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The Stereotyped Image of Christ in Villiers's "Les Amants de Tolède"

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Graciela Susana Boruszko,
"The Stereotyped Image of Christ in Villiers's 'Les Amants de Tolède'"
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Abstract: In her article "The Stereotyped Image of Christ in Villiers's 'Les Amants de Tolède'" Graciela Susana Boruszko discusses images in Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's text. The embedding of icons of foreign cultures, histories, and religions into a literary narrative results in a work of art enriched by the images fashioned by the "foreign eye." The narrative strategy of Villiers creates a kaleidoscopic representation of themes and images that merge the fields of religion, literature and history. These themes and images — transposed into the domain of *littérature fantastique* — follow the initiation of the reader to a supernatural world that imposes its own principles and assumptions over reality. The boundaries of reality are then transposed and a new world opens up where the known and the unknown, the local and the foreign, the natural and the uprooted, the ordinary and the imaginary extraordinary intermingle. Boruszko's study suggests that Villiers's narrative represents an aesthetic journey resulting in the creation of a possible world out of the ruins of the past.

Graciela Susana BORUSZKO

The Stereotyped Image of Christ in Villiers's "Les Amants de Tolède"

History, culture, and religion converge in a literary expression of a stereotyped image of Christ in Jean-Marie-Mathias-Philippe-Auguste, Comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's "Les Amants de Tolède," one of sixteen stories compiled in the volume *Histoires insolites* published between 1886 and 1888. Son of an aristocratic family of limited means, Villiers conducted a Bohemian life in Paris, a *poète maudit*. Villiers's writings are marked by a personal touch where his voice shapes his personal aesthetics in an euphoric tone. In this manner, his texts represent a sort of legend or myth involving his life. In his story *Isis,* written at twenty-four of age, he expresses his thoughts through the character of Prince Forsiani: "Ah! If you knew that a word, apparently ordinary, contains mighty power and spreads hastily! You realize what a word can do. Somebody opens the mouth and articulates any idea that could be applied to a general fact; this idea breaks down, it is absorbed and assimilated in a million different ways by millions of different ways of listening and comprehending them. … Consequently by mutual agreement, man and his idea become miraculous, simply because to open the mouth, beginning of the general fact, is already a miracle. … Do not end by despising humanity but despise the power of the human word" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("Ah! Si vous saviez comme une parole; en apparence banale; contient de puissances terribles et marche vite! … Vous voyez ce qu'un mot peut produire. Un tel ouvre de la bouche et articule une idée quelconque pouvant s'appliquer à un fait général; cette idée se décompose; s'absorbe et s'assimile d'un milliard de différentes façons par le milliard de différentes manières d'entendre les mots et de voir les choses. … Bref d'un commun accord, l'homme et son idée finissent par devenir miraculeux, simplement parce qu'ouvrir la bouche, principe de l'événement général, est déjà un miracle. … N'en concluez pas au mépris de l'humanité, mais à la puissance de la parole humaine. [116-18]).

It is this *parole humaine* that transforms itself and starts a dialogue between cultures, histories, and literary expressions. The title of the 1888 collection, *Histoires insolites* (Extraordinary Stories), is associated with the nature of many contemporary cultures where it is not so coincidental that the image of Christ and the context of terror remain predominant. In "Les Amants de Tolède," the subject of religion is presented from a different perspective, with the institution of the Inquisition as a theme. The stories "La Torture par l'Espérance," "Les Amants de Tolède," and "Axël" have the Inquisition as a background scenario, which is both troubling and worrying. This hesitation, mixed with some Machiavellian perspectives, sets the stage of the story based on a controversial time in history. Villiers, a writer who had cultivated "horror," presents it as associated with a subject that appears innocuous: love. From this connection originates the subversive cruelty of the plot: a spectacular punishment for carnal love. Villiers's target was not to create a world of dreams robust enough to disguise reality. Instead, he pretended that imagination was so compelling that it imposed itself upon reality.

