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« Imagination » in *A Dialogue of Comfort*.

Rastell tells us (*EW*, sig. Cii^{v}) that, as a young man, More wrote a series of pageant verses to accompany a set of wall-hangings in his father's house. The first eight of the set depicted an *itinerarium vitae* not unlike Petrarch's *Trionfi*, to which the verses are appropriate English captions. [1] The last of the set, however, showed a poet sitting in a chair, and the Latin verse (« Has fictas quemcunque ») moralized the preceding images :

> If anyone finds pleasure in looking at these pictures because he feels that, although they are products of the imagination, still they represent man truly and with remarkable skill, then he can delight his soul with the actual truth just as he feasts his eyes on its painted image. For he will see that the elusive goods of this perishable world do not come so readily as they pass away... [2]

Given the context of the verses, the poet can be excused for omitting an important qualification : the world's pleasures *may* cause us to forget heaven, but the world's terrors certainly do -- unless the imagination is rightly disciplined and directed. In *A Dialogue of Comfort*, More turns again to the problem of the disciplined imagination, and solves it not by renouncing the images of the world, as the poet teaches, but by replacing them with a single image from the world : the suffering and crucified Christ. *A Dialogue of Comfort*, especially Book III, thus belongs to the tradition of meditation that More inherited from the Middle Ages. [3] In that tradition, too, the imagination has an important function. It is not surprising, therefore, to find both that *imagination* and related words occur frequently throughout the text, and that the imagination itself helps to solve the intellectual and spiritual problem that Vincent brings to Antony : how to move one's mind from present tribulations in this world to find comfort in the hope of the world to come. Uncovering the theoretical foundations of More's attitude toward the imagination leads to an understanding of its role in the process of salvation and in the structure of the dialogue itself.

In the dialogue, the many references to the imagination allow the reader to recognize the underlying theory as Augustine's. Given More's early study of the *City of God* and the frequency of his references to Augustine, More's acquaintance with Augustinian psychology was probably more substantial than the merely generalized awareness that any educated man of his time might have had. Augustine's psychology is set

forth most succinctly in the treatise *On the Trinity*, IX-X, and in the *Confessions*, X [4]. According to Augustine, the human mind has three powers or faculties : the memory, the understanding and the will. These three faculties are together a figure of the Trinity, and their single proper object is the love of God (*Trin.* IX-X). Memory forms, retains and recalls images of and feelings evoked by sensory experience (*Conf.* X.viii-xxi). Imagination, which is an aspect of memory, rearranges images to create new ones, which the understanding judges. This judgment belongs to the process of salvation because it indicates what the will desires (*Trin.* X.xi), and the criteria of judgment, although hidden in bodily images, come to the mind from God (*Trin.* IX. vi). This theory of the imagination differs from the later sixteenth-century theory, represented in Spenser's House of Alma (*F.Q.*, II.ix.48-58) and in Batman's commentary upon Bartholomew (III.xvi), where imagination and memory are held to be separate faculties. In Augustine's analysis, three notions are important for More's dialogue : that the imagination is bound to the sensory world ; that it is directed toward the future ; and that it is judged by an absolute standard that comes from God. These notions form the basis of More's idea of imagination.

In the dialogue's fictional framework, the imagination of troubles to come contrasts with the immediate situation of the speakers. Antony's household is that of at least a substantial gentleman (II.Pref., 81), perhaps a retired courtier (III.10, 223-247). [5] His dinner is presented on time, and he naps afterward without disturbance (II.17, 190-91). Vincent, a well-travelled young man, favored by the powerful (III.10, 218), has leisure enough to report Antony's « comfortable counsel » while visiting other friends (II.Pref., 82). The drawn-out conversation -- itself a sign of tranquility -- conveys the impression of a civilized, orderly and cultivated life, typified by the game of capping quotations (e.g., III.10, 218-22). Neither speaker suffers any immediate danger, except for Antony's lingering infirmity of old age. In this setting Vincent engages Antony's imagination in order to prepare for the Turk's tribulation : « the world is here waxen such, and so great perils appear here to fall at hand » (I.Pref., 3) that counsel is needed in advance. Antony's imagination of the future has credibility because of his memory : « [You, Antony,] have had of such things as we now do fear, good experience and assay in yourself, as he that hath been taken prisoner in Turkey two times in your days » (I.Pref., 3-4). The urgent prospect of trouble, therefore, compels Vincent to risk Antony's health for the general good (II.Pref., 81). The anticipation of trouble to come strikes harshly in the comfortable house, yet the contrast fixes the subject in the future -- the proper sphere of memory as imagination.

