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CHAPTER 14

SEEING DOUBLE

The Crucified Christ in Western Mediaeval Art

ALISON MILBANK

> And since, on this account he wished to suffer, even though he was beyond the power of suffering in his nature as God, then he wrapped himself in flesh that was capable of suffering, and revealed it as his very own, so that even the suffering might be said to be his because it was his own body which suffered and no one else's.
>
> (Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*)

ALTHOUGH an Eastern icon from the ninth century may be almost indistinguishable in style from one made a thousand years later, there is a seismic shift in the portrayal of Christ in Western art of the same period, especially in the way Christ's suffering on the Cross is represented. Both East and West are, together, responding to the Council of Chalcedon of 451, which left the Church to work out the implications of a Christology of the union of two complete natures, human and divine, 'without confusion of substance, but by unity of person' as the creed attributed to St Athanasius puts it (Schaff 1877: 69). Cyril of Alexandria, quoted in the epigraph above, offered one of the most profound and subtle early responses to Nestorius' challenge to that union of natures by linking the Word's enfleshing to the redemption and deification of the Christian believer, so that the mortal may be able to put on immortality, just as Christ 'wrapped himself in flesh'. This mystical exchange is central to Cyril's theology and animates his discussion of Christ's suffering in his human nature, so that 'what he was by nature, we might become by grace' (Cyril 2000: 35). Throughout Cyril's essay *On the Unity of Christ*, and despite his aim to question Nestorian separation of human and divine natures, he nevertheless keeps all the antitheses in play—passible/impassible; suffering/glory; divine/human; body/soul—while arguing that it is by assuming and integrating these antinomies that Christ saves humanity.

The theology of the icon developed in Eastern Christianity was a way of making this deificatory transformation into a religious practice; it was enacted through an image

which was written so as to transport the one venerating it into another, transcendent realm. Western art—or rather, image-making as we should call it in the mediaeval period—is often seen as moving away from the dispassion and *theosis* of the icon towards increasing naturalism and emotional empathy, as the Carolingian *Christus Victor*, judging the world from the Cross, gives way to the agonized, tortured body of the Man of Sorrows. This chapter, however, will seek to complicate this narrative by arguing that in every period of Western mediaeval art there is some attempt to realize a Cyrilline union of the two natures, and that where this is successfully achieved, there remains a potential for that redemptive transformation and participation in the divine life of the icon tradition. Moreover, the moves towards increasing realism of representation can be the catalyst for a truly dynamic communication of idioms, in which the two natures are paradoxically juxtaposed. Following Augustine, the Middle Ages loved to dwell on the deformity of Christ's body on the Cross, but in the greatest art, this ugliness of the suffering servant can become beautiful, calling the viewer into the Passion mystery of redemptive transformation, so that Christ's deformity can make humanity whole again.

Early Mediaeval *Christus Triumphans*

Although there exist representations of the crucifixion on ampullae and gems dating from the third century, it was not until the Empress Helena's archaeological investigations in the Holy Land and discovery of the true Cross that representation of Christ crucified became common (Viladesau 2005: 42–3). Its introduction seems to be coterminous with the discovery also of icons-not-made-with-hands, such as the Mandylion of Edessa, which came to prominence in the sixth century, and which claimed to be in some way the mark of the face of Christ himself, miraculously printed or copied from life by Nicodemus (Belting 1994: 305). With no description even attempted in the Gospels, up to now Christ had been represented either as akin to Dionysus, with curly hair, young and beardless, or as a philosopher, bearded. From the Mandylion icon and certain supposedly contemporary descriptions, Christ took on the features that would remain constant for a thousand years: reddish chestnut hair, curling at the ends, a forked beard and long nose. Such an iconography is common to Eastern icon and Western sculptural crucifix, as can be seen in the Holy Face of Lucca (Figure 14.1), which survives in the form of a thirteenth-century copy of an eighth-century original. Its importance was international, so that the Battló Majesty from Catalonia (Figure 14.2), like many other Spanish crucifixes shows its influence (Mann 1993: 322–4).

Although early images of the crucified Saviour occasionally show him wearing nothing but a loincloth, in many early wooden crucifixes he wears the *colobium*, a priestly garment also worn by kings to show their sacerdotal role of service to their people. When painted in red as in the Battló example, the kingly aspect is emphasized, and the authority of Christ over death and sin. Such images stress therefore both the historical Jesus whose facial image is reproduced, and the divine Son, whose divinity, shrouded

