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THE RETURN TO THE VISUAL IN THEOLOGICAL THINKING

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Theological thinking has shifted radically in the past half century as we shift back from a primarily textual and verbal culture to one which is heavily reliant on the immediacy of the visual. This, though rooted in ancient practice, has begun to change the patterns of theological thinking and the nature of the appropriation of doctrine and thence our practice of worship and liturgy. The shift actually has its origins in the changes that took place in the understanding of the visual arts after the Reformation, and therefore this essay will begin with a brief reflection on the work of Rembrandt and link this to contemporary art and theology at the present time.

Keywords: Barnett Newman, Diego Velázquez, Eric Gill, image, Lucas Cranach the Elder, *parergon*, Rembrandt, self-portrait.

Introduction: Rembrandt's *Entombment* and Lucas Cranach's the Elder *Wittenberg Altarpiece*

In this brief essay I am going to take you on a long journey in European art, but it will, I trust, be coherent and clear. The journey begins with a small "sketch" of the entombment of Christ by the Dutch Protestant artist Rembrandt (1606–1669) which is in the Hunterian Gallery of the University of Glasgow (see the recent exhibition catalogue Black 2012). The Dutch critic Professor Mieke Bal, to whom we shall return shortly, once presumed to describe Rembrandt as Holland's most important biblical critic. But I wish to go further than that – Rembrandt was more than a biblical critic – he was a theologian, thinking theologically from the biblical text into image beyond and even outside the linear narratives offered by the gospels.

Here is my proposal about this picture in brief. What we see in the *Entombment Sketch* is not one but two images. It is not only a picture of the moment of the entombment of Christ, but also of the nativity – the stable in Bethlehem. Such a linking of biblical moments would be entirely harmonious with John Calvin's reading of the canonical scriptures as a whole, bound together by the analogy of faith, linking not

only the Old Testament with the New, but every moment in the gospels as united in the drama of salvation through Christ. This is not insignificant as reformed theology and the Bible were part of the very fabric of Rembrandt's home city of Leiden. In this painting, in one instant, we see two images – of birth and death. But why link these two moments in the gospel narratives in one visual experience? The reason is theological. The birth of Christ and the death of Christ *are*, in a very real sense, the same moment in our salvation through Christ. His death is the overcoming of death and the moment of death's defeat – when the tomb is opened it is found to be empty of the body (Matthew 28: 2–4; Mark 16: 5; Luke 24: 3; John 20: 4). The moment of the entombment is the moment of new life in Christ and death is done away with. As the viewer adjusts to the impossible truth contained in meditating upon this dual image, so the miracle of salvation is embraced in the very act of viewing, a moment of theological realization in action.

Now let us go back almost one hundred years in Protestant art, to the predella of the *Wittenberg Altarpiece*, painted by Cranach, which presents an image of Martin Luther King, Jr. preaching to the Wittenberg congregation (see Koerner 2004: 258). The congregation, standing and seated, from the very old to the very young, are on the left. On the right, in his pulpit with right arm outstretched, is Luther himself. He is pointing to the figure of Christ on the Cross, which stands between him and the congregation. Clearly Luther is *preaching* the gospel of Christ crucified, the word become flesh in the figure from whose side flows the blood of our salvation. The congregation are gazing at Christ (that is the embodiment of the spoken and preached word) – theology made real to sight. Above this picture on the *Wittenberg Altarpiece* are three further pictures by Cranach – of baptism, the Lord's Supper (the two dominical sacraments) and confession. Both Cranach and Rembrandt are working within the same devotional tradition of art, employing a careful and complex biblical hermeneutics to enact, from word to image and in the viewer's contemplation, a profound theological moment that is nothing less than the realization of our salvation.

In short, we have moved, in "readings" of Rembrandt and Cranach, beyond what Bal has described as the problem of the word-image opposition (Bal 1991: 10). The paintings of these artists, as figurative, present us, Bal suggests, with both a problem and an opportunity. Problematically, because the painting is "about" something and representational art is open to different forms of reductionism. We might read the painting, for example, simply as an illustration of its monolithic meaning, or, within art history, reduce it to various forms of intentionalism. On the other hand, more open readings of the visual potential of the picture itself, looked at as primary and not simply secondary to assertions or illustrations of the biblical narrative, allow us to range more energetically, and with provoking, searching interdisciplinarity, across the liberating and dynamic visuality of the image.

