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Donne's "Good Friday, Riding Westward, 1613" and the *Illustrated* Meditative Tradition

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In 1954, Louis Martz published *The Poetry of Meditation*, a study of Catholic meditational techniques which he saw as forming an essential background to the great religious poetry of the 17th century, the poetry of Southwell, Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan, Traherne, Marvell and Milton.[1] Martz drew his examples from the documents of the Counter-Reformation, particularly those following in the wake of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola (1548), and persuasively demonstrated how Catholic Counter-Reformation meditative methods flooded England in the early 17th century, both in their original languages and in translation and adaptions. Martz's argument for a meditative tradition as an essential correlative of a too-localized "Donne tradition" strongly affected Donne scholarship, and his book is usually cited as among the critical studies most highly recommended as essential to an understanding of the religious poetry of Donne and his contemporaries (see, for example, the MLA *Approaches to Teaching Metaphysical Poetry*).

Martz's detailing of the practice of meditation, particularly his description of the threefold structure of composition (memory), analysis (understanding) and colloquy (will) is familiar and thus need not be recounted here, yet I invoke it because I want to examine the first stage, the stimulation of memory through "composition of place, seeing the spot," a practice as Martz says "of enormous importance for religious poetry" (27) and, I would add, for Donne's religious poetry in particular.

I am focusing on this aspect of the meditative practices which Martz has explored so fruitfully because I find that behind it lies another tradition, one which Martz does not discuss although his sources demonstrate it repeatedly, and which has itself a richness of considerable significance for Donne. The latter tradition is clearly apparent in many of the manuals Martz alludes to, but it is most evident not in the texts but in their illustrations. I am speaking

of the traditional fascination with the power of images, demonstrated through devotional treatises both in their early use of illustrations to reinforce the message of the text, and also in cautionary admonitions, conveyed by both text and image, about the dangers inherent both in pictures and in that picture-making faculty of the mind, the imagination. It is this fascination with the picture-making faculty, I am arguing, which also links Donne's poetry to Counter-Reformation meditational practices, and the illustrations, to which Martz does not allude, do not simply enhance the text but actually prove part of its essential foundation.

It will be recalled that the conflations and disjunctions of word and image have a long history in Western thought, attributable to a variety of causes, but focusing in the Renaissance in particular on the ways in which the human imagination was not simply stimulated by visual images but actually functioned in the same fashion. The image, it was believed, was projected into the mind in the same manner that an artist produced that image on canvas. Theories about internal representation as modeled on the methods of artistic representation had been common since Alberti, and the role of the graphic verbal description had long been a staple of meditative exercises. With the development of the combined technologies of the woodcut and print at the end of the 15th century, however, the two traditions—theories of representation and the emphasis on the potency of the graphic image—combined, and it is this combination with its emphasis on the imagination as an image-making faculty that seems to fascinate Donne.

We can trace the development whereby the act of meditation, initially described as simply stimulated by graphic description, becomes full and explicitly modeled on the activity of the painter, by looking at representative examples of meditative manuals from the late 13th century to the early 17th. The late 13th-century *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (pseudo-Bonaventure), for example, includes passages in which verbal description plays the central role in the careful construction and deliberate intensification of a series of scenes to produce the kind of empathetic engagement essential to meditation.[2] Describing the flight into Egypt, the author directs the reader to

> Make careful note of the following things . . . . We read that [Mary] provided the necessities for herself, and the Son with spindle and needle; the Lady of the world sewed and spun . . . . What can we say if at times when the lad returned the work and asked for the price, some arrogant, quarrelsome and talkative or scolding woman replied abusively, taking the finished work and driving Him away without

> payment, and he had to return home empty-handed . . . . These and other things about the boy Jesus you can contemplate. I have given you the occasion and you can enlarge it and follow it as you please. Be with the child Jesus! Do not distain humble things and such as seem childlike in the contemplation of Jesus for they yield devotion, allow purity and simplicity, nurture the sign of humility and poverty, preserve familiarity and confirm and raise hope (B Ms. 269-71).

And verbal description was reinforced with graphic representation in this particular copy [see Figure One] currently in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris, Ms.ital.115).

