Ascent from 'Descent': The Theological Context of Rogier van der Weyden's 'Descent from the Cross'

DOUGLAS, MARGARET,VALERIE

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The remaining central panel to an altarpiece Rogier van der Weyden completed in 1435, known as *The Descent from the Cross,* is one of the finest examples of the work of *The Flemish Primitives*. Their paintings are characterised by their technical innovation, superlative workmanship, purity of realism as well as their, often tranquil spirituality and emotional expression. Yet despite these qualities, they have never sat comfortably within the general *oeuvre* of Western Fine Art Studies, as has the work of the Italian Renaissance: Theirs was the last flowerings of the French Gothic. Additionally, given that the painting it is a pre-Reformation work, it can never, legitimately, be separated from the Christian religious culture that bore it. That culture had two important elements in the early fifteenth century, the piety of the laity and the mysticism that had developed from the early 1200's. How may these facts be linked, to facilitate a greater understanding of this painting, from those critical pre-Reformation years?

Whilst aware of research during the last twenty years, my aim is to contribute to a greater understanding of the religious context of Rogier's *Descent from the Cross.* I have approached the task in the manner in which the devout would have considered a mystical ascent: exploring the physicality of the work alongside its historical situation and increasingly seeking the deeper theological references. I began by looking at artist and commissioners, the more obvious clues within the work and the Chambers of Rhetoric who dramatised Scriptural events; the very *active* life of the era. Mary has a dominant role in the painting and though dismissed by Reformation, she has a vibrant history and presence. Uniting the visual image with mysticism required a 'journey to Byzantium', to consider the legitimacy of the image within Liturgy, and understand how differently its use evolved in the West. And lastly, to draw the laity into both, I called upon three eminent theologians from the second millennium St. Anselm, St. Bonaventure and the Blessed Jan van Ruusbroec.

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Illustration: *The Descent from the Cross* Rogier van der Weyden, Oil on Panel, 1435

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For Jonathan

Introduction

If you were to enter room seven of El Museo del Prado in Madrid, to escape the August heat, you may come face to face with Rogier van der Weyden's masterwork, *The Descent from the Cross.* The painter was one of the two most acclaimed Flemish artists of the early fifteenth century in Northern Europe. The suddenness of the encounter surprises. The oak panels that have supported it since its creation hang with little protection and the work has been brought down to our eye level. We are free to intermingle, visually, with the nine life size figures who, with quiet distress, witness the lowering of the newly dead Christ from the cross; we could put out a hand to touch the *trompe l'oiel* wound in the side of Christ, we can stand so close. At first glance, and many only glance, it seems less real, less dramatic, the colours more muted than the impression given by technological reproductions. It is always something of a surprise to see a work of art in the original, one which we have come to know through text and reproduction; it is rarely what we thought it to be. Rogier's masterwork now hangs as the remaining panel from an altar triptych. It hangs, an expatriate in a foreign land, isolated from its place of birth, its native environment and the culture that bore it. It hangs, innocent of what was to come and the reasons why it now rests in a secular place, in a foreign land, so different from where it was intended.

The status of *The Descent from the Cross* in the gallery is that of a masterwork of *The Primitives,* a term coined in the 1800's for those artists who painted in a *Gothic styl*e of the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Theirs was an elegant, soft manner of 'delicate realism' using the new medium of oil painting, particular to the Northern Burgundian Lands of Europe, one that had an exquisite jewel-like quality. The question may then be asked, how can we mentally repatriate Rogier van der Weyden's masterpiece? The gossamer of nuance is too delicate to have withstood the passage of time but if enough remnants of material can be gathered together, it could be that we can enfold our masterpiece in a 'cloth of context' and comprehension, and try to gain a greater access to its *persona*. However, context here cannot be confined to the era in which the work was created. *Context* has, where needed, to refer back to those first difficult attempts to understand the phenomenon of the man they called Jesus, to refer to

critical times when re-evaluation was needed. In doing so the aim is to gain a greater understanding of the Christianity the laity practiced, in those critical pre-Reformation years in Northern Europe, and how it had evolved. This was the era that brought forth Rogier van der Weyden's masterpiece which has survived for nearly six hundred years.

The survival of a major work of art is a history in itself, for it has depended on a person or persons having the will and determination to protect it, in times of conflict, and retain it in as near to its original condition as is possible. However, for an art work to merit such intensive care there must be a consensus of opinion to uphold an unwavering belief as to its value, one maintained throughout the multiple generations who have sought to protect its being. Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross,* is one of those *major* works of art from the early 15th century, from the late middle ages of Northern Europe that has been afforded that privilege, being as it is, a unique work of pre-Reformation religious art. It was created, amongst other things, as Erwin Panofsky believes for a dual purpose:

> 'To realise a "vision" in a work of art, the artist has to fulfil two seemingly contradictory requirements. On the one hand he must be an accomplished master of 'naturalism', for only where we behold a world evidently controlled by what is known as the Laws of Nature can we become aware of that temporary suspension of those laws which is the essence of a 'miracle'; on the other hand, he must be capable of transplacing the miraculous event [the painting] from the level of factuality to that of an imaginary experience';[1] [that of offering passage to that which is not governed by the Laws of Nature, as in a spiritual contemplation of that image.]

Rogier van der Weyden's masterwork hangs, somewhat uncomfortably, in its foreign home. It does not hang with the assurance that it emits from the glossy pages of High Art texts and there are several aspects of the work that are difficult. It is much larger than many of the *Primitive* works and it is atypical. Within the panel there is no apparent geometric structure into which we can settle. There is a disconcerting sense of

[1](Panofsky 1971) p.111 Panofsky is commenting on his text on Albrect Dürer but his text is considering, at length, *Early Netherlandish Paintings.*

the random held together by angles and shapes; 'More in common with Matisse or Picasso.'[2] The work does not hang from the wall with the consummate assurance of native Spanish works. It has none of the bold self-confidence of Velasquez's *Las Meninas* or the bravura dash of the Goyas with their signature black and muted tones. Rogier's work is distinctly polychromatic. The colours live independent lives as though they were applied to individual statues. But most of all it is the obsessive observational description, akin to photography, which confounds the modern viewer. Many believe that what they see could be equally well achieved by an enlarged photograph of a group of actors. It seems to lack, *Art.* It is 'figurative.' It is too 'accessible'. It is too big and we are allowed to stand too close. Culturally, it is overtly religious. It describes, with apparent graphic sentimentality, a rather uncomfortable moment in the Christian story.

In commenting on the unique nature of Northern Art of the 15th Century as opposed to the familiar Italian, Craig Harberson writes, 'Northern artists ... saw themselves as conduits for important political, religious or social change ... Their works were instrumental in helping their contemporaries formulate issues and ideas ... there is a sense of contingency and ambiguity in the North which contrasts with the fixity, the monumental stable forms so typical of the Italian Renaissance.'[3] It is the challenge of this difference, the invitation for dialogue between the reader, [the seer] and the text, [the image] that Harbison invites; to use the portal of the 15th century Burgundian Lands though which to enter this complex Northern mind set. But to gain full access we are, as 21st century viewers, set multiple challenges in order to gain *entré* into this Late Medieval world. Though the artistic analysis and the detailed historical context are essential, they are exceeded by the potential of this particular work, this visual liturgy, to take the viewer back to before the techno/scientific age of modernism, to before Reformation, Enlightenment, Romanticism and Revolution and into the very heart of those *Catholic* Late Medieval, Barbarian inspired Northern Lands: a time, in those lands, that was unique and so relatively short lived.

