough investigation revealed also that Claudine had a younger sister and a younger brother - all of which precise information corresponds exactly to the data given in the text. In the first page, in fact, she writes:

> It pleased God to take my mother from this world when I was about 8 or 9 years of age and, even so, the eldest of three children she left behind.

The war and its severe consequences began to make themselves felt even among the well-to-do, and in the long run Mathias Moine and his family found themselves battling against great difficulties, possibly financial. Claudine, being the eldest, was sent by her father to Besançon (that, from a hypothesis based on the timetable of her return journey, was in all probability the town in question) to carry out some business transaction. Because of the insecurities the roads presented, the young Claudine was not able to return to Scey-sur-Saône until a period of three months had passed. Eventually a safe route home presented itself. But on her way home she had an accident that resulted in her losing consciousness, which she sustained because of a horse that leaped and knocked her to the ground on a pile of rocks. Regaining her consciousness, however, and resuming her journey, she finally arrived home, but she was confined to bed for fifteen days. She was not long recovered from this illness when she was stricken with another one; this one lasted almost fifteen months.

The material situation of the family was deteriorating more and more almost daily, and Claudine and her sister Nicole thought they should enter someone's service as domestics until the war was over and peace was re-established. As stated above, the



Franche-Comté at the time of the Thirty Years War