Figure One

Not all of the early manuals were illustrated, but increasingly illustrations came to be recommended as useful in furthering the affective goals of the text. With the arrival of print and the use of woodcut and engravings, however, two significant changes took place: firstly, images became increasingly standardized, thus insuring that individual meditators meditated on the same image, and, secondly, the act of meditation became more directly and

explicitly linked to the activity of artistic representation. A woodcut from a German broadsheet of 1477 can serve to demonstrate the first stage in this evolution (from the image as supplement to the image as foundation of the meditative experience), particularly in the way in which it, graphically, insists that the image and the act of imaging are central to our emotional and cognitive immersion in the text [Figure Two]. As David Freedberg points out, one cannot evade that awful image of the crucified Christ even if one wants to. Moreover, all reading/looking/feeling/thinking distinctions are here dramatically collapsed.[3]

Figure Two

As the crude handling of the woodcut gave way to images constructed in accordance with the new techniques of perspective and modeling, the instructions in meditation, even in the unillustrated manuals, began to focus more explicitly on picture making as the model for affective engagement. *The Fifty Meditations on the Life and Pious Praise of the Virgin* of 1588, although itself unillustrated, can serve as an example. Its preface reads, "Just as it is of great import whether we look at a painting casually or intently, in passing or directly, attentively or thinking of something else, whether we are moved or we admire the art, so it is of great importance that we meditate on the Virgin with a definite method."[4]

That "definite method" is fully spelled out, and demonstrated, in the most interesting of my examples, Johannes David's *Veridicus Christianus* (Antwerp, 1601-03). Its proemium explains: "Just as famous and outstanding painters must do their best to represent after the life that which they have chosen to imitate by art, so Christians must imitate Christ in their lives and relations with others, as well as in their deeds, until they show Christ in themselves, as if depicted after the life." And David's advice is followed by an illustration [Figure Three] of nine painters seated at their easels, imitating Christ carrying his cross.

Figure Three

It should be emphasized that the evolution of this particular method, the modeling of the meditative practice on the activity of the painter, occurred for a particular purpose: "to imitate Christ in [one's] life" (in David's words from the passage above). That is, the individual was to be stimulated to imitate Christ by refining and then imitating the image of Christ within himself.

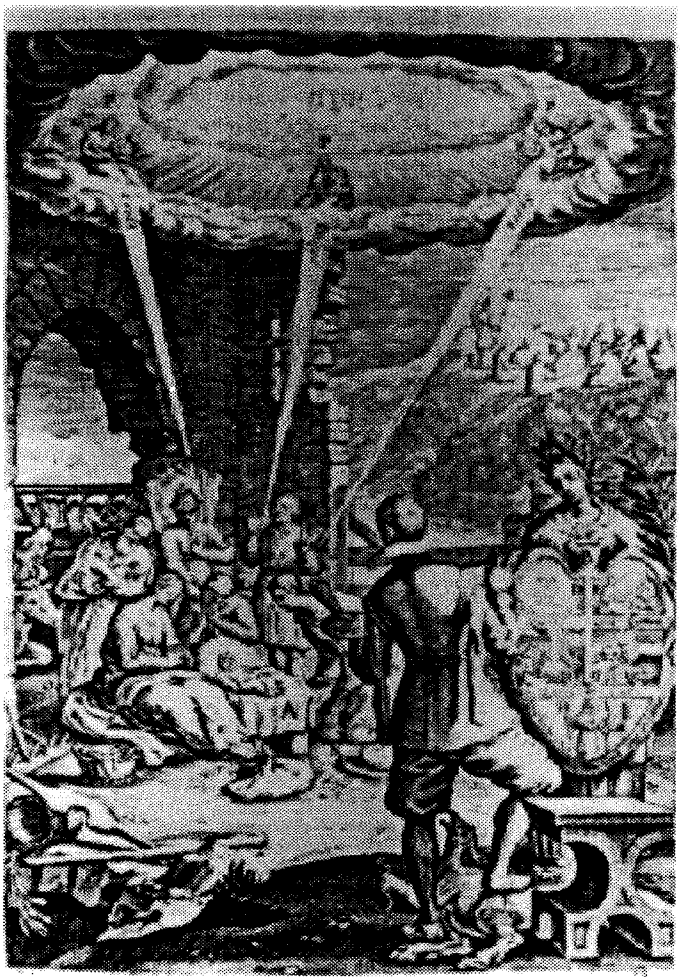

Figure Four

Thus Antonius Sucquet in his popular *Via vita aeternae* (1630) instructed his reader: "To meditate is to consider in one's mind, and, as it were to paint in one's heart, the mystery . . . of the life of Christ, or even the

perfection of God, by [representing] the circumstances: people, actions, words, place and time." "To paint in one's heart," was intended quite literally. The David manual urges the meditator to "Imagine that you see many painters all sitting at work, casting their eyes on Christ as the model, and painting him . . ." And he adds, "in this representation of Christ, everything that helps us to lead a Christian and virtuous life helps us likewise to represent in ourselves Christ as the prototype, as if copying and portraying him in a painting."[5] Thus the "paintings" produced by the mediator represented not necessarily the scene immediately before him/her but what was literally in his/her heart. What was represented could even be schematized or abstract. [See Figure Four.]