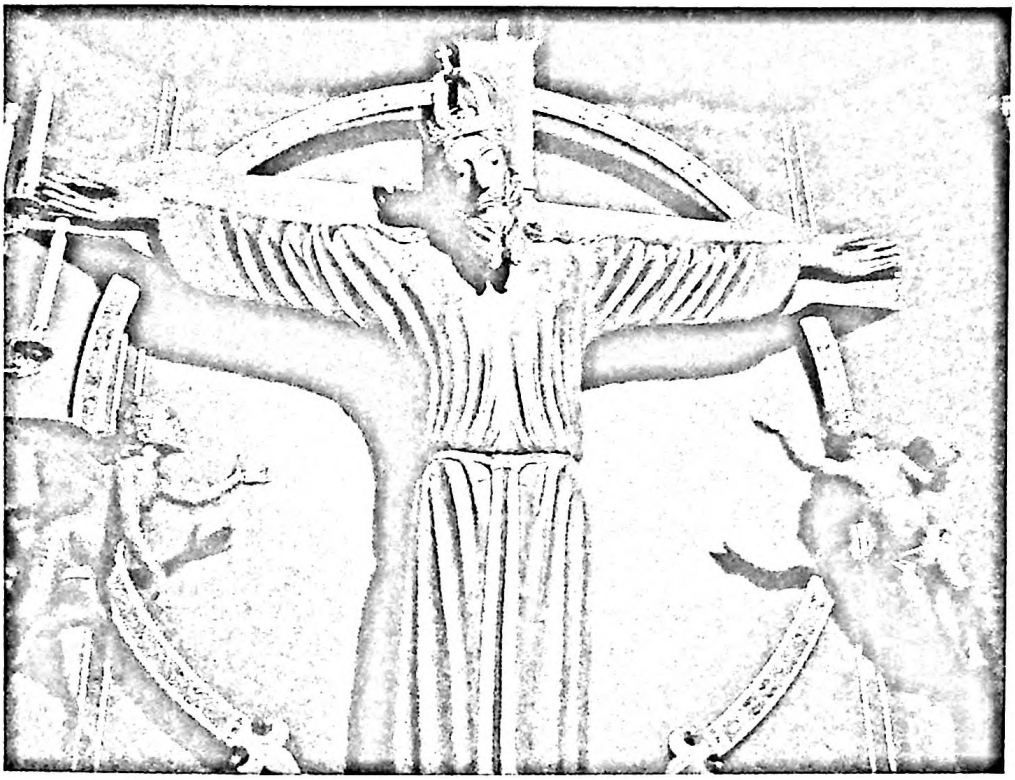

FIGURE 14.1 *Volto Sacro*/Holy Face of Lucca, wooden figure of Christ, early-thirteenth century copy of an earlier figure, Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca, photograph by Juanbanjo.

in flesh, tricked the unseeing Satan to exceed his authority, and thus lose his putative 'rights' over fallen humanity (Aulén 2010). The robe in such images is both revelation of kingship and representation of that Cyrilline wrapping in flesh and blood. In the same way the image itself both shows Christ—as an image—but also hides within it a relic (Schiller 1972: 141). The Luccan crucifix once held a relic of Christ's blood, for example, while others might hold a fragment of the Cross.

In these early mediaeval images of the crucifixion, the eyes of Christ remain open, as if he were alive. His arms are actively outstretched upon the Cross and the palms are often opened, so that he seems to be offering himself, rather than passively suffering. Indeed, often as in Lucca and the Battló examples, his face is calm and peaceful. Combined with the robe, this suggests an eternal image of Christ's redemptive action, rather than a representative account of the historical scene of his suffering. Indeed, scholars argue that what is being imaged here is the Last Judgement, and the Christ portrayed is the 'Son of Man' of the first chapter of Revelation, 'clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest' (Rev. 1:13). In the same chapter there is reference to the Second Coming of Christ, when 'every eye will see him, even those who pierced him' (Rev. 1:7). Many early crucifixion pictures, such as the ivory book cover from Reims (Figure 14.3) include Longinus with his spear and Stephaton with the vinegar on a long stick, representing two responses to Christ's suffering. The former, according to the apochryphal

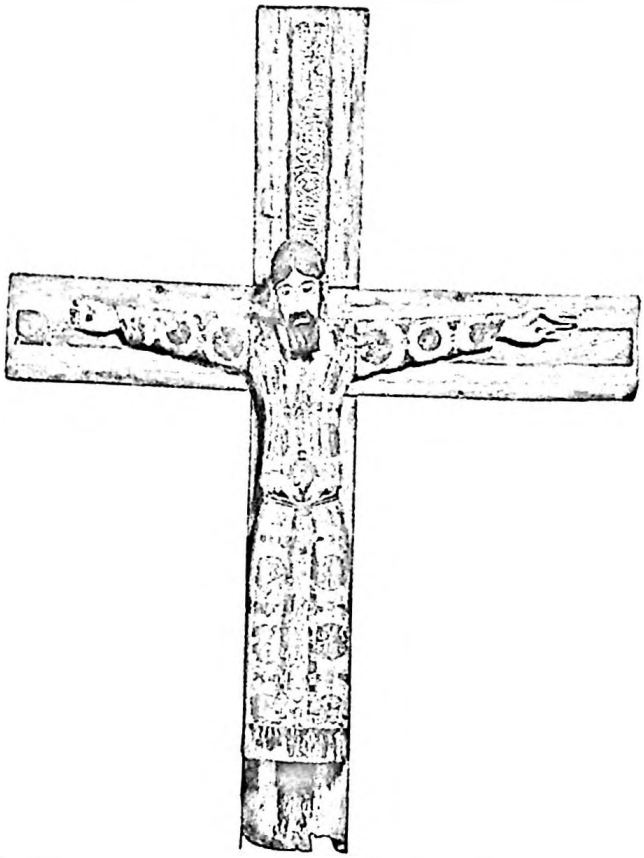

FIGURE 14.2 Battló Majesty, painted wooden crucifix, mid-twelfth century, Museu Nacional de Catalunga, Barcelona.

Acts of Pilate, was healed from his blindness by the blood and water released from the side of Christ, which he pierced as the soldier in John 19:34, while the latter is equated with the unknown person who offered the vinegar in John 19:29 (Ehrman and Plese 2011: 465–90). They represent therefore, the response of life-giving faith and that of bitter rejection to the offer of salvation.