With respect to his religious background, we know that he was obsessed with the life of martyrs, so much so that he could have believed that he himself was a saint of the bourgeois century. His was a duality of thought. On one hand, he was convinced that his eternal destiny depended on the orthodoxy of religion and he was ready to give his all to this purpose. On the other hand, as to his literary expression, he could not accept any limit to his creative freedom as Alan Raitt suggests in his biography of Villiers: he appeared to have a Christian heart but his intellect was not. We can speculate on this position, given the fact that the emotional charge of the story, which is immense, comes from "church building" in the background, while on the foreground, there is a wedding ceremony being officiated. In this scenario, the narrator tells the story as a silent witness of all that was happening. His impartial point of view emphasizes vivid emotional messages that the religious characters impart to the audience. This audience is also present but silent. Between a heart that feels and a mind that thinks, one disassociated from the other by terror, there is a human being that oscillates between two worlds, between two extremes. In this story, there is a pendulum that originates a dialogue between the silence and the screams. All the human expressions are exacerbated to their utmost. It is interesting to see that the silence and the cries convey the same weight of message.

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Villiers nourished an attitude of adoration for the Virgin Mary. Nevertheless, the image of the Christ was not ignored, although it was not so prevalent. As Mercé Boixareu affirms, Villiers is a romantic who shows a Promethean tendency, where a heroic vision of man is central to his conception of humankind. In "Les Amants de Tolède," Villiers lets us know of his dislike for physical love, as well as his concept of love as being expressed exclusively in an ecstatic moment. The rest of the story is just a degradation of such a climax. At this time in his life, Villiers lets himself be carried away by the fascination of terror and cruelty. In this story, the scenario of the Inquisition served well his literary purposes. We do not see any signs of personal condemnation or admiration toward this institution. In the same way that he does not take a personal position in relation to the *guillotine* and the *république,* he remains neutral in relation to the Inquisition and Spain. More than a choice of heart, it seems to be a choice of literary intellect that seeks a scenario suitable for staging his cruel stories. This panorama constitutes a glimpse of the personal *toile de fond* ("backdrop") of the story of "Les Amants de Tolède."

It is evident that Villiers, as a writer, plays the role of a fictional screenwriter of historical events treated from a kaleidoscopic point of view. He reflects on French history through Spanish history, presenting in his work the image of Christ, which unites both histories marked by terror as René Rémond relates this perspective of Villiers's text. Villiers, as a romantic, always defended his right to freedom, which he associates with happiness as well. In "Les Amants de Tolède," he condemns the dictatorial decision to impose our own parameters of freedom and happiness on others. Villiers proposes that we all respond to an authority, but this authority has to be legitimized by each individual. Freedom, then, is the perfect scenario for happiness and a fertile soil where it can thrive. Maybe this conception of freedom and happiness was rooted in his life, as he was about sixteen years old, when he presumably fell in love with a young girl, who was forced to become a nun. The narrative is always such a fusion of a personal story with the collective history. Each of his texts is born at the intersection of these crossroads; each crossroad is a geographical and metaphorical image of the cross and it constitutes the presence of the image of Christ in the absence of a visible body but on the testimony of a Biblical sacred history accomplished and finished.

The image of exile is also a historical, literary, political, and religious component in Villiers's text, a literary dialogue with a polyphonic resonance. The young couple in "Les Amants de Tolède" is punished by being ostracized to live in an artificial environment and experience love in exile, outside the ordinary world. This spirit of alienation was dear to Villiers and to contemporary romantics who tried to fight the emerging bourgeoisie and the positivist movement that marked that era. That is why we can compare Villiers to a screenwriter or even a cinematographer: in close-up and panoramic views, perspectives of an image magnified by the abundance of detail and different points of view and perceptions. These ideas were introduced in studies of the *fantastique* (on the fantastic in literature and cinema, see, e.g., Caillois; Castex; Grivel; López-Varela Azcárate López-Varela Azcaráte <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/>). Villiers's national French history is represented in the Spanish history through the nexus of a common history of horror and terror as Boixareu states. In this case, the distance of the geographies and times where each history takes place creates a literary fertile territory to reflect beyond the immediate partisan positions. They could impinge on the writer and the reader of all times.