A danger, familiar to those who urged the use of real images in the meditative process, lurked here in particular. If what was in one's heart was impure, the sensual quality of the skillfully depicted image could easily distract that lesser faculty of the soul, the imagination, to lascivious impulses, prompted perhaps by allowing an image of the Virgin Mary to stir thoughts of women, rather than of the Mother of God. [See Figure Five]. Here a devil drags the painter from his image of the Madonna, neatly personifying that very danger.

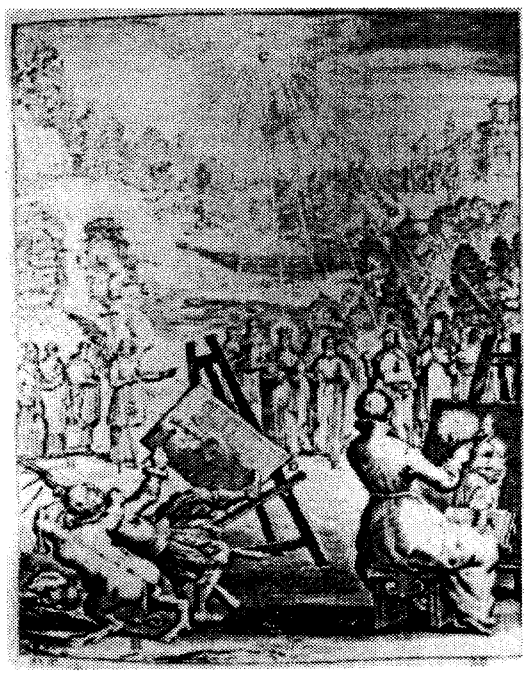

Figure Five

Examples such as these have an intriguing relevance to Donne's religious poetry as he seems to have thought recurrently throughout his life about the role of images, specifically in reference to their curious dual nature, on the one hand supplying clarity and focus to the meditative act, on the other potentially dangerous, even damning, in their appeal through sensuality. As early as Satire III he hopes to escape the whole question by rejecting images entirely: "To adore, or scorne an image, or protest,/ May all be bad." But as subsequent poems, meditations and sermons demonstrate, the role of the image, and particularly the picture-making faculty of the human imagination, continuing to engage his interest (see Gilman, *Iconoclasm*, for a number of relevant examples). For my purposes, however, it would be more useful to confine my analysis to one poem, and thus I would like to turn to the poem that Martz discusses at length as an act of successful meditation, Donne's "Good Friday, Riding Westward, 1613."

Martz read "Good Friday" in the context of his discussion of the texts of the meditation manuals. Read in the context of their illustrations, however, I think we experience a different poem. Martz's reading, for example, emphasizes the fluidity of a perfectly achieved meditation, seeing the poem as beginning with an extended comparison as the prepatory stage of composition, then moving to intellectual analysis as the speaker rehearses the familiar paradoxes of the crucifixion, and ending with a ten line colloquy through which the will is redirected. "The eloquent motions of the will," Martz concludes, "have all fused into one perfectly executed design" in a poem which displays "The perfect equipoise of a carefully regulated, arduously cultivated skill" (56).

Such a reading, in its accent on achieved mastery, disregards, or at least blunts, the peculiar tension of this poem: the tension between the speaker and the image of the crucified Christ, a product of the speaker's picture-making imagination. It also disregards the syntax of the poem which suspends that central tension within an extended negative: though the speaker "should see" the crucified Christ on this Good Friday he insists that he "do[es] not"--until his imagination, against his will, through the dynamic action of its peculiar property, picture-making, forces a resolution.

The dynamic of picture-making is thus central to the poem and can be traced through its successive stages. That the speaker's imagination is initially inoperative is suggested through the references to his linear, earth-bound and business-oriented, journey. His imaginative "seeing" in the first ten lines of the poem has not yet begun, but its potential is suggested by the

fact that his literal "seeing" has evidently already been turned off. (As John Carey has pointed out, Donne rides through one of the most picturesque of England's literary landscapes, from the Forest of Arden to Montgomery Castle, and gives not one syllable of allusion to it.) His spiritual "seeing" in fact begins on the intellectual level, in his review of the paradoxes common to the meditative practices which Martz describes. As the "spectacle" of the crucified Christ, brought into focus by the review of these paradoxes, takes shape, it gains detail and affective potency. The speaker is increasingly anguished as the product of his visually-tutored memory and his own image-making faculty begin to intersect.