Vincent conceives of this prospective tribulation first of all as physical danger and pain -- an assault upon the bodily senses. Once the idea occurs to him, his imagination fills out its sensory details, in a passage that forecasts the dialogue's movement from bodily harm to spiritual danger. The Turkish peril epitomizes the tribulations that human beings suffer :

> There falleth so continually before the eyen of our heart, a fearful imagination of this terrible thing : his mighty strength and power, his high malice and hatred, and his incomparable cruelty, with robbing, spoiling, burning, and laying waste all the way that his army cometh ; then killing or carrying away the people far hence fro home, and there sever the couples and kindred asunder, every one far from the other, some kept in thralldom, and some kept in prison, and some for a triumph tormented and killed in his presence ; then send his people hither and his false faith therewith, so that such as are here and remain still shall either both leese all and be lost too, or forced to forsake the faith of our Savior Christ, and fall to the false sect of Mahomet (I.Pref., 6-7).

Vivid language and concrete imagery, here reinforced by rhetorical balance and parallelism, give the imagined tribulation a sensory impact that more abstract discussion would lack. Vincent's imagination carries him away, here and elsewhere, compounding the actual threat with « fearful heaps of peril » (I.Pref., 7). Subsequent passages show the same sensory elaboration. They exemplify the psychology of fear that drives Vincent to seek counsel. The « tidings » (III.Pref., 192) or « the very fame [i.e., rumor] and expectation » (III.15, 244) of tribulation enlarge his fear, so that he fails to judge them accurately, as Antony once points out (III.Pref., 192).

Antony in fact recognizes the effect of imagination in all these troubles : what we see with « the eyen of our heart » causes us to fear. He and Vincent frequently refer to imagination's special potency : sinners at the point of death « despair with imagination of hell » (I.18, 63) ; the persecuted may weaken « by rememberance of the pain that their imagination representeth to the mind » (III.1, 203) ; even the steadfast tremble with « horror at the thinking upon bodily pain » (III.17, 250), « the terror of those painful accidents » (III.19, 263). The discussion of various delusions in the first two books leads to Antony's distinction between kinds of imagination in Book III : « wrong imagination, whereby I beguile myself with an untrue persuasion » (III.18, 257) may end in « an horror enhanced of our own fantasy » (III.20, 283), the kind of

horror that springs up when imagination is left to run unchecked. The sensory elaboration of the troubles that Antony and Vincent describe sometimes runs unchecked itself, imitating the « fantastical fear » (III.24, 304) that results when « our fantasy frameth us a false opinion, by which we deceive ourself » (III.20, 282). Wrong imagination results, that is, when « the eyen of our heart » focus upon the wrong object.

The crux of the psychological problem is the nature of the imagination. Since the imagination depends upon the senses, it inclines the mind toward the sensual world. By this fact, the devil sets all his store : « our ghostly enemy the devil enforceth himself to make us lean unto the sensual affections and beastly » (III.21, 288-89). If imagination could conceive of heaven, then no present tribulation would daunt us. The best comfort against tribulation in this present world is joy in the world to come -- but that joy the imagination cannot present to us. As Antony says :

> Howbeit, if we would somewhat set less by the filthy, voluptuous appetites of the flesh, and would by withdrawing from them with help of prayer through the grace of God draw near to the secret, inward pleasure of the spirit, we should by the little sipping that our hearts should have here now, and that sudden taste thereof, have such an estimation of the incomparable and uncogitable joy that we shall have, if we will, in heaven by the very full draught thereof... (III.26, 312).