Allusions to the Spanish Inquisition adapt well to the literary themes of fantastic stories, serving, at the same time, as a reflection on the passion of Christ. Spanish and French histories share episodes violence where religious passions are expressed, blending with the political events of the times. Given these connections between the French *terreur* and the Spanish Inquisition, Villiers can talk about "his history" through the eyes of the "history of the other." To talk about the shortcomings of the "other" is an indirect way of addressing our own shortcomings. This indirect dialogue is a prolific venue where art, history, and religion converge to present the reader with a cultural convocation to reflect. We notice in our most current set of events in the history of the twenty-first century that our cultures are putting aside the art of dialogue, jumping into action without giving proper attention to the table of conversation. The history of the "other" is not associated with "our history," but, to a certain extent, it is viewed as a competitive history that is opposed to "our history." Nowadays, violence, horror, and terror are leaving the literary world as a reflection field, permeating our real lives that are carried on

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in such unstable territory of crossroads and intersections. Many times they do not bring us together but rather alienate us from each other.

The functions of the many images and literary scenes that reproduce a composite mosaic of visions and realities of the supernatural and the human are at work in fantastic literature, as Alain Chareyre-Méjian and Charles Grivel describe. "Les Amants de Tolède" is introduced from a multicultural perspective: an Oriental sunrise, *Une aube orientale*. The sensual image of the Orient is suggested indirectly in this literary sunrise, *aube littéraire.* This scenario — which is temporary, sensual, colorful, almost intangible, contrasts with the "granite sculptures on the façade of the Inquisition in Tolède" (*The Scaffold* 208) ("fronton de l'Official à Tolède" [Œuvres *complètes* 1 141]). The thread of history continues while the scenarios change according to times and circumstances. The cultural tradition is also represented as a lasting memory that embellishes itself with the glamour of new beginnings, a transcendental hope that is not of this world. The spiritual presence is then converging in this initial image to convey the image of the presence of God: Villiers presents in the opening paragraph of "Les Amants de Tolède" a kaleidoscopic image of Christ through nature, history, and cultures, all encompassed in an artistic literary story. In the next paragraph, we find the images of two fig trees that provide shadow to the door of bronze. The fig tree is typical of Occidental Asia, whereas in the Bible, the image of being "under the fig tree" connotes the idea of prosperity and security. We find in the story the image of complete protection by duplicating the image of a fig tree into two. Those fig trees are described as thick or full of leaves. Villiers continues to unite two flourishing histories and two thriving cultures that are related to the "luxurious" Oriental world. Although these fig trees are described as having abundant leaves, no fruit is mentioned. This fact could allude to the symbolism of the biblical image when Jesus pointed out the lack of fruit of the fig tree as a lack of religious authentic profession of the faith (Mark 11 12-17). The image of Christ is implicitly and subtly incorporated into this image as an advice against the human vice of lack of authenticity. There are two fig trees at the entrance as a representation of number two and it indicates the number of witnesses needed for a testimony to be valid. The number two speaks of communities of cultures; of two that agree on something: two cultures, two histories that have something in common. They are standing at sunrise, the *aube*, telling stories of histories that relate to the past while living in the present. They connect the past and the present in a fusion of beauty to welcome the reader to a palace.

Villiers describes a pathway that takes us to the interior, the *entrailles* of the palace. (*Œuvres complètes* 1 141; *The Scaffold* 208). From the entrance, we are getting into the inner courts of the building. As the narrator guides the reader into the palace, the road becomes less clear, it multiplies into many ways that are not straight but follow a spiral pattern. The road as an image of communication also represents the life journey of a person. The pathway is also a Biblical image we find in the Old Testament, when the people of Israel are exhorted to leave the "false ways" and to direct themselves to the "true way." Furthermore, in Psalms 37 5, the pious asks God to "show him the way." In addition, the image of Jesus is the image of a prepared Way for Salvation that contrasts with the image of spiral multiple ways of the palace presented in our story. As Villiers introduces the image of the pathway into a narrative of the fantastic and as the image passes the threshold of the Biblical realm, it goes crazy and multiplies itself into many pathways, taking the spiral pattern that contrasts with the biblical images that concentrate on the image of Christ unifying all of them. This image of multiple ways reminds us moreover of the Roman Via Appia that was so long that it was said that "all ways take us to Rome." Between "many ways" and "The Way" (John 14 6) we have the image of Christ that brings together the many ways that we can take as humankind. The pathways or roads are connections that normally remain for many centuries, serving as a vehicle of communication for basic human needs. It seems that, in our cultures, we have developed many new tracks that are somehow spiraling and taking us to the inner courts of the human dysfunctional communication process.