There are certain incontrovertible facts, relating to Rogier's *Descent from the Cross,* and the era of its creation. Firstly, and significantly, both commissioners and painter

[2] (Campbell 2009) p.34
[3] (Harbison 1995) p.23

were members of the laity. This places its creation outside the environs of Church or the Aristocracy. This is critically important as it determines the whole essence of the enquiry.[4] As Norman Tanner concludes in his text on *The Church in the Later Middle Ages,* 'In Western Christendom, the later Middle Ages witnessed much energy and creativity in the religion of the laity. The period is rightly called an 'Age of the Laity'. Secondly, the group of artists that worked in the Burgundian Lands, known as "the great Netherlandish artists", as Dürer called them, ruled supreme for two or three successive generations.[5] In fact the Italian Quattrocento was deeply impressed with the distinctive qualities of Early Flemish painting,[6] though they had their later detractors. However, their work, acclaimed though it was, fell out of fashion with the Reformation and the dominance of the Italian Renaissance. Thirdly, there is the importance of the Mystical Theology that was associated with this Northern European late Middle Age and the laity: 'the period circa 1350-1550 as being the central era for Dutch mysticism. It witnessed a florescence of mystical authors writing in the Dutch-Flemish language, a proliferation that testifies to the literacy of the urbanized Low Countries, as well as to the widespread hunger for spiritual literature'.[7]

If these factors are to be considered together, how can they be united? *The Descent from the Cross* is not merely a painted panel. It was conceived and created for a religious purpose by and for members of the laity, and therefore must, through circumstance, hold within its fabric the social and religious culture of its creation. The challenge has to be, how may a closer look at Roger's masterwork contribute to a greater understanding of this religious culture that desired its creation?

For the laity, Jeffrey Hamburger argues, in his appraisal of *The Rothchild Chronicles*, that the ability to read had given the elite the privilege of spiritual contemplation through text rather than image, but 'the growth of a literate public, also enfranchised the image in ways that had never previously been possible'.[8] When before,

[4] That said, there has to be added the caveat that Rogier, in executing this commission as a newly established painter, would have been seeking to attract patrons from the ruling classes.
[5] (Panofsky 1971) p.1
[6] Ibid p.1
[7] (McGinn 2012) p.1
[8] (Hamburger 1990) p.7

the laity had only the spoken work and the image for religious education and spiritual enrichment, they progressively came to embrace both text and image. 'As the ability to read became more commonplace, the hierarchical distinction between texts and images became increasingly tenuous',[9] The work presents beautiful evidence of the newfound equality of text and image, as vehicles of mystical elevation.[10] Hamburger's *Canticle,* is yet another reminder of the religious creativity of the laity; a creativity of which the collaboration between artist and crossbowmen were a part.

Before attempting to enquire more deeply into the theological and cultural mores that shaped Rogier's masterwork, it is important to acknowledge at least some of the scholarship that has already explored the complex manner of viewing such a work of art; the particular way in which sight was, as many writers have observed, so very differently understood as opposed to the contemporary. Without doubt the European Middle Ages have been opened up academically since the end of the 20th century. Not only have attitudes changed but important original theological texts, particularly in the vernacular languages of High German and Middle Dutch, have been translated into English and other languages. Many of these however remain fairly impenetrable, particularly to the secular world. They remain very *medieval.* It has, in many ways, been easier to access this era through its art works and artefacts. The use of artworks has come to be an accepted tool of communication. Responding to this challenge, there have been considerable efforts by the art historians, who have tended to dominate the field, at the expense of the theologians. There are several leading protagonists but the efforts of Jeffrey Hamburger come to the fore, particularly in terms of the religious art of Northern Europe, with his particular interest in German Mysticism which made its way into the Burgundian life of the Middle Ages. He seems to have a particular sensitivity to the complexities of both the religious and artistic dimensions. In his work *The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and History,* 'The central theme of the book is the fusion of theology and mysticism in the figure of St. John as expressed both in theology and art.'[11] In reviewing the work, Bernard McGinn praises it for its 'impressive erudition,

[9] Ibid p. 7
[10] Ibid.p.7
[11](McGinn 2004) p. 184

critical insight and original exploration of the relationship between art and spirituality in the later middle ages,'[12] His corrections of historical theological accuracy confirm the difficulties of such a venture, but he still applauds the work.

Jeffrey Hamburger, however, as editor of the text *The Mind's Eye,* makes several important points regarding medieval art, including reviewing attempts that have been make to reconcile the dialogue regarding medieval visual arts and Christian culture.[13] He feels that the visual image within religion has always been problematic and this he explores in detail. He makes an interesting point regarding the essay by Rudolf Berliner of 1937, on *The Freedom of Medieval Art,*[14] emphasising that image making was not simply dictated by clerical power. The freedom was widespread as Christians, left to their own devices by a dysfunctional church, sought comfort in a plethora of unofficial writings and images. When we are faced with both the vastness of time and circumstance and the volume of religious image and text, generalisations become disingenuous. Added to that, even if we are considering a single work of art, that consideration, while dependent on its provenance and theological genealogy, is also hugely dependent on the, 'mind's eye' of the viewer/commentator. We all bring with us our cultural, denominational, aesthetic disabilities, which inevitably partially blind us. Hamburger is seeking to caution against what was the popular exercise of visual exegesis and writes, 'even the most brilliant iconographic interpretations can reduce images to ciphers' and run the risk of, 'flirting with catechism.'[15] While Hamburger has made exceptional forays into the Christianity of medieval art works, his integrity constantly pulls him back to question the validity of such a venture.

Whilst accepting the reservations of Hamburger, there is no one formula that fits all. The matter is greatly simplified if, as in this case, the work has survived to enter into the universal domain of human experience; it is thought to be 'known'. To counter that, however, when that work of art embraces so particularly a religiosity that was so soon to be challenged, by so many, there is a problem. This legacy still holds an almost

[12] Ibid p.185
[13] (Hamburger 2005)
[14] Ibid.p.12f
[15] Ibid.p.22

subversive lack of recognition, not only of its Latin Catholic nature but also of the mystical lay piety of the Burgundian Lands of Pre-Reformation Northern Europe. Just as the artefact is locked within its historical context, so too, it is within its religious circumstance.

It is within a similar vein that I consider, Thomas Lentes' essay, concerning the 'gazing' at religious works of art and visual piety, as a medieval practice.[16] Lentes explores the manner in which image was able to, 'transform, expiate and purify man of his guilt.'[17] He writes of, 'Gothic piety,' defined as a devotional gaze leading to a, 'visual addiction'.[18] His references include opinions of Ildefons Herwegan and Anton L Mayers who equated the importance of sight with the elevation of the Host during Mass and salvation,[19] but who manipulates the arguments to misinterpret the practice. Lentes notes the deficiencies in their arguments and comments that such practice was, 'an example, *par excellence*, of the [perceived] decadence of medieval piety.'[20] At the same time he records the emotive manner in which their arguments were made, as if somehow man has outgrown this subjectivity to the visual image. There is also a well documented instruction as to how to use the religious image, particularly in private devotion, a practice which has not completely passed into the history books. He does, however, repeatedly acknowledge the research yet to be carried out on these divergent questions. The sum total of the aspects of the religious image he raises, as do others, is all part of the choreography of sacred space – a space, whether it be in the home or church, the individual in spiritual need, sought retreat. Relenting, Lentes writes, almost touchingly, of images being, 'memorial stones in everyday life,' during the Middle Ages.[21]

Much has been added to the dialogue on the ability to, 'see', medieval art as a physical object and as a focus of concentration assisting toward a deeper spiritual sense,

[16] (Lentes 2005) p.360
[17] Ibid p.360
[18] Ibid p.361
[19] Ibid p.361
[20] Ibid p.361
[21] Ibid p.336

of seeking a communication with God. Herbert L Kesslers's *Seeing Medieval Art*,[22] is an important contribution to this field. However, again, his range of consideration is wide and to a certain extent eclectic, making it too general for this context.

An important contribution to the subject has come from Brett Rothstein and his, *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting*.[23] Using works by Rogier van der Weyden, Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin, he looks to see to what extent the work of Geert Groot and Jan van Ruusbroec played in the phenomenon of Flemish medieval art works. Its reference to Ruusbroec is a useful and a significant contribution, as he breaks away from the dominance of art history.

There is, undeniably, a considerable amount of scholarship abroad. There is much to set the stage for an 'in depth' examination of a masterwork of medieval visual art, but the perennial strength of a masterwork is that it continually offers itself up for reinterpretation. Inevitably, that last lap of moving into the religious interior of a late medieval religious art work is complex, as it has to be completed by the viewers, with whatever resources they may have to hand, resources the modern secular world has, in the main dismissed. There are relatively few master artworks that have come down to us that have, within themselves, sufficient sustenance to potentially carry the viewer into those inner reaches of pre-Reformation divine meditation, that offer visual clues to theological lines of enquiry, capable of occasionally confusing modern interpretations. This is not the case with Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*. It was a boldly 'modern' work but it still fell within that pre-modern age. It carries, as I will attempt to prove, within its deceptive modernity and sumptuous excellence, the bounty of its theological provenance. The question remains, of how to access it.