As Antony's figure suggests, right imagination can give the human mind some foretaste of joy, but only by the barest likeness of sensory perceptions, for as he says earlier, « our blind mortality cannot here imagine nor devise the stint » of heaven's glory and God's « high goodness and wisdom » (I.11, 38). Guessing at heaven -- « estimation » -- belongs to the understanding, and for fallen man, the defective understanding is much less powerful than the imagination.

Imagination, then, and more broadly the whole world of sense make comfort against tribulation difficult. Here are the tribulations that memory through imagination forces upon our awareness ; there is the « uncogitable joy » that renders them insignificant. But at an accurate vision of that joy imagination cannot arrive. Antony's advice converts part of the problem into part of the solution. Since the imagination belongs to the mind, and since the mind is God's creation, through grace the mind can supply the discipline that imagination lacks. Imagination is not to be conformed to the world of sense but to be transformed : « right imagination » can change the focus of « the eyen of our heart. » [6]

As Christ is both God and man, and as He meditates between God and man, so does the imagination of the Passion mediate between the world of sense and the « uncogitable joy » of heaven. The repeated evocations of the Passion (I.10, 34 ; I.19, 69 ; II.16, 159, 167 ; III.1, 203 ; III.17, 251-52 ; III.20, 284 ; and III.27, 318-26) follow the pattern that is established in the description of the Turkish peril. They belong to the same imaginative faculty, as their emphasis on the senses suggests, evident in the most extended example :

> if we could and would with due compassion conceive in our minds a right imagination and remembrance of Christ's bitter, painful passion, of the many sore, bloodly strokes that the cruel tormentors with rods and whips gave him upon every part of his holy, tender body, the scornful crown of sharp thorns beaten down upon his holy head, so straight and so deep that on every part his blessed blood issued out and streamed down ... (III.27, 318).

This last imagination of the Passion, coming at the end of the dialogue and continuing for another twenty lines in the text, balances and answers the imagination of the Turkish peril with which Vincent began. In both, imagination and sensory elaboration carry the speaker (and the reader) forward, but in the first, the imagination is undisciplined and directed toward the self ; in the last, Antony's imagination is clearly focussed upon the saving image of the suffering Christ. By grace and discipline, the imagination is both redirected and redeemed. « [Our] carnal hearts ... [are] so little able to conceive so much as a shadow of the right imagination » (III.26, 314) that not the joy of heaven but the suffering Christ must occupy the senses (see, e.g., II.16, 167). As the Turkish peril epitomizes all that human beings suffer through tribulation, so the Passion subsumes all the tribulations of humankind in one perfect act. Grace leads the imagination away from present tribulation toward « uncogitable joy, » for it is Christ as man, not as God, that the imagination of the Passion presents to « the eyen of our heart » :

> [Vincent :] But surely, good uncle, when I bethink me further on the grief and the pain that may turn unto my flesh, here find I the fear that forceth mine heart to tremble.
>
> [Antony :] Neither have I cause thereof to marvel nor you, cousin, cause to be dismayed therefore. The great horror and the fear that our Saviour had in his own flesh against his painful passion maketh me little to marvel ... (III.17, 251).

In summary, the dialogue uses both parts of the imagination that Augustine describes as a function of memory : the reproductive imagi-

nation that allows us to reconstruct our past sensations, and the productive imagination that re-orders past sensations to create new ones. The imagination thus allows us to place our suffering in the proper framework, which is the comparison with the suffering of Christ ; we can by an act of will through grace direct our imagination to its proper object, the consideration of the Passion, which mediates between equally difficult extremes : on the one hand, the « wrong imagination » of worldly tribulation, which endangers us by wrongly focusing our minds ; and on the other, the « uncogitable joy » of heaven, which neither imagination nor reason is equipped to summon up.

This attitude redeems the imagination, most earth-bound of the mind's faculties. It is transformed from potential danger into actual benefit to salvation, for neither defective reason nor infected will can do what the imagination does. To the rightly-disciplined imagination, the image of Christ's suffering is an index to which all human suffering can be referred, so that we may see how the greatest tribulation provides the greatest opportunity for the imitation of Christ.