Velazquez, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*

But I would not wish to restrict my discussion simply to the art of the Reformation. And so let us take a somewhat similar kind of example from the art of the Counter Reformation, bearing in mind that the Council of Trent (1545–1563) concluded in its final Twenty Fifth Session (3–4 December, 1563), albeit somewhat cursorily, with the question of the veneration of images, and in particular of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin and the saints. And so we move to the art of 17th century Spain and the work of Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), and in particular to his painting known as *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* in the National Gallery of London. We can do little more than touch upon this complex and still much debated work and suggest the theological thinking that it seems to provoke. Once again we have a biblical scene from the gospels (Luke 10: 38–42) – the account of the visit of Jesus to the house of the sisters Martha and Mary that has given rise in the Church to the traditions of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. Indeed, the painting might be seen specifically as a meditation on verses 41 and 42: "Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the best portion". There are many things that are puzzling about this picture. For instance, as we see it, Christ is blessing the kneeling Mary with his *left* hand, not only odd but a potentially highly dangerous suggestion in Velázquez' Spain of the Inquisition (see Boyd, Esler 2004: 128). Certainly it could be argued that such a left-handed gesture was in breach of the decree of the Council of Trent on religious images inasmuch as it was disordered (*inordinatum*), or irregular (*praepostere*), profane (*profanum*), or simply disgraceful (*inhonestum*). Furthermore, not only is it not at all quite clear who the various figures in the picture are in relation to the biblical narrative, it would appear that, in spite of, and almost in contradiction to Jesus' words to the sisters, the primary and highly sympathetic attention is given to the working Martha rather than to Mary (if we assume that the young girl in the forefront of the painting is indeed Martha).

And so what is Velázquez, a painter of numerous religious works of art who from 1622 held the revered and establishment position of court painter to the royal family in Madrid, seeking to express in this seemingly dangerous painting? Was he deliberately, for some reason, courting the wrath of the dreaded Inquisition? That hardly seems likely. And so, first, we might argue, and like Rembrandt, that he is employing the techniques of art and the power of the complex visual image to prompt careful theological reflection on the Bible and the history of its interpretation in theology and contemplation. We can go far to explain some of the odd characteristics of the painting when we recall Velázquez' fascination with mirrors, and the use which he made of them in his studio, most famously in his great painting *Las Meninas* (*The Maids of Honour*). There have been various proposals by art historians regarding the use of mirrors in the composition of this painting, and here is my suggestion. The small inset in which Jesus, Mary and the second woman (perhaps Martha?) are placed is viewed through a window opening up on the opposite wall from the two large figures of the women in the foreground, and thus is actually behind the artist himself. He, in fact,

stands *behind* the two women in the foreground, all three facing a large mirror which occupies the whole of the wall in front of them, and it is thus this mirror image that he paints and we see. This being the case, the young woman herself is actually looking *at* the reflection of the inset which appears to us to be behind her. Our gaze is drawn to her face, and to the face of the old woman who looks over her shoulder, perhaps encouraging her in her work, perhaps reproving her. Actually the young woman's profoundly sad gaze, even as she is occupied with her food preparation, is deeply contemplative as she seems to reflect on the scene before her in the mirror – contemplating the contemplative Mary who is the beneficiary of Jesus' encouragement in the Bible narrative, for "she has chosen the better part". But how available are the blessings of the *vita contemplativa* to the young woman at her chores in the kitchen, away from the well lit reception room occupied by Jesus? (Thus it might be suggested that the use of mirrors enables us to see that which we actually do not or cannot see, without actually seeing it directly – just as poetry, in Martin Heidegger's words, is the art in language of "letting the unsayable be not said" (see Clark 2002: 118).