The Challenge of a Theological Access

One of the challenges of twenty first century life is the excess of information. Another is, living within a scientific age, the requirement for definitive answers, plus

[22] (Kessler 2004)
[23] (Rothstein 2005)

the determined secularisation of western society. In their own way, these facts potentially disable any foray into the spiritual realms of late medieval life. Academia may demand 'evidence' but it is the interpretation of that evidence that is so subjective. I would submit that outside the realms of empirically measured scientific data, total objectivity is an impossibility; facts may be presented in a scholarly manner but it is the interpretation of those facts and the problems of selection, when a field of study is so vast that declare the agenda of the writer. Is it not so, that the usual methods of conduct, are not applicable here? Could it be that, given we are dealing with an object of supreme creativity (as endorsed by scholars of fine art), one made as part of a religious culture that disappeared into darkness at the time of the Reformation, there may be allowed a certain creativity of approach, one that will not necessarily deliver definitive answers, but in the delving into the inner reaches of the work, create more questions than it attempts to answer and thereby lay trials of potentially useful inconclusion; for such matters require many minds. Within the riches of such a sumptuous cultural era, it is impossible to embrace all aspects; but detailed cameos can possibly create an environment, a context, for text, even visual text is barren without *con*text. The work has to be explored in something of the creative manner in which it was made.

One important foray into an important medieval Flemish altarpiece, *The Adoration of the Lamb,* contemporary to Rogier's, has been made by the theologian Peter Schmidt.[24] He begins by asserting that any monumental work of art, from the time of its completion, 'takes on a life of its own and is pretty soon beyond its creator's control'.[25] He continues that, 'as with literature, there is developed a referential inter-textuality; 'powerful texts and great works of art contain such a wealth of language and expression that they may conceal or even create layers of meaning of which the author/painter was never aware'. 'It is after all a requirement if a work of art is to continue to interpellate and move and affect'.[26] Schmidt entitles his initial foray into the theological dimensions of the altarpiece, *The Theological Programme.* As introduction, he notes the pitfalls of such an enquiry.[27] These pitfalls stem from the fact that 'The late medieval

[24] (Schmidt 2000) The *Adoration of the Lamb,* The Ghent Altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers, 1432
[25] Ibid p. 46
[26] Ibid p.47
[27] Ibid p.43

interpretation of biblical texts was wrapped in a tissue of symbolic and allegorical explanations, drawn from the commentaries of early Christian Fathers and medieval theologians'. This statement is of considerable importance in my attempts to address the complexity of Rogier's masterwork. Schmidt admits that this concept can rapidly get out of control. Even when considering only one work of art. 'The principle of "everything connects" can set off a chain reaction that links virtually every theme in Christian theology ... as well as all the political issues of the day and every allegorical meaning that was current in the late Middle Ages'.[28] He suggests, that, 'To prevent falling into the reverse logic that says, "if you can't prove it isn't, so it very likely is",[29] it is necessary to begin with a minimum number of incontrovertible facts and on the basis of these pose a number of questions and cautiously suggest some possible answers'. As he writes, 'Perhaps the most complete encounter with a work of art takes place when there is a balance between the correct historical situating of the work (on the objective side) and emphatic dialogue with the work borne of one's own experience of the world (on the subjective side).[30] However, even with this approach, there are fault lines. My objective selection of correct history is, undoubtedly, coloured with my subjectivity, making this only a singular contribution. I believe it is important to state these shortcomings, if only as an attempt to minimise them.

A Subjectively, Objective Route to Accessing the Inner Reaches of Rogier's *Descent*

Given that my principle interest in Rogier's work is that of seeking out its religious origins and presence, I intend to divide the enquiry into four chapters. In doing so the work will move from a close examination of the leads that the work gives, into exploring some of its history, through a challenge to the modern interpretation of Mary within the painting followed by a broader look at that which had influenced its creation

[28] (Schmidt 2000) p.44
[29] Ibid p.44
[30] Ibid p.48

and lastly to three theologians through whom, I feel, can be most easily be traced the mystical dimensions of lay religiosity during the early fifteenth century.

Just as Italy has been a bountiful source of fascination for its creative energy, so too the other most populated urban area of the late medieval West, the Northern Lowlands, was culturally rich, a richness that is still being discovered. In the first chapter, I will explore some of the diversity of the lives of artist and commissioners and look at clues from the painting that will flesh out the context of their lives. Within the bold 'modernity' of the work there is the ancient vision of the biblical text from which the popular medieval devotion *The Seven Sorrows of Mary* originated and expressed in the many dramatic interpretations. This leads to acknowledgement of The Chambers of Rhetoric and the religious dramatics of the age. For the second chapter I want to look at the second most important figure in the work that of Mary, and challenge the over-riding opinion that this work was a statement of Mary as *equal* co-redemptrix of the human world, with her Son Christ. But Mary was a casualty of Reformation, being rejected by the Reformed Churches, a rejection originating, not least, in the satirical texts of Erasmus and his translation of the New Testament from the Greek. The position of Mary, and through Rogier's depiction of her, the position of women in pre-Reformation Northern Europe, has yielded a bounty of information that contributes to the understanding of lay piety. For the third chapter I will question the least obvious aspects of the work, firstly the culturally difficult expressions of intense emotion and the equally difficult, the description of empathy for that emotion. From expressing and reacting to these, I will move on to address the less tangible aspects of a work of religious art, the relationship between image and Christian faith; how and why this differed in East and West and yet as the pre-Reformation era closed, how there became an unwritten parallel between the two as the West's mystical theology became more sophisticated. Then, in the last chapter, when at the stage of knowing more of the genealogy of this artwork, it is time to concentrate on the final stage of enquiring into how that mystical theology, embraced by so many of the laity and aristocracy, progressed in those Middle Ages and how it was relevant to this particular painting. The time-span of the Christian years from the ancient to the modern are so vast that selection of theologians is difficult, but is essential in such a short text. The men I have chosen I

have done so for two reasons. Firstly, they were men who, within their faith, rose to the challenge of particularly difficult situations within Christianity during their life. Secondly, from them it is possible to see how the West rose from its *Dark Ages*, to embrace all class of people within its Christianity and in doing so developed a particular spiritual dimension to its faith. Those men I have chosen are, St. Anselm of Canterbury, St. Bonaventure and The Blessed Jan van Ruusbroec, who although having no direct influence on Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, were a key part of how the faith that informed him had developed.

The narrow confines of Art History have moved on since the eminent Art Historian, the late E.H.Gombrich wrote his renowned *History of Art* in the 1950's. His comments, however, at the end of the Introduction to his *classic* work, still have relevance for any re-look at a monumental work of art from the past. 'To talk cleverly about art is not difficult, because the words critics use have been used in so many different contexts that they have lost all precision. But to look at a work of art with fresh eyes and to venture on a voyage of discovery is a far more difficult task. There is no telling what one may bring home from such a journey'.[31]

[31] (Gombrich 1950) p.18

Chapter One

The Great Deposition: Rogier van der Weyden's altarpiece of 1435

'HOC EST ENIM CORPUS MEUM'. As the celebrant priest elevates the Host, the eyes of the congregation in the church of Our Lady Outside the Walls in Leuven, circa 1435, are drawn upwards to alight on a painting that was attracting much attention. The highly praised, almost local painter, Rogier van der Weyden, a man originally from Tournai but who had a workshop in the nearby city of Brussels, had painted this new altarpiece for their church; a magnificent work; the extant section entitled *The Descent from the Cross.* The triptych had been hung above the altar with its doors now open for the ongoing ceremony. The whole was unbelievable in its realism, splendour of colour and emotional impact, the like of which had never been seen before.