Villiers could suggest in "Les Amants de Tolède" that these roads are distracting us from the original design of connecting with ourselves and with others. The text, in its conception and imagery, suggests more than an intercultural event but also an *ex-tempore* approach to the human nature. It is in this aspect that we find the genius of Villiers as he reaches out to our time through the human nature that we have in common with the people of his time. These paths take us to the main chore of

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all of the sectors of society as we approach the end of the road in a library. The filmic description of the ambiance is that of richness, taste, abundance, light, and splendor, finding at the center of it, an old fragile man. His attire distinguishes this character as a religious man. He shares even some characteristics of the image of Christ: "with his sanded feet" (*The Scaffold* 208) ("les pieds nus sur les sandales") "clad in a white cassock with a red cross" ("vêtu de la simarre blanche" (*Œuvres complètes* 1 142). We could easily associate these descriptions with the image of Christ. Inquisitor Tomas de Torquemada is at the center of the room. Villiers seems to be well informed about this historical character (see Hope; on the Spanish Inquisition, see Longhurst; Whitechapel). It seems that Villiers is leading us to the site where the action is going to take place. We arrive at the end of the pathway, where we find the character of the old priest standing in an old building. Time seems to be one of the key themes of the story. Time is also a common denominator of the three approaches that we chose for this study: history, culture, and religion through the nexus of the image of Christ as it still relates to our own culture.

We find the character dressed and ready with two aspects participating in the description: blood and cilice. The contrast is again to emphasize the opposition between the two elements. Bleeding is notorious and the red color is the color of passion, but the cilice is a garment of rough fabric that was worn as a sign of mourning. In this story, this sign of mourning is invisible, thus denying in itself the purpose of wearing that distinctive garment. The irrational aspect is connected with a perverse, mysterious silence of something that is hidden but known at the same time. Nowadays, we also find images of irrationality and incongruence, when the signs of pain and suffering exceptionally visible, exceedingly tangible, and incredibly depleting are covered by silence. This silence is not the silence of ignorance but the silence of knowledge, thus its pervasive nature. AIDS victims, hunger, illiteracy, poverty — just to mention only some of the bleeding signs of our society are covered in our lives with an indifferent silence of impotence and/or disengagement. The image of a Christ who suffers but keeps in touch with what is going on around Him is presented here as an image in contrast. This presence of the secular history associated with the biblical history offers the reader a timeless vision of corresponding cultures.

The horrific image of silence is enlarged by the gargantuan image of "an immense palace" where the silence "fell from the vaults" (*The Scaffold 208*) ("tombait des voûte" [*Œuvres complètes* 1 142]) thus suggesting a hierarchical judgment of society. This silence was fashioned not out of nothingness but, on the contrary, by "a thousand of sonorous breaths of the air" (The Scaffold 209) ("mille souffles sonores de l'air [*Œuvres complètes* 1 143]). We encounter a bizarre image of silence as a composition of breathing sounds. It seems that life does not allow nothingness to take the place of a person alive whose vital signs testify to life. The image of the stones is back in the main scene as an obstacle to life and a contrast to a natural response to the circumstances. The predictable and the regular leave the place to the unnatural and supernatural, which is created in an atmosphere of mystery and shadows. The image of Torquemada expands as well, starting with the image of an old man that is close to the image of Christ and ending up with the image of "The Grand Inquisitor of Spain" or the *Grand Inquisiteur d'Espagne*. This character leaves the real aspect of a human being, of a religious man who unites heaven and earth, to become a fantastic creature that is at ease in a very bizarre circumstance. It is in this way that it is normal for Torquemada to ring a bell that does not sound. Villiers is expressing through this image, his lack of complete comprehension of history and its characters where silence and words are beyond comprehension and those historical characters dialogue among themselves, in a language so unique that it communicates in silence. Perhaps, Villiers is introducing the reader to the deep communication of the soul and the spirit that needs no words to dialogue. This silenced bell is so powerful that it moves "a monstrous bloc of granite" ("monstrueux bloc de granit"). Villiers references the Biblical image of Moses tapping the rocks at Meriba and Horeb in God's name to get water for the people of Israel (Exodus 17 6-7). Soon after in the Biblical account, God judges Moses because, instead of speaking to the rock, he taps on it again when it was not necessary, given the fact that it constituted the metaphor for the image of Christ that needed to "be broken" only once. In the Bible, Christ takes the image of the Spiritual Rock that provides humankind with living waters (I Corinthians 10 4).