There is, in fact, a long history of reflection in the Church on the complex relationship between the two Christian ways of contemplation, on the one hand, and activity, on the other. As early as the 5th century CE, Abba Isaiah of Scetis, in the Egyptian desert, writing in his *Ascetic Discourses*, actually praised the "zeal" of Martha who "carries out her duty with diligence and joy" – almost, it seems, in contradiction to the priority established by Jesus himself in the gospel (Abba Isaiah of Scetis 2002: 161). The paradox of Velázquez' painting is that the life of toil has merged with the life of contemplation in the sad gaze of the young woman, and in a complex provocation that leads us back to the passage in Luke the Evangelist with renewed theological enquiry. Perhaps the blessing with the left hand – explicable by the use of the mirror – is a deliberate gesture by the artist. We see, as it were, the Bible as in a mirror, and how do we, in our lives which are often of drudgery and toil, relate to the sublime teachings of Jesus and to the remote, golden-haired Mary. Velázquez, like Rembrandt, though here less doctrinally, is reading the Bible through his visual art, theological thinking and its questions being drawn from the image which asks the question, "how do we see the Bible?" – as in a remote and beautiful painting on the wall, removed from the work of everyday, or within the rag and bone shop of the human heart and quotidian life?

The art of the self-portrait

I want to suggest that in the Reformation and the Counter Reformation in Europe there was also a reformation of the nature of the image in religious art. There was a form of iconoclasm *within* art itself, or perhaps better a revisionary moment within the representational element of the church's art which often displayed its object precisely by negating it (Koerner 2004: 13). Images never go away, but survive, phoenix-like, in their capacity to persist even as they are destroyed, and in this they have the kenotic characteristic of Christian theology itself from the very beginning, most powerfully in the very cross of Christ which makes positive for our salvation the moment of ne-

gation (as Rembrandt makes us see). Furthermore, the 16th and early 17th centuries saw the emergence in art of the self-portrait, and it is no accident within our story that Rembrandt himself was one of the greatest of early self-portraitists, often placing his own image (or that of his mistress) within his biblical pictures. It is clear, for example, that he paints himself as the rakish Prodigal Son in the 1636 painting now in Dresden (Hoekstra 1990: 336; White, Buvelot 1999), a reflection of the changing status of the self in Reformation Europe, and of the self in relation to Christ and religion. We see ourselves deeply within the mysteries of the faith that in image cease to be remote and distanced. As artists looked profoundly into their own selves as image (in a tradition that would eventually find its most profound searching of the self in the later art of Vincent van Gogh), so identity as it is seen can even draw the artist to identify with Christ himself – in Athanasius' of Alexandria celebrated phrase about the incarnation: "he became like us in order that we might become like him". Thus Albrecht Dürer, in his startling *Self-Portrait* of 1500, in Joseph Koerner's words, "fashioned his own likeness after the miraculous *acheiropoetos* of Christ in order to announce that art is the perfect image of its maker" (Koerner 2004: 14; for further detail see Koerner 1993: 63–79).

Eric Gill, *The Nuptials of God*

As this idea within self portraiture develops through the 19th and into the 20th century, the power of the image to provoke reflection and complicate theological thinking advances inasmuch as the work of art reveals not merely the skill or religious piety of the artist but becomes an expression of hitherto unseen inner experiences, linking the doctrines of belief with the inner and actual life of both artist and viewer. The image then, as we shall see, begins to shift away from the figurative and representational, and, as we perceived even in the art of Rembrandt, resists reductionism into any concluded meaning or intention. "Reading" the image becomes a process of thinking that proceeds in a manner of questioning and, often, deconstruction. We can see a deceptively simple example of what I mean in the work of the English Roman Catholic artist Gill (1882–1940). It is a woodcut entitled *The Nuptials of God*, giving us an image of the crucifixion with a female figure, perhaps Mary Magdalene, seemingly superimposed upon the first figure in a gesture of embrace which also crucifies her. Allow me to quote myself in a recent report entitled *Theology and the Power of the Image*, prepared for the Scottish Episcopal Church by its national Doctrine Committee (of which I was, at the time, convenor) (Fuller, Jasper 2014).