It is important to note, here, that the image of Christ which is most fully focused in the poem (ll. 25-32) is every bit as conventional as were the paradoxes just rehearsed. As James Marrow has fully documented,[6] this image is the product of centuries of instructions to painters, particularly in Northern Europe, on the most affective details of Christ's passion, most of these derived in turn from the meditative manuals. In these "Christ's sufferings are characterized in extraordinarily brutal and violent ways. His tormenters are presented as dementedly gruesome, and his sufferings go well beyond the pale of the normally tolerable. The welts and bloody wounds of his body are made septic by the admixture of spit from those who mock him, and are inflamed by the soil rubbed into them" (Freedberg summarizing Marrow). In the words of a Dutch version of Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi*:

> our beloved Lord's holy face was miserably transformed and disfigured as if he had been a leprous man, because the foul snot and filthy yellow spit lay baked and dried upon his holy face, and his sacred red blood had thickly overflowed his face, hanging from it in congealed pieces, in such a manner that the Lord appeared as if his face were covered with boils and sores. (Marrow 54)

Donne's central lines—on the "blood which is the seat of our Soule/.... made durt of durt" and on "that flesh....rag'd and torne"—thus serve as metonymy for a long and familiar visual tradition of increasingly standardized images, thereby signifying that the speaker's own picture-making faculty is now deeply engaged.

It is only after that picture-making faculty has been engaged on the level of the standardized image that it can be deepened to become the personalized image of Christ in the individual soul. And it is here that the speaker's

particular devils, of guilt and fear, begin to tug at his internal easel. The poem turns away from the meditative process in line 36 of the poem as the standardized image, given horrifying dimension and "too much weight" through its intersection with the speaker's imagination, departs from convention and "looks" toward the him. Thus, while the poem does conclude with a prayer, it is not, as Martz claims, a completed meditation. To meditate on the passion, is, as the manuals tell us, to arouse compassion, not guilt. "What then would you do if you were to see these things?" asks one such writer. "Would you not throw yourself on our Lord and say: 'Do not, oh do not do such harm to my God. Here I am, do it to me, and don't inflict such injuries on him.' And then you would bend down and embrace your Lord and master and sustain the blows yourself" (Freedberg 171).

Instead Donne's speaker, as has often been noted, guilty before the eyes of his internalized Lord, invokes those blows not as an act of compassion, but to receive punishment. The syntax of lines 38-39 subtly corroborates this deflection from the usual path. "I turn my backe" the speaker says "*but* to receive corrections" i.e. not, as anticipated by one tutored in the meditative tradition, in compassion to receive the blows intended for the Lord, but in guilt to receive the blows deserved by the self.

The poem thus documents a failure or, at best, an interruption, in the meditative process. The speaker cannot paint the image he sees before him in his heart; his image-making faculty in fact turns away. Resolution is implied—through the familiar, anticipated, sequence of acknowledge guilt, punishment, and grace—but as the concluding use of the verb "to be" suggests, it will take place in a not-yet imagined future where "I'll turn my face."

What I have endeavored to do here is to place Donne's "Good Friday, Riding Westward" more fully in the context of one of its informing traditions, the fascination with picture-making as both a faculty and a measure of the human mind. Donne's poem is the product not only of a meditative tradition but also of habits of seeing as modified and intensified by meditative practices. What Donne does in "Good Friday," I think, is to dramatize that tradition by bringing vividly to life some of the theories underlying the use of real images for religious practices. The speaker's imagined images in the poem—the product of Donne's own engagement with real images like the ones which would hang in his study in the Deanery or with illustrations like the ones in the 17th-century meditative manuals—indict him for a failure in imaginative exercise. Donne's poem, then, is not concerned with the correction of a mistake in direction (the opening lines of the poem may have

been given greater emphasis that they should receive), but with the highly dynamic nature of a stage in the meditative process and with the central role of the image-making faculty in his speaker's life.

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Notes

[1] Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Renaissance Literature of the Seventeenth Century*, Revised ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962). All further citations will appear parenthetically within the text.

[2] *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century* (pseudo-Bonaventure). Isa Raguasa and Rosalie B. Green, eds. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

[3] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[4] Quoted in Freedburg, p. 180.

[5] Sucquet's *Via vitae aeternae: Iconibus illustrata per Boetius a Bolswert* (Editio septima, auctior et castigatior et novissima. Antwerp, 1630) is also quoted in Freedberg, pp. 184-85.

[6] In his *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: A study of the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative*. Kortrijk: Ars Neerlandica 1, 1979.