Paradoxically, it will be the one who pierced Christ who will be saved, whose sight is the gift of grace. He who offered vinegar is interpreted according to Psalm 69:21: 'for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink' and 69:23: 'Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see'. In the inclusion of Longinus and Stephaton, therefore, the early crucifixions make their own act of representation part of a salvific process, and an anticipation of the Last Judgement. Nicodemus, who came to visit Jesus by night in John 3, and provokes the words about the brazen serpent, is a figure also associated with salvific sight: 'as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life' (John 3:14–15). Christ elevated on the Cross, like the brazen serpent which healed the Israelites, is the source of healing. Rachel Fulton emphasizes the importance of the Cross as a catalyst of judgement, and cites an eleventh-century bishop, Gerard of

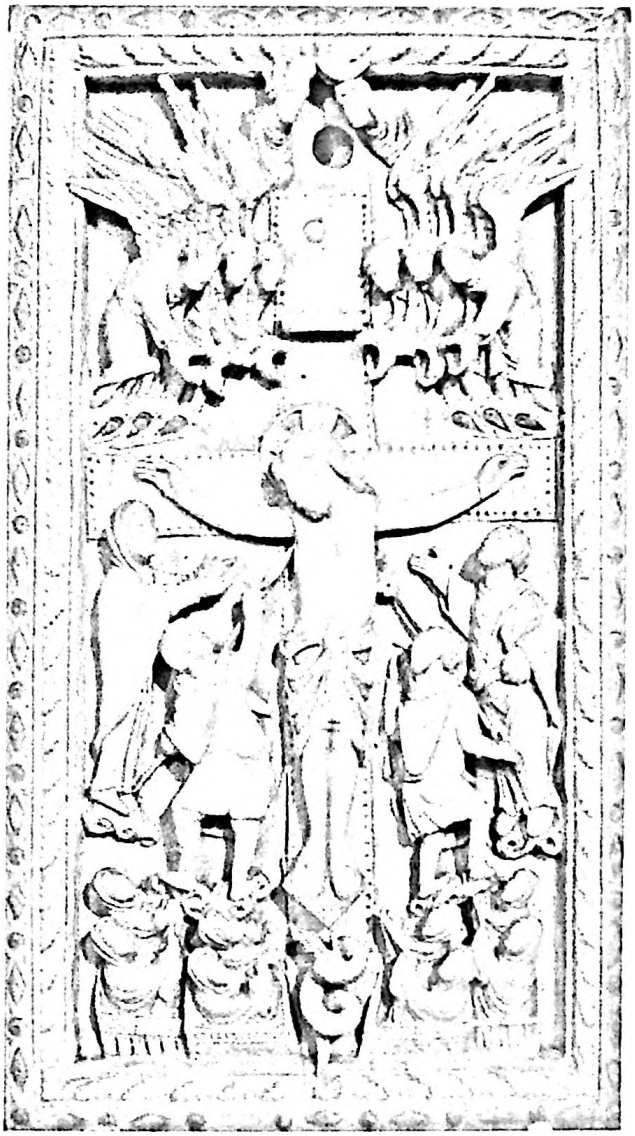

FIGURE 14.3 Ivory book cover panel of the Crucifixion, Rheims, *c.*860–70. © Victoria and Albert Museum no. 303-1867.

Arras and Cambrai, who uses the brazen serpent as a justification for the use of images in churches:

> And we, travelling from the Egypt of carnal conversation through the desert of earthly exile to the land of celestial promise, are rid from our hearts of the venom of the ancient enemy through the sight (*respectum*) of the Mediator hanging on the cross. For whoever will have gazed (*conspexerit*) upon Christ through the image and passion of the son of God (*per imaginem filii Dei ac passionem*), that one will be able to evade the ancient enemy.
>
> (Fulton 2002: 85)

Thus we see how by means of Revelation and St John's Gospel and the original brazen serpent of the Exodus story the representation of the crucified Christ is not only justified but rendered salvific in itself just as the carved snake once was. This seeing, however, is receptive: it enables grace to flow just as the lance of Longinus once opened the side of Christ. Following the science of Aristotle's *De Anima*, touch is the basis of all sensation that allows the world to manifest itself to us (Aristotle 1995: 200–1). Longinus' lance then opens the flow of redemptive love to bathe and heal his sight, and reorder his body and soul together. It is no accident that the wound on nearly every mediaeval crucifix lies just below the breast for it is nutritive—the water and blood of the Eucharist, which Carolingian and earlier Christian theology saw as a form of medicine, as well as salvation from death. In many early mediaeval crucifixes, instead of Longinus, the figure of Mary or Ecclesia holds a chalice to receive the blood. In this ninth-century ivory book-cover, the Virgin and Longinus are included in a salvific crescendo of death, where angels stretch down to receive Christ's soul, while the graves open below, sun and moon bear witness, and Ecclesia/Mary stretches to catch the saving blood.

Although we can never fully recover exactly how earlier ages saw these images, it is clear that their seeing was a complex activity, and that the images presented to them were not simple, even though they have a powerful affective force as objects. It is clear also that to make sense of these images it is necessary to see doubly: to view a scene as both memorial of a particular moment in time but also as ultimate and ahead of time, at the Last Judgement, and as a moment that is itself generative of eternal life through grace and the sacraments that literally flow from it. Such images distance and judge the viewer while almost beckoning him or her into an embrace. We know that participation could be quite extreme in that the Holy Face of Lucca was almost destroyed and had to be recarved because people kissed or chipped at it too enthusiastically.

This seeing doubly in terms of iconography was paralleled by discerning the double nature of Christ made manifest in its extremity on the Cross. Celia Chazelle demonstrates how it was debates about adoptionism at the court of Charlemagne and his successors that led to the development of images of the crucifixion, despite Carolingian caution about artistic representation (Chazelle 2001: 14–71). Familiar as we are with the idea that the suffering of Christ shows his humanity, it is sometimes difficult to remember that Alcuin and others viewed the crucifixion as an event that revealed above all his divinity and had recourse to it to refute any view that Christ was adopted as God after his resurrection. The blood is central to this assertion of his divinity. What might seem a piece of gory realism is common to crucifixions throughout the whole mediaeval period: the free-flowing blood from hands, side, and feet. The blood as proof that Christ really suffered (thus avoiding Docetism) is equally 'his blood, through whom all things are created [which is] poured for the salvation of all' (Chazelle 2001: 62). Where we might see vulnerability the early mediaeval eye saw creative power, which alone could reunify humanity to its Creator. The open hands and calm expression of Christ in these images testify also to his voluntary suffering, which is an index of the sinlessness of his human nature, so a symbol of his divinity works equally to reveal the humanity. His

suffering, writes Alcuin, is 'voluntary but true', unified by his will, which is in complete union with his Father.