Few people have had More's opportunity to practice at so crucial a juncture what they have preached before. Certainly More's conduct on the scaffold suggests that More had reconciled himself to the event and that the imagination of this persecution, which More had rehearsed through the characters of Antony and Vincent, served him in good stead by focussing the eyes of his heart on the Cross of Christ. Yet on the other hand, the dialogue gives evidence that this victory was hard to win. Nowhere in the dialogue, for example, does either speaker deny that pain *is* pain : More is always careful to give the world, the flesh and the devil their due, but he is also eager to redeem not only the generality of human troubles but also his own personal tribulation from the fruitless dead-end of simple suffering. The dialogue may also indicate More's doubts as he considered the justice of his cause. The long passage on suicide at the end of Book II, bracketed by « merry tales » of persons whose suicides travesty the Crucifixion (II.15, 128-30 ; II.16, 147-48), may suggest his doubts about the reality of the martyrdom he faced. [7] In the end, however, one may be inclined to see the dialogue as a rehearsal for death, and in this rehearsal the imagination plays its most important role. As Antony says at the end of the dialogue, « to fear while the pain is coming, there is all our let » (III.27, 325) : imagination gives us the fear, but it also frees us from the fear. Without imagination, we cannot prepare ourselves for reality. With imagination,

« the eyen of our heart » can perhaps discern, even through the haze of pain and persecution, the comfort of that great good growing towards us from God (I.19, 70).

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1. See Elizabeth McCutcheon, « Number Symbolism in St. Thomas More's 'Pageant Verses,' » *Moreana*, XVIII, no. 70 (June 1981), 29-32, and further references there cited, n. 1.

2. Trans. L. Bradner and C.A. Lynch, *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More* (Chicago : Univ. Chicago Press, 1953), p. 238. Reproduced with the Latin in R.S. Sylvester, ed., *St. Thomas More : Richard III and Selections* (New Haven and London : Yale Univ. Press, 1976), p. 118.

3. See Louis L. Martz, « The Design of *A Dialogue of Comfort*, » *CW 12* (New Haven and London : Yale Univ. Press, 1976), lxv-lxxix.

4. For More's acquaintance with Augustine's works, see Leland Miles, « Patristic Comforters in More's *Dialogue of Comfort*, » *Moreana*, no. 8 (Nov. 1965), 9-20, and G. Marc'hadour, « Fathers and Doctors of the Church, » *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies, CW6*, Part 2 (New Haven and London : Yale Univ. Press, 1981), 526-35. As Frank Manley suggests (« The Argument of the Book, » *CW 12*, cxv, n. 2), Aquinas might also be cited as the source of More's idea of the imagination, although the Thomistic model contains refinements -- notably the idea of the *sensus communis* -- that More seems to ignore ; *S.T.*, Ia, Q. 78, aa. 3-4, bears most directly on the relationship of memory and imagination. I am indebted to Stephen Foley, of the More Project and Brown University, for pointing out the difficulties of separating Augustine's influence from that of Aquinas or of Scotus ; since both of these later writers also owe a debt to Augustine, it may be more accurate to cite Augustine as the ultimate source of More's ideas, although More's frequent references to Augustine suggest immediate influence. Much useful information on the history of theories of memory and their relationship to the imagination may be found in Frances A. Yates's *Art of Memory* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

5. All quotations are taken from the modern-spelling version of the *Dialogue*, ed. Frank Manley, in the Yale Selected Works series (New Haven and London, 1977). Parenthetical citations give the book and chapter numbers, followed by page numbers in this ed.

6. For the source of discipline in the action of the reason, see Manley, *CW 12*, cxii-cxvii.

7. See Walter M. Gordon, « Suicide in Thomas More's *Dialogue of Comfort*, » *American Benedictine Review*, 29 (1978), 358-70, and Paul Greene, « Suicide, Martyrdom, and Thomas More, » *Studies in the Renaissance*, 19 (1972), 135-55.