> [Eric Gill's] is a stark picture and for many, perhaps, an uncomfortable one. It is a deeply Christocentric image, but also deeply erotic. In a strange way the same questions arise as we begin to interpret it. Is it expressing the fact that Christians necessary live in two worlds – the ordered world of their religion, and the powerful world of the erotic? Are we given in such a picture an attempt to hold them together in our lives? Or is it expressing the view that the erotic need not be feared, since it can be taken up and offered within a full understanding of the cross and resurrection, and within Christian discipleship? Is it that the erotic symbol of Mary Magdalene pays a

> kind of feudal homage before the Christ in whom is vested the greater power? Or is this an image of Christ and his bride the Church, indicating that she has the power, in some sense to save also? Is it suggesting that the erotic imagery itself can now become a vehicle for communicating the truths of the Gospel, and that the very power that is implicit in erotic imagery and images of erotic love – the place where people's deep hopes and fears do actually lurk in our world – should be used more courageously in the work of Christian communication? (Fuller, Jasper 2014: 27).

The purpose of this long quotation is to emphasize that Gill's disturbing woodcut engenders many profound religious, indeed theological, questions. They are questions which arise from the "deep hopes and fears" of our incarnate being, meeting the religious theme with brazen challenge.

The power of the image

Such images, whether loved or loathed, are powerful. The fear of such power goes back in the biblical tradition to the prohibition in the second commandment itself: "Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, not worship them" (Exodus 20: 4). The fear is that we begin to worship the image itself for its theological power – a continuing fear so that at the Council of Trent, replying to what it perceived as Protestant iconoclasts, it was insisted that images were to be venerated but not adored. On such a distinction Margaret Aston has written: "artists were put on notice that the seductions of the world and depictions of the holy belonged to different spheres. And wherever pencil, brush or chisel attempted to outline the invisible, words were to supplement art and compensate for the deficiences of representation" (Aston 1988: 45; also Pattison 1991). But it could be said that such defensive strategies go a long way to admit the strength of their opponents' case. Artists from Rembrandt and Velázquez to Gill have denied the separation of these spheres of human being and have resisted the compensations of language to amend or enhance the complex power of images. By the middle of the 20th century Paul Tillich, a serious theologian by any standards, was recognizing the place of visual art in his theological explorations, and denying the separation of spheres that the Council of Trent was, vainly, seeking to uphold and maintain. Tillich admits that his term "ultimate reality" is *not* another name for God, yet the idea of God includes ultimate reality, and thus "everything that expresses ultimate reality expresses God whether it intends to do so or not" (Tillich 1984: 220).

Implicit in my claims for the art of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation is that they forged a process in the visual arts which must lead, inevitably, to the shift from the figurative to the non-figurative, in which the major figure in the earlier part of the 20th century is Wassily Kandinsky, author of the essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1977). The process by which Rembrandt drives the viewer inwards into a theological reflection that can only be precisely known in the image (such a process is that which actually transcends the fear expressed in the Second Commandment and makes the move from idol to icon – though it is often hard to discern precisely the power

of the image to seduce us) (see Marion 1991: 7–24), finds one of its clearest expressions in the art and writings of the American abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman, whose intense abstract canvasses insistently return to religious themes – above all in his great *Stations of the Cross* (1958) in the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. In an early article entitled "The First Man Was an Artist", Newman described what the line in art meant to him. He wrote:

> Man's first expression <...> Was a poetic outcry <...> of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void <...> The purpose of man's first speech was an address to the unknowable <...> [His] hand traced the stick through the mud to make a line before he learned to throw the stick as a javelin <...> The God image, not pottery, was the first manual act <...> Adam, by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, sought the creative life to be, like God, 'a creator of worlds'. <...> In our inability to live the life of a creator can be found the meaning of the fall of man (Newman 1947; also Sandler 1970: 185–192).

Thus we can see that the line which is drawn by the artist is, for Newman, not simply a copy or even a distortion of life. It is primary, primitive, primal – and therefore always borders upon transgressing the Second Commandment, which it actually predates, yet in doing so necessarily subverts itself and thus knows itself as tragic. We return by this route to the tragic gaze of Velázquez kitchen maid and Rembrandt's great painting of Bathsheba, an uncompromising and realistic painting of his own mistress, Saskia van Uylenburgh, deeply religious yet subversive of religion at the same time.