The Imitative Turn and the *Christus Patiens*

The huge artistic shift in representation of Christ's Passion in the twelfth century onwards should not conceal the fact of a great deal of continuity. St Bonaventure, whose life of St Francis was instrumental in developing his founder's life as that of a continuous Passion, also writes in *The Tree of Life* of Christ's 'priestly robe of red', and here the red comes from his own blood rather than an actual vestment. Cyril's wrapping image continues in the 'sacred garment, artistically woven by the Holy Spirit from [the Virgin's] chaste body' (Bonaventure 1978: 157). Although the role of the blood in removing personal sin is important earlier, in Bonaventure the individual reader is central addressee. And there is no doubt of the central role of the Franciscan movement in this turn to the individual, the personal, and the affective. Francis, who prayed constantly to his crucified Lord, also made himself into a living work of art representing Christ's suffering. Having had a vision of a seraph bearing between his wings 'the figure of a man crucified', Francis finds his own body marked with Christ's wounds. It is a vision that calls out paradoxical emotions—joy and sorrow—and opens a space of contradiction, as he seeks to reconcile seraphic immortality and 'the weakness of Christ's passion' (Bonaventure 1978: 305). The answer to the paradox lies in himself: his weakness will be transformed into Christ's likeness by seraphic love. It seems as if he embraces an Abelardian theory of atonement, in which it is the overflowing charity of God that is revealed on the Cross and which effects our redemption by calling out love in response (Abelard 2011). Francis thus becomes another image-not-made-with-hands, 'depicted not on tablets of stone or on panels of wood by the hands of a craftsman, but engraved in the members of his body by the finger of the living God' (Bonaventure 1978: 307).

Moreover, not only does Francis display throughout his life a love of the Cross but he has a particular devotion to the crucifix, including the one in St Damian's church, which addresses him, and still exists in Santa Chiara in Assisi. It conforms to twelfth-century style. Christ wears a loincloth, has open eyes and arms carefully open, while the sections beside his body contain smaller figures of disciples, Longinus/centurion and Stephaton. Above the resurrected Christ is welcomed by wondering angels. Although flat and with no place to hold relics, this was an image displayed above the chancel and later incorporated into the rood screen, where it was an important part of the Holy Week liturgy. Franciscan piety, however, would lead to a new portrayal of Christ's suffering.

By the time of the celebrated Florentine figural crosses of Cimabue (1280–5) and Giotto (before 1312), a great deal has changed. The body of Christ bends outwards into

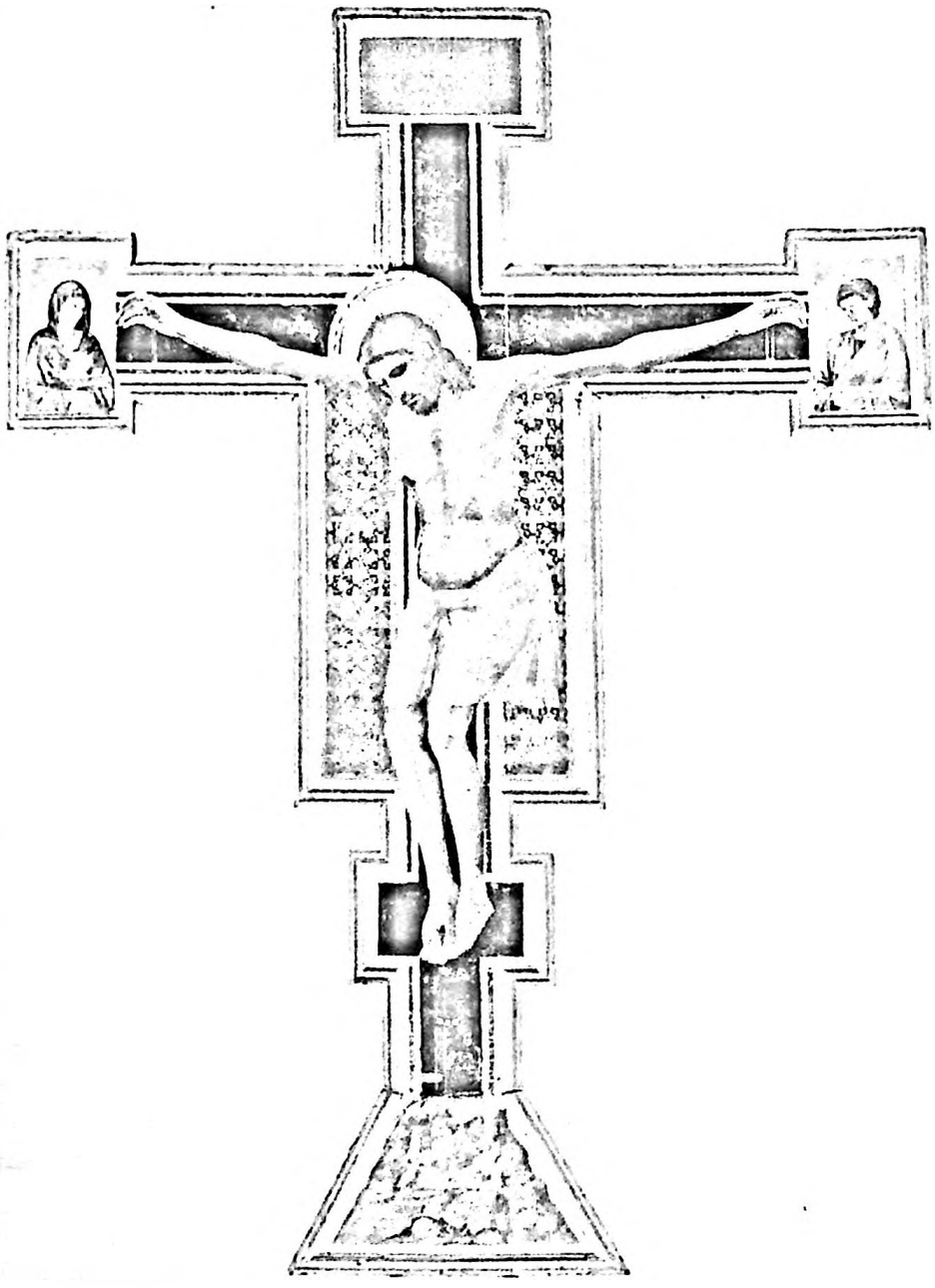

FIGURE 14.4 Giotto di Bondone, Crucifix, painted wood, 1290–1300, Sante Maria Novella, Florence.