The Descent from the Cross. Rogier van der Weyden El Prado, Madrid. 220x260cms, 1435

In this initial look at Rogier van der Weyden's masterwork, I propose to take three different viewpoints. Firstly, the artist and the commissioners need to be fitted together, historically, socially and religiously, as they originally came together to make this, *Artefact:* this was a substantial commission Importantly, it was more usual for such major works of art to be commissioned by senior clergy or a member of the aristocracy. It is an indication of the wealth and power of The Guild of Crossbowmen of Leuven that they could finance such a project. For the artist, new to his mastership of the Guild of Painters, it presented a unique occasion which would allow for a certain degree of creative freedom, in a similar way in which the Van Eyck brothers executed *The Adoration of the Lamb.* Also, importantly, it is one of the few works that can be confidently attributed to the hand of Rogier himself, rather than a corporate venture from his studio.[32] From this I will show how painters were emerging from being nameless artisans to become international celebrities and how The Guilds were becoming a power that could challenge the ruling classes. With this corporate enterprise between a master artist and a Guild, *The Descent from the Cross,* by Rogier van der Weyden was hanging in the Guild of Crossbowmen's Chapel of Our Lady Outside the Walls, in the then Hoelstraet of Leuven, just inside the second ring wall of the city by 1435[33]: It was a unique example of the power of the rising middle class of Northern Europe; it was a time for new liaisons and for innovation and creativity.

Secondly, *The Descent,* so different from contemporary works, even strikingly different from other works that came from the Rogier's studio, that when first viewed, must have presented as, "The Shock of the New". It is this newness that I will explore, one which arose out of the circumstance of the era but was scrupulously contained within a fabric of tradition, some looking back to the earliest Churches in Christendom. As Rogier made no clear demarcation between the old and the new, the innovative married harmoniously with the familiar, so this is how the work must now be considered.

Thirdly, I will continue to consider the, 'active' dimensions of this work of art; how it was integral to the social, religious and creative aspects of late medieval life in Northern Europe, in contrast to the isolation in which it now hangs, There are two important cultural

[32] (Campbell 2004) p.13-14
[33] (Stock 2009) p.19

aspects related to the work, the devotion of The Seven Sorrows of May, particularly the sixth, The Lamentation and the rise of drama within the circles of the 'third estate' and the aristocracy. This was a time when drama was a universal means of communication, so that a popular depictions of The Sixth Sorrow of Mary, grounds the work in its contemporary circumstance. That said, any consideration of dramatic performances is incomplete without including The Confaternaties of Rhetoric. These became established amongst the growing middle classes as they aspired to the intellectual abilities of their superiors. When the Guilds of Crossbowmen held their competitions, dramatic productions were a side attraction which was facilitated by these aspiring thespians. Among the outstanding repertoire of these literary and theatrical groups, a universal favourite was the dramatic representation of *The Seven Sorrows of Mary.* The mix of social, working and religious life of Burgunian towns was held together by their mutually interdependent activities. The whole was a matrix, a tapestry, a functioning whole of which Rogier's magnificent altarpiece was but a part.

From the three perspectives I hope to demonstrate that, from within the ranks of the rising middle classes, there was a contemporary familiarity with visual religious expression and a serious intent for its literary and dramatic culture. These emerging skills made it possible for them to evolve their own particular expressions of lay piety; the word 'piety' not being the modern, deprecating interpretation, but at its best an expression of their attempt to make more fruitful, an understanding of Christianity within a Church that was failing and often abusing them. From that base of the decidedly 'active' life of the early 15th century, it is possible to move onto specific aspects of that culture and how it developed into the unique expression of Christianity before all was swept away by the Reformation, less than a century later.

Artist and Commissioners

The Guild of the Great Crossbowmen, the men who had sufficient funds to build a new chapel and commission one of the most promising painters in the Northern Lands, have their own tale to tell. Despite Pope Innocent II's dislike of this weapon on which he had

decreed at The Second Lateran Council of 1137, 'We prohibit, on pain of damnation, that deadly skill of Crossbowmen and archers to be exercised against Christians and Catholics,' the weapon gained popularity. Innocent's was a lone voice expressing concern in the wilderness of territorial struggles and the accepted violence of Christian against Christian. Frend, writing on Augustine, quotes the latter's Lucan text, 'Compel them to come in,' addressed to the Donatist group in Cartenna in North Africa in 411, when they refused to enter the Catholic fold. As Frend continues this small sentence, justifying the use of force had, 'the gravest consequences for the future of Christian brotherhood and toleration.'[34] This Christian brotherhood was strained to breaking, in the 'violent tenor of life'[35] which was the Middle Ages but would degenerate as the Reformation and Counter-Reformation reshaped Europe.

This crossbow, so damned by Innocent, was a hand held weapon that fired a small missile rather than an arrow and caused mortal damage as it tore into the flesh of the victim or as it unseated a knight from his horse at over 300 metres. There seems to have been little skill or strength involved, enabling it to be used by boy or old man. It lacked the elegance and skill of the longbow, favoured by the English, where an archer, in the pay of Henry V, fought alone as they did against the hapless French at Agincourt.[36] The crossbow by comparison seems to have been a cruder, more brutal and utilitarian weapon widely used in medieval warfare and particularly favoured by the Burgundians: An aside maybe, but an endorsement of Huizinga's assertions as to the wild contrasts of late medieval life with tender empathy aside gross brutality: a cameo of the Crossbowmen of Leuven

The Guild of the Crossbowmen was just one of many groups of people who had gathered themselves together to provide pre-industrial Europe with its goods and services, in agreement with charters granted to them by the ruling authorities. [37] The role of the Guilds was the provision of a well trained labour force, passing on traditions, innovating where needed, disciplining and supporting its members. They operated a sophisticated

[34] (Frend 2003) p.204
[35] (Huizinga 2001) p.9
[36] Henry was reputed to have had 5000 archers and a stock of 400,000 arrows in readiness for the French at Agincourt
[37] The Guild system lasted for over 500 years only to be abolished when countries became Nation States. And presumably when industry began they stood in the way of capitalist ventures.

form of finance to market their products, protect their innovations, supported members and apprentices, funded and protected those in need and as part of their charter supplied the town with able bodied men, to defend the walls in times of danger.[38] The skills they perfected and trade they generated brought much wealth to the Burgundian lands and made each town and city a force to be reckoned with for the ruling Burgundian Dukes. However, depending on the personality of the particular Duke, violence for the sake of violence was not their style.[39] Within the delicately balanced society of 15th Century Leuven, the Crossbowmen played a more integral and complex role than one would at first believe. Van de Stock notes that, as a predominant guild within the town, they were granted allowances by the town council as well as subsidies for expenses for any festival or competition they attended. [40] At this time the Dukes did not hold standing armies but relied heavily on these guild-men to be available as needed. Thus, the Crossbowmen in towns and cities of 15th Century Northern Europe were surprisingly influential. But there is a certain irony in that these men of war, using so brutal a weapon, should choose for their new chapel, an altarpiece portraying the moment of death of their brutally murdered Saviour.

It is a very particular man who can, from the religious ethos of the day and his own wider knowledge, conceive and execute such an outstanding and innovative piece of religious imagery. What then were the influences brought to bear on this man and how was his natural ability nurtured? This is not simply a work of *biblica pauperum.* It is a work of outstanding technical facility, an intimate understanding of human emotions and a unique interpretation of the religious climate of the era, created in the early maturity of an outstanding artisan. His apprenticeship with the innovative Robert Campin, himself renowned for his artistic expressions of human emotion, was undoubtedly important. Also, given that the ruling Burgundian Court was French speaking and that this was the mother

[38] (Epstein 1998) p.684ff
[39] (Blockmans et al 1999) p.15 Phillip the Bold, despite gaining his title from his courage in battle, when facing the inferior force of John of Gaunt in 1396 at Calais, rather than engage in mass slaughter suggested a chivalric dual on a specified battlefield to settle the matter but at the last minute decided against even that. During his life he was fonder of tournaments and indicated that he preferred was as theatre rather than mass murder.
[40] (Stock) p.20 and note 30

tongue of Rogier, from his native town of Tournai, he had to have had a significant Gallic mind-set,

It is to another guild that we must turn to follow the creation of Rogier's great *Descent from the Cross* and to another town, that of Tournai, 85km from Brussels. In the first half of the 15th Century it was directly dependant on the French crown as it sat on an islet between Flanders and Hainaut. As such, its language was French. Roger de la Pasture as he was at birth, c.1398-1400, only took the name Rogier van der Weyden when he moved to Dutch speaking Brussels; this was the name he used throughout his professional career. This French influence is, I believe important in tracing the provenance of his work.