Theology and the verbal to the visual

The 20th century witnessed a broad shift in Western culture away from the verbal to the visual. Improvements in the art of photography, the massive global influence of cinema, the development of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, the move towards abstraction, pop art (one could go on)... together with the relative decline in reading, accelerated by the explosion into Information Technology and the virtual world of the internet, have served to revive and refine the ancient power of the image. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* Marshall McLuhan (1962) looked back to the printing revolution at the end of the16th century and ahead to a future still then, in the 1960s, unrealized of what he called the electronic revolution which would bring about a world that would be utterly different in inconceivable ways. My proposal is rather different. While I agree that the galaxy has been radically reconfigured, within it the renewed power of the image retains its old qualities in its capacity to provoke theological thinking – qualities present in the art of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation. Such qualities are related to what Jacques Derrida has described as the truth in painting. His key term in the journey beyond the word-image opposition and the capacity of the image to be "read" beyond the verbal text is the *parergon*, which he carefully describes as: "[the] supplement outside the work [which] must <...> designate a formal and general predicative structure, which one can transport *intact* or deformed and reformed *according to certain rules*, into other fields <...>" (Derrida 1987: 55).

Derrida links the word *parergon* with the writings of Immanuel Kant, remarking that there "the context is very different but the structure is analogous" (Derrida 1987: 55). The context in Kant is in a long note added to the second edition of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1960), Kant's last major work. The *parergon* is actually in the concept of the Note itself which is added to the "General Remark" that closes the second part of the work, in Derrida's words, "insofar as it defines what comes to be added to religion *Within the Limits of Reason Alone* without being a part of it and yet without being absolutely extrinsic to it".

This, I suggest, is precisely the nature of the theological provocation in Rembrandt's *Entombment Sketch* – a realisation of the salvation mystery that is not precisely *in* the painting and yet, within the response of the viewer, is not wholly extrinsic to it either. Such theological thinking – we might call it the irritation of the sacred – is present also in Gill's *The Nuptials of God*, and, in a very different way, in the spirituality of Newman's suppressed abstracts in their interiority and lack of surface inflection. And so we end with Derrida's *parergon*: the supplement outside the work which operates according to certain rules (the processes of theological thinking), that yet can only be found in a visual response to the work itself (the "truth" in painting), and which may be transported "*intact*, or deformed and reformed" (and thus often highly disturbingly) into others fields. In short, art and its images may transport us back into the field of theology and religion, yet in ways ever new, surprising and hard to grasp, as in all revelations. As always, the power of the image, is ambivalent within the Christian tradition, but in an age when it is perhaps questionable whether theology in its older, doctrinal and dogmatic forms and narratives can survive, the renewed energy of the visual in our culture opens up new possibilities, new *parerga*, if we are prepared to have to see them.

Conclusions

The argument of this essay has been for the power of the image in Western theological thinking, today all the more significant as we move from a largely verbal and written culture to one ever more addicted to the image and the visual, both figurative and non-figurative. It is a theme that has been pursued at great length by the American theologian David Morgan in his recent book *The Embodied Eye* (2012). The shifts with regard to art and the understanding of the nature of the image that took place in the Reformation did not displace this argument, but merely changed its terms. Thus, it may be that, through theological readings of Reformation artists like Rembrandt and Lucas Cranach the Elder, and Counter Reformation painters like Velazquez we can begin to recover this sense of the visual in theological thinking, a sense which stretches back to the most primitive art to the art of the present day.

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VIZUALUMO TEOLOGINIAME MĄSTYME ATGALIOS LINK

David JASPER

Santrauka

Teologinis mąstymas radikaliai pakito XX a. antrojoje pusėje, perėjus nuo tekstualiosios ir žodinės kultūros link tos, kuri iš esmės priklausoma nuo vaizdo betarpiškumo. Nors vizualumas yra giliai įsišaknijęs senovės praktikose, tačiau jis ėmė keisti teologinio mąstymo modelius ir doktrinos įsisavinimo pobūdį, o kartu ir garbinimo bei liturgijos praktikas. Iš tikrųjų šį perėjimą sukėlė po Reformacijos vaizduojamųjų menų sampratoje įvykę pokyčiai. Todėl šią apžvalgą pradėsime glaustai aptardami Rembrandto paveikslą ir jo sąsają su šiuolaikiniu menu ir nūdiene teologija.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Barnettas Newmanas, Diego Velázquezas, Ericas Gillas, atvaizdas, Lucas Cranachas vyresnysis, parergon, Rembrandtas, autoportretas.