an 'S' shape in Cimabue but inwards in the case of Giotto (Figure 14.4), for whom the weight of the body pulls the arms down. The head too is bent and the eyes closed. This is the dead Christ of Good Friday, whose fingers are at rest because there is no more life in them and whose body is thin and even yellowish in tone, with defined ribs and only one nail holding the feet in place.

For writers like Bruce Cole 'the remote, heroic Son of God has been replaced by a very human image of a dead man divested of all the old associations of hierarchical grandeur which date back to the very beginning of Florentine art' (Cole 1976: 40). And yet, despite the deadness of the body the blood flows freely, not just oozing down from gravity but flowing out in a full arc in a manner that is not realistic but is wholly theological, since it is the death of Christ that allows us life. Moreover, the little figures from beside the body have gone, to be replaced by a patterned cloth. There is little critical discussion about the meaning of this background, which could so easily have been narrowed, now that it serves no representational function. Yet its Byzantine pattern echoes the style of the *colobium* on the Battló Christ in majesty, almost as if it were a royal robe laid out in one piece as in a shroud. The shroud cloth of Charlemagne still survives in the Cluny in Paris, and is made of patterned silk in red and gold. It seems therefore that Giotto is not necessarily abandoning the 'hierarchical grandeur' of the earlier Christ Triumphant but opening his kingly shroud to offer Christ to our view almost in the manner of the winding-cloth in the later deposition paintings. What is different about the kingship in Giotto's image is that it is not so much that of Christ reigning *from* the Cross as the king of glory reduced *to* the Cross. The halo with its tripartite sections is another indicator of his divine status but it does not radiate out from his head—indeed it is given a perspectival flatness and material positioning behind the cloth. If one were to continue the circle down, it should appear between Christ's arm and body, but it does not. There is therefore a tension between naturalism and the symbolic within the image, just as there is between the active kingly and the passive victim. With the eyes closed, the challenge to the viewer to see the truth of Christ's self-offering is muted. Instead of a judgement leading to participation, there is a compassionate response. No longer under the shower of blood, the Virgin Mary and St John are caught in gestures of grief at the far ends of the Cross, so that they too are primarily mourners whose gaze moves along the arms to centre the focus upon the face and down to the side wound.

I have stressed the awkwardness and ambiguity of Giotto's presentation in order to qualify the usual readings of his portrayal as simply towards naturalism and as being proto-Renaissance in character. Instead, like Francis seeking to make sense of immortal angel and suffering Christ, Giotto employs his realist technique to interrogate the problematic of identification and compassion that was now so to the fore in religious art and practice. Similarly in his fresco portrayals of the Passion story in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, his ability to render forms monumental, weighty, and rounded is used quite histrionically to portray intense emotion and to lay out a scene almost as if in a dramatic tableau, opening a space for the viewer's involvement. Yet by the reserve and hiddenness of the figures now fully suggested by his mastery of embodied form, he suggests something exceeds our comprehension. Rather than simple naturalism, it is this contradiction that energizes his work and makes it great religious art because it too, like the Romanesque examples, forces us to see double, although the focus shifts from Christ himself somewhat towards the perspective of the viewers and their surrogates in the characters portrayed. Barbara Raw claims that the figure of Mary is a witness to Christ's humanity, while that of St John verifies his divinity, especially when he holds the Gospel

book (Raw 2009: 98). In the arm of this crucifix, however, he holds no book. Instead, the mystery of the event is held within the rounded folds of John's own person, but reserved, unlike the visibility of Francis' stigmata.

The Later Middle Ages: The Eucharist and the Man of Sorrows

Every crucifix in the Middle Ages was to be understood as in some sense a Eucharistic image. Hence the importance of St John at the scene because of his witness to the mixed flow of blood and water, representing baptism and the Eucharist, as well as the mystical exchange between humanity and Christ. From the inclusion of the word 'transubstantiated' in the articles of faith at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1415 onwards, the identification of the suffering Christ with the Eucharistic elements took on a new force. As Thomas's Eucharistic hymn, *Adoro Te Devote* emphasized, Christ was hidden, and it required discernment to see the truth of the body and blood behind what came to be called the 'accidents' of bread and wine. Miracles such as that of St Anthony of Padua, for whom an ass discerned the real presence of Christ in the host, abounded. Although in Thomas it is the whole and risen Christ who is received, stories such as the mass of St Gregory became popular in the later Middle Ages which involved the bleeding body of Christ appearing on the altar at the consecration rather than a resurrected figure (Schiller 1972: 226–8). The rising popularity of such images is due to controversies about transubstantiation that seem to have put pressure on the delicate balance of distance and intimacy in Thomas' Eucharistic devotion.

From the fourteenth century onwards, the compassionate identification with the suffering humanity of Christ is combined with an increasing collapse of distance in the act of vision. Where once it was necessary for faith to discern the God reigning from the tree, now to adore the all-too-visible image of the gory, bloody corpse of the Redeemer is important in order to assert his real though hidden presence in the Mass. So paradoxically, blood becomes the indicator of divinity once again, although this may not readily be apparent to a modern gaze. Just as worshippers focused on the elevation of the host at Mass, so viewers of holy images began to gaze at a figure of the crucified Christ called the Man of Sorrows (Figure 14.5).