The introduction of the image of the bells reminds us of the biblical image where we find the allegorical use of the bells that hang from the garments of the priest. The bells symbolized the

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testimony that would accompany the daily walk of the Christian in closeness to Christ. During the time of Israel's restoration, the Bible mentions about metal plaques that will be inscribed with the legend: "Holiness to God." The scene in the story "Les Amants de Tolède" continues with the description of a room lighted by an underground light of reddish coloration. The scene becomes more and more horrific as the description develops. The initial sign is a light that is not yellow or white but red, whose source is unidentified, making it more fantastic and fearful rather than supernatural. The image of light is associated to the image of Christ, but the use of the foreign elements in the description makes the image leave the realm of the divine to enter the world of the supernatural fantastic. In this way, Villiers joins the biblical message to the literary message in an aesthetic project. The light, being invisible itself, illuminates the surroundings. This property of the image of light is intact in our story. Because the surrounding of this light is that of terror, the exposed scene is of the same nature. Villiers, enhancing the visual image with sound effects simulating a cinematography approach, takes a certain in-crescendo approach. The image presented in this scene becomes a haunting image: "a terrible, confused squall of cries-so harrowing, so sharp and so frightful that one could neither distinguish nor guess the age or the sex of the howling voices … a distant whiff of the inferno" (*The Scaffold* 209) ("confuse rafale de cris si déchirants, si aigus, si affreux: qu'on ne pouvait distinguer ni pressentir l'âge ou le sexe des voix qui les hurlaient … comme une lointaine bouffée d'enfer" ([*Œuvres complètes* 1 142]). Horror invades the scene and its images are presented using many different metaphors and these images suggest and support the image of death incorporated into a scene where the frame is constituted by blood and shouts. These images are constructed using all of the senses, giving the story a vivid representation of death that comes after a climax of pain and suffering. A family member brings the young couple to the scene as one generation ushers the next one to familiar scenarios. The youngsters are not described physically or even individually but according to their social status. They are not individuals but representatives of a sector of society. The image of the innocent young couple looking at the old man connotes the Biblical image of the visions when a person is able to understand a moral or didactic content of a message in relation to the future. The image of Torquemada imposing his hands on the couple mirrors the Biblical image when the priest transferred the sin of the people to the expiation animal.

Villiers is signaling and illustrating the kind of representational legacy that each generation chooses to pass onto the next one. The image of the wedding being officiated in the palace brings the nature of the ceremony from a spiritual realm to a political realm. When Torquemada starts his discourse on love, he presents himself as a knowledgeable person in relation to this topic. He uses the expression: "It is with love that my own heart burns, for love is the law of life!" (*The Scaffold* 210) ("C'est d'amour que mon cœur se consume, car l'amour, c'est la loi de la vie!" [*Œuvres complètes* 1 145]). According to Biblical narrative, matrimony is a divine association instituted by God that organizes society in groups called families. In the story, although we find representatives of the families of the young couple, the priest who holds the temporal authority, as well as the divine mandate to represent the divine authority on earth is the one who imparts the authority over them. We can see here how the Biblical image of the Christ as the son of God uniting earth and heaven is elaborated on in the story as the image of Christ participating in the everyday life of the people. In everyday life, the meaning of the law is that of a norm or a conduct imposed by an authority that is subjected to penalties if not observed. From a Biblical and spiritual meaning, the image of Christ as the husband and the Church as the bride is present here, with the difference that this husband is not in control and the priest is taking the place of the one who decides. And thus Torquemada continues to be in command when marries the couple: "So. Therefore, I have taken it upon myself to unite you in marriage, in order that the very essence of love — which is nothing but the good Lord — is not troubled in you by excessive desires of the flesh or too long delayed by that lust which can, alas, inflame the senses of newlyweds in their legitimate possession of one another" (*The Scaffold* 210) ("Si donc, j'ai pris sur moi de vous unir, c'est afin que l'essence même de l'amour, qui est le bon Dieu seul, ne fût pas troublée, en vous, par les trop charnelles convoitises; par les concupiscences, hélas! (*Œuvres complètes* 1 145]).