Rogier's upbringing had been reasonably affluent with his father a well respected cutler. Time has robbed us of most of the detail of his early life. However, he enrolled as an apprentice painter under the tutelage of the renowned artist Robert Campin (1406 -1444), on 5th March 1427, a training that was to last four years.[41] Campbell comments on how Rogier developed alongside Campin, his 'concept of feminine beauty ... and the elegant disposition of draperies.'[42] With 'superb draughtsmanship and the ability to observe the smallest details they both integrated perfectly into the overall design'. They used, to maximum effect, their ability to express pain and anguish. Not all human emotions or experience can be successfully expressed in every art form. Images in the two dimensional can fail miserably by becoming genre comments on matters which should be dealt with in another medium; literature and the spoken word, sculpture with its three dimensional presence or music, are often better suited to conveying such intense emotional feelings. But these men went boldly forward to develop their form of artistic expression.

Successful though Rogier was in Tournai, following the completion of his apprenticeship, he moved with his wife and son to Brussels in the 1430's. Blockmans questions why. Why did he leave his French speaking hometown to open a studio in Brussels where the language was Flemish? The conclusion seems to be that of opportunity and prudence. The Burgundian Duke, Phillip the Good (1418-67) was of French descent through his grandfather, Phillip the Bold. The court spoke French and all matters, to the

[41] Ibid p.26
[42] (Campbell 2004) p.19

irritation of the Dutch speaking towns and cities, were conducted in French.[43] With this as his mother tongue, Rogier would have had substantial advantage in his dealings with the court and his commissioners.[44] The Court of Phillip the Good spent more time in Brussels than at any other city in the Burgundian lands.[45] Phillip would have been well aware that artists, who attracted international applause and enhanced his status and that of his country. Had he realised that this flowering of the dramatically different mode of painting that was taking place was, 'an instrument of culture and could serve political power'?[46]

There was however, another reason for the move to Brussels: The border between France and The Holy Roman Empire ran through the middle of Tournai. Conflicts of power and loyalties made for an unstable situation.[47] This was the time of Joan of Arc and the war between France and England. Duke Phillip had to play an even handed game of political support for both England and France to ensure that his revenue producing cities continued their trade. The Tournaise, understandably, as French speakers felt an allegiance with France. In 1424 Phillip agreed not to engage in further attacks on Tournai and the situation was resolved in 1435 when he relinquished all claim to the town. Tournai settled down to quiet prosperity but did not regain its old productive status.[48] Brussels was the place to be for a talented and ambitious artist. There has to be acknowledged a certain astuteness on the part of The Guild of Crossbowmen, to have had the foresight to select such a talented and aspiring artist, fresh into his mastership, to create the altarpiece for their new chapel in Leuven; a certain 'hand of fate' that brought together two strands of the new middle class in their expression of the lay piety, so key to this era.

[43] (Blockmans.Wim 1985) p.30 Phillip the Good made several attempts to speak Dutch but without success.
[44] (Milis 2005) p.327-351 In his chapter Milis explores the dominance of French culture on the Low Countries during the Middle Ages.
[45] (Blockmans 2009) p.30
[46](Blockmans et al. 1999) p.136
[47] (Blockmans 2009) p.28
[48] (Blockmans 2009) p.28
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The Shock of the New and the Consolation of the Familiar

Rogier's *Descent from the Cross* represents his first altarpiece, as far as we can tell, as master painter in his own right, following his apprenticeship with Robert Campin, that meets the artistic standards that define his work. Referring to this work, Panofsky remarks that we see Rogier, 'face to face.'[49] And as he comments, 'the painting ... is still a youthful work animated by a rich unrepressed, and in spite of the subject, almost sensuous vitality.' [50] On this occasion, though it would be necessary for the work to be approved by a member of the clergy, Rogier would not have had to negotiate any personal theological mindset or canonical fetishes of his more illustrious patrons. Remarkable too, for a work that would have taken such intense work in the formulation and execution, it was not created within the quiet regulation of *Holy Hours* with which his Italian contemporary Fra.Angelico (1384-1455) was blessed. Rogier had to manage and maintain his place in a busy urban society, run a workshop and provide for a family. Allegedly, Fra. Angelico was in the habit of saying that, 'Art required much composure'. Had Rogier known of this he would surely have concurred, for the qualities he bestowed on this particular work held some of the same qualities of composure and contemplation displayed in the work of the Italian. Rogier's moments of *grace* had to be snatched from the business of secular life. There is a general amnesia as to how such works of art come to be created, with *Create* being the key work. Since the advent of critical art history, paintings have been considered in terms of quality of execution, style, content, cross references, psychological and or political intent. There is rarely acknowledgement of the mental and spiritual energies required to garner complex personal and religious expressions for capture into the visual nor to the persistence needed to sustain this effort throughout the long and complex process of execution – in this case even years. Just as illustrious thinkers require solitary mental thought, so too such exceptional artistic expression requires an undisturbed mind.

Where does the viewer begin when engaging in a work of art that has become such a 'classic' example of 15th Century *ars nova* of Northern European? Looking more closely at some of the key physical points from within the painting, it should become clearer how and why this work was so distinctive; those factors that define its conservatism and its

[49] (Panofsky 1971) p.257
[50] Ibid.p.258

newness. There are references to older altarpieces, the retables that presented figures in the box-like containers, often as a sephiroth of ten. The lack of any geometrical structure is typical of work prior to the Italian Renaissance, disturbing though it may be to scholars of the *Italian;* any structure there is, is contained within an ellipse. The motif itself, of *Lamentation* is one which was well established; the grieving removal of Christ from the cross as described in John 19: 25-42. And lastly, there is the significance of the strange appendage to the panel – the 'inverted T' shape, which is almost a vestigial reminder of older works. Counter to the references from the past, the 'shock of the new' came in several ways. There is the startling realism of description; an almost obsessive dwelling on the minutiae of detail played out in the physiognomy and descriptions of dress that distracts and holds the eye. Why are there no halos? How do we know who is divine and who is not? There is the assumption that such details would be extraneous to a public so well versed in The Gospels and such a reference would have dragged the work back into the past. With its emphasis on detail of description, there is an indication that these people were individuals, with whom one could empathise. They are described as contemporary and Flemish, they are people who would probably have been from the parish. This new concept, of the importance of the individual, is but one indication of the very 'newness' of the work, its 'cutting edge' nature but one that harmonised with the familiar.

Given this unique opportunity for a large commission, the onus was on Rogier to produce an altarpiece that would mark him out as a *supremo,* in the highly competitive artistic world of the 15th Century Burgundian Lands. He had to plan and execute the work using all he had learnt from his master Robert Campin, *The Master of Flamelle,* and the work speaks of this influence.[51] But he had to add his own personal dynamics, for the ethos of a work of art depends ultimately on the artist. There is one thing an artist cannot escape from and that is himself. No matter how he may contrive to create distance and claim objectivity, the stamp of the persona is contained within the fabric of the work; the energy, in a simplistic interpretation of Newton's Laws of Thermodynamics, that energy is neither created nor destroyed, here seems to become trapped, as if to be stored for later distribution. The production of such a large work, executed to such an impeccably high standard would demand a *cache* of emotional and intellectual energy. It demanded that

[51] (Panofsky 1971) p.259

consciously or unconsciously the whole concept was solidly in place before work began; there was no room for vacillation. It would have taken several years to produce, from the research and preparatory studies Rogier had to undertake, to the monochrome under-painting, the successive layers of paint and innumerable glazes, all of which had to dry in the unpredictable Northern climate with its short days of winter. The whole exercise became an act of faith. But equally, as if by osmosis, it would have sucked into itself so much of the emotions, the tensions and the aspirations of the time. And to reiterate what Schmidt wrote, as soon as a work of art was out of the ownership of the artist it became, 'beyond the creator's control; taking on a life of its own' and that, 'great works of art contain such a wealth of languages and expression that they may conceal or even create layers of meaning of which the author (the artist) was never aware.'[52] In other words, all that is finally contained within a master work of art was attained in some part by this subconscious, osmotic process and this abundance of information remains there, *in perpetuity,* to be accessed as and when needed and taste determines.