This German version from about 1430 by Master Franke, is typical of the northern style. 'Man of sorrows' is a quotation from Isaiah 53's description of the suffering servant: 'when we see him there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men: a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief' (Isa. 53:2–3). Here is the ugly Christ whose lack of comeliness is a sign that he bears the transgressions of us all. These words had long been part of liturgical and private meditation but now they took on a new literality. Cimabue's Christ was perfect in mathematical ratio and Giotto's too had a pure, pale beauty. Yet here the pink hands of the angel accentuate the

FIGURE 14.5 Master Franke, Man of Sorrows, painted wood, *c.*1420, Museum der Bildenden Künste, Lepzig.

ghastly yellow of the dead body of Christ, which has to be propped up by angelic hands. The sickly eyes look up from the lowered head seeking our pity, while the arms stuck out akimbo with ungainly agency seek to point out the flowing blood and the chastising whip. Each object in the scene is part of the now expanded narrative of the Passion and each has its typological anticipation in the Old Testament, mainly in Isaiah and the Psalms. What happens in response to the *devotio moderna* of intense affective identification with Christ's suffering in the later Middle Ages is that, just like the actualization of transubstantiation in the Mass of St Gregory, the allegorical distance of figurative reading of the Old Testament is crossed, so that type and fulfilment are closed up into one image. In the tight, crowded structure of Franke's painting, formal style and content

mirror this closure and the lack of mediation. The image is also influenced by the mystical visions of those like Birgitta of Sweden, who found themselves at the historical scene of Christ's chastisement, and added iconographical details to the narrative. Here, St Birgitta's *Revelations* seem to be in the artist's mind: 'He was crowned with thorns. Blood trickled over his eyes, his ears, his beard' (Schiller 1972: 147).

The presence of the angels and the fact that they hold the body suggests the Mass, when the angels are invoked in order to take the sacrifice to the heavenly altar at the consecration. They handle the body through the winding sheet, just as the ministers use a cloth to handle the sacrament. Thomas Aquinas writes of this *Supplices* prayer in the *Summa*: 'The priest does not pray that the sacramental species may be borne up to heaven; nor that Christ's true body may be borne thither, for it does not cease to be there; but he offers this prayer for Christ's mystical body, which is signified in this sacrament, that the angel standing by at the Divine mysteries may present to God the prayers of both priest and people' (Aquinas 2006: 163). If a Thomist theology lies behind the image, then the Christ presented is the Church, the mystical body, and the image opens to include the viewer as part of that entity. But although the angels put their fingers into the actual wounds to draw our attention to them, their hands and gaze actually get in the way of any entrance by the Christian viewer. The angel at the back of Christ forces our gaze forward and allows no movement beyond. Christ's own hand, indeed, partly covers the flow of blood from his side, which seeps down into his loincloth, rather than out as a regenerative fountain. Only the central attention to the navel, that guarantor of Christ's true humanity, offers some possibility of a mystical exchange, but even that is fronted by the whip.

The Italian versions of the image of the Man of Sorrows are much more restrained than their Low Country or German equivalents. The painter and Dominican friar, Fra Angelico, included a Man of Sorrows as one of the simple frescos he made for the cells of his brothers in the San Marco community in Florence around 1440. As in many Man of Sorrows images, this shows the dead Christ after his deposition and yet still within the tomb. A winding cloth is invisibly held, presumably again by angels, behind the figure of Christ, who is also shown with the Cross, as well as a number of the *arma Christi*, that is, the objects or events of the Passion narrative, which are here seen as the instruments by which Christ achieves his victory. Particularly interesting here is the fact that people and events are foregrounded, rather than simple objects: the betraying kiss of Judas; the hand taking the pieces of silver; Peter's denial; the hand that hits the blindfolded Saviour. In contrast to the awkwardness of the Franke example, here the multiple objects form a unity, as the eye is taken in a circle formed partly by the cloth, and guided by the disembodied hands and heads. Angelico's mastery of geometry is very evident.

The image is less obviously naturalistic than the angelic holding of the Franke Christ, in that it is wholly meditative in character, as befits its location in the private cell of a friar. The objects are not held by figures but engendered from the background, or even from the devoted contemplation of the Virgin and St Thomas Aquinas. Our Lady sits in the classic pose of pensive thought, while Thomas kneels, quill at the ready to record his visions. The Christ upon whom they meditate is much more active than in

Franke: standing, not propped, so that his resurrection is assumed. Even in his humiliation, on the upper right of the picture, he is tranquil behind the blindfold, with the reed held lightly as befits a king. The wooden board announcing his kingship is also prominent. Most importantly, he stands with hands outstretched, opening his hands towards the two saints. As befits an image which contains Thomas Aquinas, this unites the believers in the redemptive action of self-offering; it is not merely an image of pity calling forth compassion. Rather the human figures of contemplation together with those involved in the *arma Christi* become part of the divine action. For the tranquillity and dignity of the figure of Christ emphasize his divine activity. He is shown thrice, as if to indicate the fact that the Passion is the work of the entire Trinity. The image requires interpretation, and thus the collapsing of exegetical levels in Franke is here avoided. The contemplative pose of the two saints implies a hermeneutical distance, as does the centring of a tilted square stone on the sarcophagus. Georges Didi-Huberman has convincingly argued that the prevalence of such focus on stones and pillars in Angelico's painting is a meditative device based on the mystical theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, in which the blockage to the movement of the eye enforced by the stone is akin to the movement from positive (*kataphatic*) to negative (*apophatic*) in the movement to divine union (Didi-Huberman 1995: 69–80). Realizing the limitation of a name or quality to define the divine is the springboard to a deeper understanding of the mystery of God. For Didi-Huberman, the background of these convent frescos is a representation of the unknowable depths of God. The figure of Christ therefore, as the Logos, both reveals and conceals, but this dialectic calls the meditative viewer into the journey towards union. Here Angelico employs what is usually conceived of as a humanist device—perspective—for theological and Christological meditation.