The priest is taking more responsibility than that of a representative of God. He is now deciding and foretelling the conduct of the young couple presented in innocence at the beginning. The way to avoid future sin is decided to be to expedite the consummation of the marriage. The consequences of

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such conduct would affect the couple's spiritual life, their moral life, and the entirety of their beings since they plunge from the status of angels declining towards a fall. The image of carnal love is presented in the light of its mystical nature, while the image of pleasure is detached from reality and ordinary life, secluding it to a temporal state of an insinuated perverted nature. With regard to further Biblical intertextual narration, Villiers's description of "the chamber of happiness" ("chambre du bonheur") is close to that of the Biblical garden of Eden and the image of divinity taken directly from the book of Genesis, a book about relationships. Just as the first couple of the Bible, the young couple of Villiers's text are to stay in this garden for a short period of time. Here, it is interesting to see the notion narrated as a temporal experience. The image of being introduced into "the chamber of happiness" by others is also relevant to the Biblical image of "Christ," "the Savior," and "the Redeemer" being replaced by coping ways to live reality outside its limits. The Biblical image of Christ is transposed to the literary image of an inquisitor. It is interesting that, apart from the moments when the couple is together physically, they are always escorted, guided, introduced, and directed.

With regard to the narration of society, it is interesting that the first "expression of society" in the story is depicted as reflecting or manifesting but celebrating and this is presented in an unreal time and circumstance, that of a party, a time set aside for pleasure and fun. Here, again, we find narration and imagery borrowed from the Bible, where celebrations are times to observe special commemorations, pacts with God, assemblies of the congregation. In other words, historical events pertaining to the history of the people participating in the Sacred History at the same time. In this time of feast, eternity and temporality are interwoven. These feasts thus belong to a "sacred time." In these Biblical feasts, we see all of the partakers participating in an active way and each one of them playing an active role in the party. In Villiers's text society is alien to the reality of what is happening. The image of "averted gazes" (*The Scaffold* 211) ("des regards qui se détournent" [*Œuvres complètes* 1 145]) deepens the image of disconnection with the image of fear and avoidance. These two images of our society and cultures are symmetrical with those of the history of Spain as a reflection of the history of France in literary story. The scenario for this multiple dialogue in the layers of representation and in the centrality of the message is a literary work of "fantasy." It would seem an ironic choice of image: there is a need to reach fantasy to refer to reality because it becomes too hard to analyze reality without causing disturbance. Villiers takes us on a tour of the many expressions of a society that suffers. The end of the story comes as the climax of disintegration, when separation is institutionalized and there are no other attempts to reconcile the closest relationship of all, that of a couple. However, the dramatic and cruel ending of the story seems to reveal more a message of warning than a pessimistic point of view: "their personal apartments" (*The Scaffold* 211) ("les appartements personnels" [*Œuvres complètes* 1 145]) is a contemporary image of cultures that separate themselves in independent "kingdoms," where each one is "free" to live according to their free will. The irony between the image of personal freedom and that of separation within a society of communal nature is striking. The inexorable end is that of death without being able to leave a legacy. Thus, Villiers presents an image of annihilation of individuals in the society he narrates, a result of the lack of the practice of love. The Biblical image of a loving Christ seems to be detoured into an image of complete freedom and individuality but resulting in the incapacity to love. In the story, the image of the biblical mandate of God to love each other as the most important mandate is nullified through a religious misinterpretation of the practice of it. This manipulation of the original image creates stereotypes, which by taking portions of the image of Christ as portrayed the Bible recreates them into a new image suitable for other purposes.

In conclusion, the result of Villiers's manipulation of the Biblical image of Christ in "Les Amants de Tolède" is translated into an image of fear, a specific and particular fear suggesting that it will repeat itself in human behavior and thus Villiers's text represents a view applicable to our current state of affairs. In such a reading of Villiers we could ask ourselves whether in our contemporary society voices of belief and the practice of love are meant to be ignored and relegated to the background of cultural attitudes and practices.

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