Despite its newness, Rogier van der Weyden, there was also much that was familiar and understood. Roger's genius had a provenance that originated in the French inspired Gothic cathedrals. Their statuary, rigid, elongated and impersonal, had evolved under the chisel of Claus Sluter (d 1406), to become figures that 'with their voluminous drapery are astonishingly full of movement, and their faces are highly individualised.'[53] From the stained glass windows at Chartres was taught the philosophy of light and colour. 'These windows, not meant for looking out, were intended as walls of light - like the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem'; 'the oldest distinguished by the unsurpassable luminosity of their blue glass.'[54] As Burckhardt writes, 'It is claimed that the jewel like quality of the *Primative* paintings were a translation of this transparent form of glass painting onto a panel, carrying with it that medieval sense of colour and spirituality.' It is this provenance that marks them out as separate from the Italian painters. Although the Burgundian lands were the most densely populated in Europe, outside Italy, and rivalling them in wealth, life and minds were radically different and within the body of work that is *The Flemish*

[52] (Schmitt 1992) p.46
[53](Muller 1966) p.8
[54] (Burckhardt. 1995) p.103

Primatives, Rogier proclaimed that difference. His was a work that carried with it the ongoing doctrine and practice of the Latin Church and at the same time had the spirit of the new pre-Reformation devotional thinking mixed with older medieval, even ancient, thoughts and lay practice.

When, in 1435, this new altarpiece was first opened to the congregation of Crossbowmen in the chapel of Our Lady outside the Walls in Leuven it must have glowed in its newness; a last blaze of Gothic glory carrying with it the intensity of medieval spirituality, expressed using the new revolutionary method of painting; No more the carved retables, [55] golden and polychromed and housed in gilded boxes, the static figures enacting the Gospel.[56] Now there was a large flat panel, over eight feet across, from which the life sized figures painted on it appeared to occupy space in front of and behind the flat picture plane. In the *tempera painting* of older works, pigments had been mixed with the yolk of eggs to create thin washes of colour, which 'emphasised the intellectually spiritual because of its dryness and thinness,'[57] and gave an ethereal quality to the work, This new method, *alla flemalle,* was different with its solidity, its denseness and greater flexibility of visual description. Here, where pigments were ground into oil and resins, it allowed for work on a much larger scale. Colours could be blended then covered with numerous thin glazes of paint to allow the creation of well modulated bodies, limbs and heads that shaped the fabrics that covered them. The work was well researched and expressed emotions to which observers could relate. The whole was significantly more, 'human' than works previously seen.

The Immediately accessible Old and New

For this stage of the inquiry, there are the more obvious references within the work that have lapsed in importance, but would have been more easily recognised then. The ten life-sized figures that hold the remaining centre panel are visually contained within a painted

[55] 'Retable', comes from the French, r*étable,* a panel with a decorated surround containing an image of low relief sculpture that was placed behind and above the altar.
[56] (Campbell 2004) p. 10
[57](Onasch and Schnieper 1997) p.57

golden box, decorated with gilded tracery in the top corners:[58] A Sephiroth.[59] This makes reference to the recent use of carved retables with their three dimensional figures, but which now 'live' within a flat plane. Rogier had not used real gold for the background. But neither is there a landscape nor an environment for the depicted figures to inhabit; the painted box is their world. He prefers to simulate a gilded background using his exquisite skill of visual deception. In doing so, is he acknowledging the use of gold both in the icons of the Orthodox Church and to its frequent use as a background to medieval religious paintings? Apart from cost on such a large work, Rogier needed to move away from the dominance of that precious metal, 'it's shining, indestructible, extravagant, immaculate radiance,' away from that, 'super-luminescent darkness.'[60]

Similarly striking, is the absence of that traditional marks of divinity, the halo; a symbol of light or grace bestowed by God himself. As a means of signifying deity, it predates Christianity and can be found in Greek and Roman art works. Seen also in nature, that nimbus of multicoloured light that surrounds a winter full moon has supernatural connotations from pagan times. Expressed in gold it can represent the logos of God. But here in the Leuven chapel Rogier dispensed with such artefact. His figures have no overt symbols of divinity. This religious work represented mortal man in a way so contemporary that it could possibly be seen as shocking but for the exquisite manner in which they were rendered. Also, practically, there is the difficulty of working a halo in a three dimensional manner if the halo has to occupy a credible position in space as opposed to the flat, iconic rendering. But more important is the inappropriateness of this marker for Rogier, when expressing the Incarnate Christ that becomes the dominant feature – the humanness of the figures is a powerful and new means of expressing 'The Divine'.

In a composition which is developed horizontally across the panel Rogier describes the moment when, after his request to Pilate, Joseph of Aramathea is allowed to take the body of Christ down from the cross. The grouping of the figures displays no apparent

[58] In the top right hand corner of the painted tracery is a tiny crossbow.
[59] We have no documentary evidence that Rogier chose ten figures as having a symbolic meaning however, number played a dominant role in medieval spiritual life. Ten has a metaphysical significance because it was linked to the Sephiroth and considered to be the archetypes for everything in the world and creation. An understanding of the working of this was felt to illuminate the inner workings of the cosmos and history. It is highly unlikely that Rogier would not have been aware of this interpretation.
[60] (Onasch and Schnieper 1997) p.283

geometrical structure. Some modern commentators are troubled by this omission. Van Puyvelde writes that the figures are, 'badly grouped geometrically,'[61] More recently, Amy Powell tries to make sense of the work; 'neither by taking the main rectangle nor incorporating the central top extension as the rectangle of the work does any resolution of a centrality present itself'. She feels that what should be the all important centre of the work, below Christ and above the Virgin is, 'empty but for a collection of disarticulated limbs.'[62] However, Otto von Simpson celebrates Rogier's crowded composition and points out that we cannot evaluate the work as being constructed in the new Renaissance Italian manner. He cites earlier writers, particularly the eminent K Voll and Fr. Winkler, as falling into this trap.[63] It underlines how very important it is to remember that this work does represent that last flowering of the Gothic and not the Italian Renaissance. Though mathematics played a key role in Gothic architecture it did not include Euclidian geometry, which the mathematicians and artists of the early Italian Renaissance attempted to keep to themselves. As late as 1507 when Albrecht Dürer left Venice to return home to Nuremberg, he was triumphant at securing a translation of Euclid's writings on geometry, even though his attempts to be taught the Italian skills had failed.[64]

What Rogier did express in terms of geometry was to contain his principle figures within an ellipse, a figure that has a substantial mathematical life of its own –only the cross and the assistant break this conformity. German Bezan, wrote lyrically about the ellipse; 'All the yearnings of the mystics tend to absorb one focus into the other and reduce the elliptical warping to circular perfection, in a flash of ecstasy, the soul being absorbed by God. A bipolar figure, the ellipse is a "symbol of tension in the law of all things created; it holds sway over the degradation of energy and over the celestial mechanics": [65] From which I deduce that as the ellipse is but the perfection of a circle viewed at an angle, the intellectual tension is derived from this striving for the perfection of the circular view – the perfection of Christ? The lack of formal geometric Renaissance structure other than the obvious ellipse should not perturb us. It would have been lost on the 15th Century Flemish

[61] (Puyvelde 1968) p.106
[62] (Powell 2006) p.718
[63] (Simpson 1953) p.9.note 4
[64] (Hutchinson 1992) p.95
[65] (Bazin 1959) p. 17

viewer for whom the seemingly random group displayed more pertinent characteristics. A strict geometric plan would have formalised the group, detracted from its idiosyncratic humanity. That the centre of the work is but a tangle conveys its own metaphorical message of circumstantial confusion, more aligned to the trials of passage through medieval human life than the abstractions of ancient mathematics.