The Turn to the Grotesque

For a last example of the late mediaeval period, which by very different means enables this double seeing, I shall examine the famous Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald, painted in 1512–15 (Figure 14.6).

This may seem a complete antinomy to Fra Angelico's tranquil harmony, for this is one of the most grotesque representations of the crucifixion, in which Christ's body is not tranquil but in rigid agony. Not only does the blood flow profusely but red is the keynote colour throughout all the wings of the outer tryptych, and even the tomb below is livid scarlet. The grief of those beside the Cross is extreme and ugly; only the flanking saints, Anthony and Sebastian, have any tranquillity, and even that is somewhat rendered problematic by a demon blowing through the broken window behind St Anthony, while an arrow transfixes St Sebastian and emerges from his back.

The many wounds upon the body of Christ begin to make sense when one includes the fact that the altarpiece was made for the Antonine order, who cared for sufferers of plague and skin diseases (Mellinkoff 1988: 3). It had become common, following the

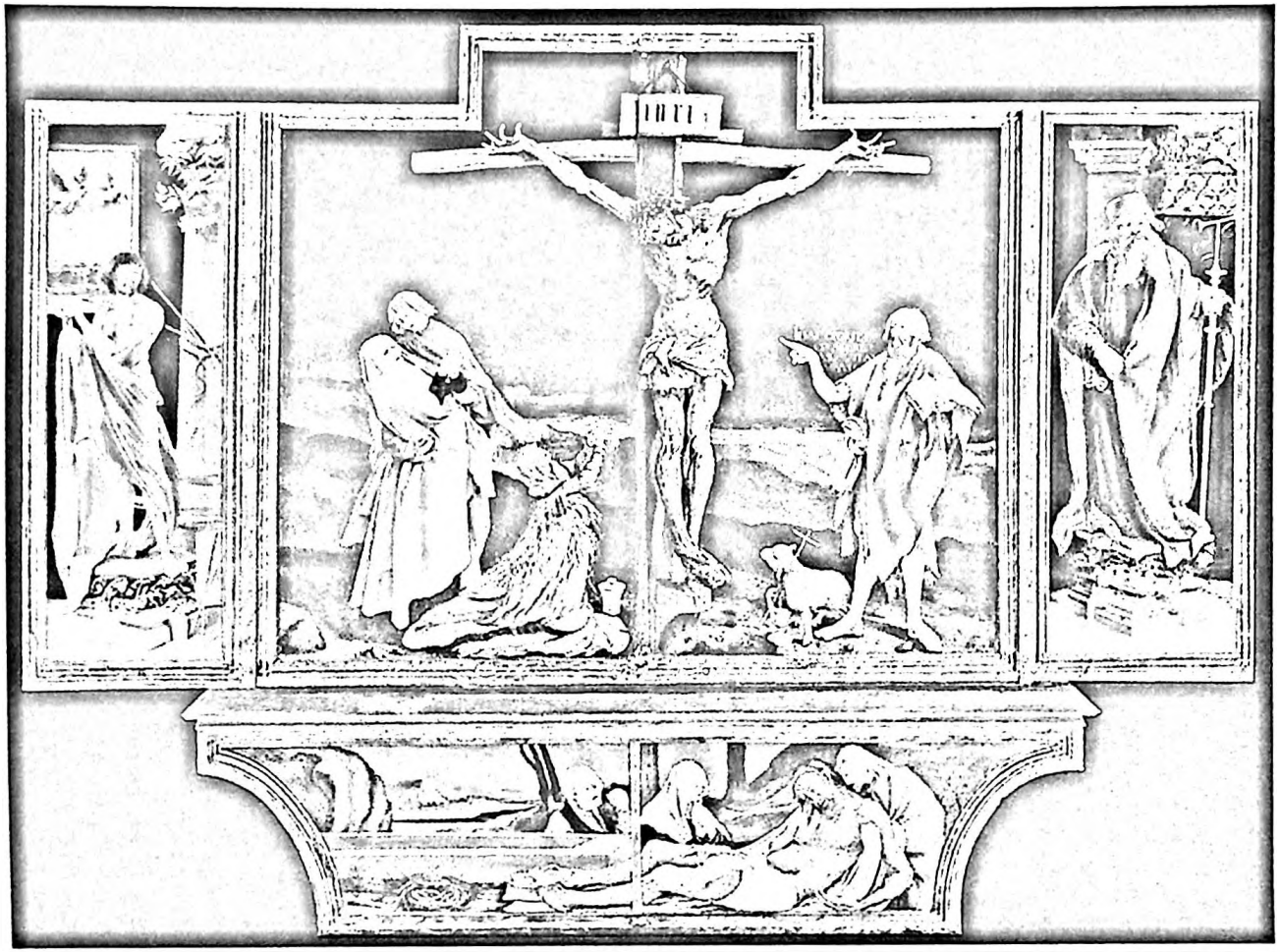

FIGURE 14.6 Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece, painted wood, 1512–16, Unterlinden Museum, Colmar.

visions of St Brigitta of Sweden and St Gertrude of Hefta, to count the wounds inflicted throughout Christ's Passion in the thousands, and here the many marks stand also for the boils and marks on the bodies of those the monks cared for. So implicitly, this was a Christ in whose sufferings the believer might find a share. Yet does not the abjection of this tortured figure prevent his divinity being manifested in any way? Does the relative realism of the pain and pus render the image realist and individualized, without any universal significance?