If there is one defining characteristic of Rogier's work it is that on the panel, *The Descent from the Cross,* he reproduced a likeness of humans, physically and emotionally, so accurately that there was the sensation of actual physical and emotional, 'being.' The whole rendering was so intense, nothing was approximated, nothing found wanting in description, from the human presence to the inanimate fabrics within the work. Contemporary Burgundian people, with all their earthliness, inhabited that space above the high altar. The work almost hovers on the heretical and can even be charged, disingenuously, with pantheism. Yet it is, 'only the greatest paintings that allow the soul to speak through the material,' as Schmidt insists, 'matter becomes what it was in the late medieval Platonic perception of reality; symbol, sacrament of spirit.'[66] 'They, [the artists], expressed eternal and transcendent truths by applying themselves devoutly to understanding, so then sacred subjects are placed on the level of daily existence.'[67] The realism was relentless.

However, 'Let us not persist with this legend of Flemish realism,' writes Purvelde; 'This proverbial red herring – a damnable cliché.'[68] Truly, this obsession with the rendering of what is perceived to be 'real' in the worldly sense has and continues to be a distraction from the intellectual potential of this work, superb and seductive as it is. Also, as we will see later, it is not a wholly truthful reality. His reality has other dimensions. It is a reality that comes via the early church as it struggled to formalise and apply the phenomenon that had been the life of Christ. That struggle touched the mystical theologians, Denis the Areopagyte, St. Francis, St. Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart and The Blessed Jan van Ruusbroec. All contributed to that early 15th Century understanding of the

[66](Schmidt 2000) p.8
[67] (Puyvelde 1968) p.9
[68] Ibid p.12

Incarnate Christ, the expression of which is embedded in, and central to, Rogier's 'realism'.

Rogier's painterly realism cannot be left there. To accept this realism as a literal translation of what Rogier was mentally and physically inspired to document is at least naive. Even if the much abused attributes of allegory and symbolism are added to the interpretation they are not sufficient to explain the intensity of sensation that he was able to convey, that power of human *personae* grouped together in grief, fusing human experience with the religious implications of the moment. Rogier is not portraying a 'vision' as in a metaphysical experience *per se* but a much more sophisticated comment on the Incarnate state of Christ and the saving nature of His death and Resurection, both of which transcend the laws of Nature.

It must surely have been this performance of apparent 'magic' that shocked and amazed its contemporary viewers. Bartolomaeus Facius, historian and secretary to Alfonso of Naples was moved to pen a manuscript recording illustrious persons of the day. In his chapter, *De pictoribus,* of his work *De viris Illustribus,*1446, he selects our two Netherlandish painters, Jan Van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden.[69] Baxendall notes that Facius' had not an untrained artistic eye for he had seen at first hand the best that Italy could offer and was a devotee of the writings of Alberti.[70] He calls on the ancient Philostratus as an example of how a skilful painter can capture, 'every characteristic and his hand will interpret successfully the individual drama of each person;' he uses the word *'ethopoeia*,' to mean the expression of character and emotion when portraying persons and that without this the work may be beautiful but remain languid and un-affecting .[71] The deep sense of the understanding of human nature as key to Rogier's *Deposition* is applauded.[72] It is this involvement with the mind of the persons portrayed that marks Rogier as unique. But lest we forget, what we are looking at is but wood, chalk, glues, resins and pigments, albeit assembled with consummate skill. Though this realism is skilfully manipulated to hold the viewer, the sumptuous detail capturing, detaining the eye

[69] (Baxendall 1964) p. 90
[70] Ibid P.91
[71] Ibid. P.93
[72] Ibid P.94 Reference is made to the excellence of Rogier's mourning Virgin, in which passion, grief and spiritual dignity are conveyed.

to stimulate disparate lines of thought, there are incongruities, discrepancies within the whole.

Being based on the Gospel of John 19:25-42, the work displays none of the 'dishonourable burial' described by Mark 15:42-47. It is pristine in its splendour. Within this, it presents to the 15th century viewer a mirror image of themselves, those worthy Burghers of Leuven and their families; a self projection of that generally sober middle class. There are no Middle Eastern faces with bodies attired in the robes of 1500 years previously; these are not the biblical figures of the African Augustine. These are people of the Northern European Burgundian lands, where many were well fed, educated, and dressed accordingly; the rising middle class of that emerging urban capitalist society. Faces could have been members of the Guild of Crossbowmen and their wives, for it was becoming acceptable that donors of ecclesiastical paintings appeared in such work.[73]

For the clothing, Rogier is lavish. 'Invented dress is mixed with contemporary,' as 'his depiction of clothing was manipulated ... to his own ends.'[74] A clean-shaven Flemish Christ, clothed in a loincloth of purest white Belgium linen, with the edges carefully scalloped, is supported by his followers. The dried blood that has dripped gravitationally from his wounds ends in refined droplets, causing no blemish. The flesh is unquestionably - without life, the depiction of which attracted the highest acclaim. Such a distinction had never been seen before. It was a wonder. A youthful Flemish Madonna, blanched in faint, not death, has collapsed into the arms of her newly bequeathed son, John the Beloved Disciple. Her headdress, which has slipped, is of a similar refined material as the loincloth of Christ. Her dress falls into a copious, totally impractical, train that seems, by the way the materiel folds, to be made of the best Flanders wool, as blue as a cloudless summer sky. The angle of her body and supported arms echo those of her Son. All other eight figures are studied and expressed with the same sensitive and meticulous detail. Though representing John's Gospel, what we see is so far removed from historical reality, yet is

[73] As a personal reflection it could have been that the unexpurgated portrayal of local citizens, so minutely rendered could have been as incongruous as the computer and projector are today in a sacred Christian setting.
[74] {Scott., 2009} p.130

fully credible. Those figures, believably, have taken the broken Christ down from an unbelievably small cross and they convince us to grieve with them.

Each figure celebrates Rogier's fluency of description of fur, brocade, damask, wool, fine as well as stout, and the best of linen. Each has its own weight and texture, each responds accurately to the form it covers. Straying from religious modesty, it is as though Rogier has a boastfulness in displaying not only the material wares of his country, which generated much wealth, but also his and his countryman Jan van Eyck's, world domination of the mastery of oil painting. Yet within this self indulgence he constantly pulls himself back to his profound and expansive meaning of the Gospel text adding contextual detail throughout: The ashen faced youth who hold the nails from the crucifix is dressed in soft blue damask and wears spotless cream woollen hose. He holds a fluttering scarf, as a reference to the Jewish prayer shawl, the Tallit; the stripes of blue represent the Messiah rather than the black of death.[75] Nothing is there by chance. All is there for the fullness of description.

The outer edges of the altarpiece are bracketed within the outer edges of the ellipse, enframed by two '*personnages latéraux incliné formant parenthése.'* [76] On the left is believed to be Mary Cleophas.[77] She could also be read in Leuven terms as a widow or a woman of the 'Common Life' by the plain, un-scalloped headdress,and the weighty black wool robe. The fur peeping from underneath the sleeve was a contemporary thermal insulation against the Northern winter, rather than ostentation. As a counter to Mary of Cleophas, Mary Magdelane closes the right hand parenthesis. The half clad Magdalene, writhing in grief is one of the least convincing figures in the group; John is the other who is, 'uncomfortable.' Mary Magdelane is the archetypal fallen women whom Christ may have forgiven, but in whose fallen state the Medieval World delighted. It could be said to reinforce the opinion that this interpretation of Mary was, 'deliberately adapted ... as a role

[75] The dye that was used in ancient times in the making of these prayer shawls was obtained from a Mediterranean snail that died out after the death of Christ.
[76] (Panofsky 1971) p.257
[77] The Gospel of John 19:25

model for a misogynistic Church.'[78] Rogier gives credence to this sentiment with skilful indulgence.

Above and beyond the sensationalism of graphic effects of the materials, what seems to have resonated most with the 15th Century viewer was the ability of the work to express grief - the most profound grief known to man. It was not simply the pearl like tears that fell from six of the ten faces, it was the physiological changes associated with these tears that were captured. Mary of Cleophas' prolonged weeping has swollen her features and her grief seems to have no end in sight as she holds herself together in a self embrace. Joseph of Aramathea gazes blankly past Christ into the eyeless sockets of Adam's skull, as in helpless despair, he weakly hold the heavy legs of Christ, so emphasising the dramatic incomprehensibility of the moment. The man who had predicted his own departure from his closest friends and family with the promise that, 'I will not leave you orphaned' (John 14:18), lies lifeless; the promise to return to them yet to be fulfilled.