In fact, this image is far from naturalistic. It is not a representation of an actual historical scene, or not entirely, for although the Virgin falls into the arms of St John the evangelist, St John the Baptist stands on the other side, although he was long dead by the time of the crucifixion. A symbolic lamb, also an element in the Baptist's proclamation of Jesus as Messiah—'behold the lamb of God' (John 1:36)—stands bleeding into a chalice like the lamb of Revelation 13:8, 'slain from the beginning of the world'. John quotes his own words—'he must increase but I must decrease' (John 3:30)—and this idea is rendered bizarrely literal in the greater size of the body of the Saviour in comparison to the other figures. The feet reach right down almost to the ground in opposition to the increasing practice in this period of raising the Cross well above the heads of those attending the event.

The verse that follows John 3:31, helps to interpret this positioning: 'he that comes from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth'. The great Cross in the painting roots Christ in the earth, while his arms seem taut, raising his fingers, albeit nailed, to heaven. It is the enfleshing in pus and blood that renders Christ's suffering redemptive for mortal human kind. The tension and energy of his passion reveals its divine character. The lamb peacefully gazing upon him, while holding the resurrection Cross of victory, shows the union of Christ with the Father that renders him paradoxically impassible while in torment. Indeed, the poised Anthony and the Sebastian unhurt by the arrow, show how God's grace through this central act of redemptive love makes healing possible, Anthony saving from St Anthony's Fire and Sebastian from the plague.

Moreover, both crucifixion and the entombment below open up: the former twice—first, to reveal the annunciation, the Virgin delighting in her Son, and the resurrection, and secondly to reveal a sculpted group of St Anthony and other saints, with wings showing his desert temptations on one side, and his friendly meeting with St Paul on the other. It is the side of the Cross that opens to reveal these inner mysteries, just as the death of Christ opens the way to glory. The centrality of St Anthony, who was tormented mentally as well as physically, makes him the friend of the sick, and calls them into relation. Moreover, the entombment opens to show a sculpture of the Last Supper, so that communion, friendship, and service are revealed as the heart of Christian and brotherly living. The entire artwork enacts a theology of participation in the body of Christ, whose power is revealed in his weakness, so that the mystical exchange of Godhead and humanity may be achieved. Like Angelico, Grünewald achieves his effect by double seeing rather than simple affective identification. He too has his techniques of dissimilitude, akin to Angelico's stonework, first in the Baptist and the lamb, but

secondly in the portrayal of the two flanking saints, who are realistically rendered as if alive but who are positioned on stone plinths, with architectural decoration, as if they were statues in niches. Sebastian's arrow seems to turn to stone as it meets the column. Are they statues or people? Perhaps the idea is that the statue can act for the saint, especially, of course, when it contains a relic. But the ambiguity, like the grotesque style of the crucified body, allows the distance between viewer and image, which mirrors and imitates the analogical distance between human creature and Creator, and which once acknowledged is the beginning of the operation of grace and the understanding of the Incarnation. In the Isenheim altarpiece, this lies within, as that to which the crucifixion is the key. Purified by the acceptance of forgiveness offered by the Cross, illumined by the joyful and glorious mysteries of Incarnation and resurrection, the viewer is drawn into union, thus enacting the threefold mystical ascent at the heart of mediaeval spiritual practice. And the seeming antinomies of stone and flesh, God and Man, body and soul, are what work through a Dionysian mystical theology to bring the viewer into communion: to taste and see.

This short essay has sought to demonstrate that there is much more continuity throughout the mediaeval period in the portrayal of Christ than might normally be assumed. Just as loinclothed figures with eyes closed can be found in the Anglo-Saxon period, and the *Christus Triumphans* of the holy face of Lucca keeps its crown until today, so artists in every period sought to see doubly: to portray a divine victim. It has to be admitted that the later examples represent the best of the age in theological exploration of the crucifixion, since there is ample material that shows a perverse delight in the infliction of suffering. Very often, as James Marrow has argued, what seems like an almost sadistic proliferation of torments in late mediaeval Northern European art is due to a refusal of interpretative distance, so that elements and details from prophecy and the Psalms used figuratively in the liturgy and in manuscript illumination come to be rendered literally (Marrow 1979: 199). There was a parallel in the biblical hermeneutics of Nicolas of Lyra, who reduced the four levels of interpretation to a double literal, while Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples (Faber Stapulensis) went even further by subsuming all meanings to Christ, who alone is the subject of Scripture (Smalley 1964: xvi). This prepared the way for Luther's Christic reading of the Psalms, which goes much further than the allegorical figuration of earlier periods. So when the ninth-century Stuttgart Psalter illustrates Psalm 22:18–22 as prefiguring Christ, actual soldiers mocking are united in one image with the communion chalice and with an allegorical lion and unicorn (from verse 21, 'unicornis' in the Vulgate). A range of levels of interpretation are at play here, whereas in Bosch's *The Crowning with Thorns* of 1490–1500, much of its sinister power comes from the literalizing of figurative elements.

So the man on the right wears a dog-collar to fulfil Psalm 22:16: 'for dogs have compassed me'; the man with the crossbow bolt in his hat is a rendering of Psalm 11:2: 'for behold the wicked bend their bow'. There are, indeed, a number of other significations in the painting: secular and sacred powers of the day, Islam and Judaism; the four humours and so on (Foster and Tudor-Craig 1986: 60). The emphasis, however, is less on

the mystery of the Passion, and more on contemporary political critique, particularly of Pope Julius II, whose oak leaves are worn by the dog-collared man. All are materialized in an uncanny, brutal naturalism in which the strongest light is reflected on the armoured fist about to push the crown on the head of the docile Christ, who lacks all life and energy in comparison with his lively tormentors. Perhaps this is not Christ so much as his suffering body, the Church, her only halo the crown of thorns. Seeing double like this can no longer be a means of salvific participation but a mode of sorrowful recognition of the distance between humanity and God, Christ and his earthly body, which a few years later would provoke the German Reformation.

Suggested Reading

Didi-Huberman (1995); Marrow (1979); Viladesau (2005).

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