The whole scene is played out with dignity. There is, despite all, a quiet solemnity about the work. It does not affright the viewer with descriptions of lurid brutality nor incite a violent reaction. The meditative calmness holds the viewer in a contemplative silence. Rogier goes beyond the doctrinal, beyond the ascetic obsessive dwelling on the physical and mental suffering of Christ and takes himself and the viewer with him, to explore that life-defining moment – a mortal death, as a prelude to that mystery of the life eternal.

The Evolution of the Individual within Medieval Society

Outstanding, in the work of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden in the early 15th Century was their ability to visually describe human form, any physical form they chose in fact. The *mimesis* of the image of a particular individual, with all the unique subtleties that carried, reached breathtaking heights. But both artists, though being compared to the ancients, created not a, 'back to the antique,' but a definitive statement of, 'back to nature,' visually describing all.[79] They were not painters in the classical manner but followed a

[78] (Haskins 1993) p.96f
[79] (Nuttall 2004) p.159.

particular, Northern European line of thought. In doing so they were swimming with a tide of self exploration. The decay and disarray in the church that followed the great Schism allowed for creative lay thinking while the currents of intellectual thought, labelled Nominalism and Humanism, washed over society, adding to one of the greatest changes in thinking about the person as an individual. From the 12th century, through the Middle Ages, there was a change in the perception of the individuality of a human being. In his writings of the late 1960's, Walter Ullmann explored this change. The ruling classes had purported that there were three estates of man in the world, the aristocracy, the clergy and the third estate, whose life long work was to provide for the first two. Georges Chastelain, official recorder of the affairs of the Burgundian Court, died 1475, contemptuously referred to this third estate as, 'hicks ... from bad stock.'[80] As history repeatedly confirms, those who establish themselves, or are born into a ruling class, do not willingly relinquish their position.

Ullmann opens his argument on the subject with the comment that chroniclers of the age began any writings of history with Genesis as being the beginning of time with man being seen as playing a part in God's universal plan. In this vein he reflects that persons portrayed in earlier medieval art work had been, 'types;' a man, old or young, happy or sad, good or bad but without any trace of individual characteristics or emotions. As the 14th Century progressed there was a change, in sculpture at first, to create an individual likeness and an expressiveness of countenance and body language, so emphasising this new consideration of the individuality of man as a unique personality.[81]

So we can see this change was brought to fulfilment, in part, visually in the work of Van der Weyden and Van Eyck, following on from the late Gothic examples. There was a new visual language. If we consider that this transition from the cult of corporation, of the individual as only a part in a grander scheme, to one where the individual gradually gained a status as a unique creature of God's making, what then were the causes of this change, which is so gloriously expressed in Rogier's work. Was it merely an evolutionary process or were there precipitating factors?

[80] (Blockmans.Wim 1985) p.300
[81] (Ullmann 1967) p.44f

The first, about which there has been much academic debate, was the devastating destruction wrought by that new disease, the plague, in the late 1340's as it swept up from Southern Europe. In its first, virulent, cross species form, it has been finally acknowledged that it killed up to 48% of the population. [82] The very pre-scientific nature of the considered cause of the disaster brings us up sharply with the reality of the *real* world the artists portrayed. 'Scientists' of the day, on considering the matter, had felt that it was due to, 'a balance of contraries associated with the configurations of the heavens,'[83] even though they admitted this might not be the whole cause. The effect that this dramatic reduction in population had on society, through shortage of people power, though disputed, had to have been dramatic, particularly in areas such as The Lowlands of Northern Europe and the cities of Northern Italy, where there were large urban communities to provide for.

The second strand of events to encourage this new expression of individuality was the rise in the use and sophistication of the vernacular languages and of consigning this into literary form. [84] The Latin of the aristocrat and the cleric, 'engendered its own linguistic and semantic ethos, far removed from ordinary humanity,'[85] and lacked subtleties of emotional expression. These new national languages not only fostered interpersonal expression but opened up a creativity that sought to wonder and explain its relationship with the natural world and its relationship with God.

When considering this evolution to a personal identity, it is necessary to call on this growing awareness of the natural world and its workings. This consideration of *Nature,* came not only from the Humanist thinkers and their access to ancient texts but from the new views of St. Francis and his erudite follower. The writings of Pliny the Elder, 23-79 A.D., and Aristotle acted more as a catalyst for actual scientific enquiry rather than providing answers:[86] Aristotle may have inspired and dominated the academic literary world but did not offer solutions to practical techno/scientific problems. Those more able

[82](Horrox 1994) p.4f. In the first onslaught of this disease it was carried from the blood stream of diseased rats to humans via the flea. Subsequently, when the disease became endemic it was also transmitted from person to person. Apart from the sheer numbers it killed it was the swiftness of death by this latter transmission that exacerbated the fear factor.
[83] Ibid p.104
[84] (Ullmann 1967) p. 106f
[85] Ibid p.106
[86] (Armstrong 1983) This article is useful for telling us what was available to scholars of natural history from extant texts of Pliny in the late 15th Century.

members of the third estate were making their way amongst the practicalities of life's needs, struggling from under the merciless tribulations of the 13th and 14th centuries and with immense effort improving the quality and function of everyday life. The third estate concentrated on, 'tangible goods to be enjoyed and traded.'[87] As the quality and sophistication of these goods rose so did demand and with it the status of the primary producer, leading to financial independence – a sustainable individuality. Whereas, in the earlier middle ages the workings of life were based on the Book of The Bible and the, 'Book of Nature,' with one referring to the other, using allegory,[88] now, in the early 15th century this was not sufficiently direct; the third estate needed the visual as part of its interpretation and expression of that late medieval life. And as part of this movement there was the need to engage with and relate to the life of Christ in more human, personal terms. Even with this evolution to what extent was this art work, this *Descent from the Cross* a surprise if not a shock; to see themselves, these Leuven people, so literally portrayed; man looking intently at himself. How did they register this explicit, if edited, rendering of the *Death of God,* God experiencing a human death presented as an extrapolation of the biblical moment, with its Atlas qualities of carrying the world's grief?

The Lamentation: The Sixth Sorrow of Mary

The first and most obvious link for the 15th century viewer, to those things familiar, has to have been that of the Sixth Sorrow of Mary – The Deposition, or Lamentation – the devotional prayers to the Virgin Mary that had steadily gained popularity with the laity from an indeterminate time in the early middle ages.[89] The devotion is reputed to have originated within the Servite Order, but despite its popularity in 14th and 15th centuries in Germany, France and the Low Countries,[90] it only gained Papal recognition in 1668.[91] [92]

[87] (White 1947) p.42
[88] Ibid 424
[89] The Seven Sorrows of Mary are, Christ's Infancy and a foreknowledge of His Passion, The Presentation in the Temple and the prophesy of Simeon, The Flight into Egypt, The loss of the young Christ in the Temple in Jerusalem, the Crucifixion, The Deposition, the taking of Christ down from the cross and lastly the Entombment.
[90] (Schuler 1992) p.16
[91] (catholictradition.org. 2010) p.2

The claimed biblical origin of this devotion was the prophecy of Simeon from the Gospel of Luke 2:34-35, as he speaks to Mary. 'Behold this child is set for the fall ... yea a sword shall piece through thy own soul also.' This sentiment was taken up as meaning there was a relationship between the sword that pieced the side of Christ and the metaphorical sword of compassion that drove itself into the emotions of Mary. Such dramatic association provided much copy for artists and illustrators and for creative liturgy.

The innumerable 'artworks' giving visual representation of the sufferings of Mary could be tasteful, but many were not. Many were crude diagrammatic representations of the figure of Mary being graphically pierced by seven, usually large, swords, and which grew into something of an addiction to the years progressed. The association of this cult with that of the growing emphasis of attending to and empathising with the sufferings of Christ, Schuler claims has not yet been fully explored.[93] But as clues, we are left with the 11th century exhortation from Anselm of Canterbury who in his, *Prayer to Christ,* demands to know why he could not have been there, with Christ, at the time of His passion. 'Why did you not share/ the sufferings of the most pure Virgin ... What do I know of the flood/ that drenched your matchless face/when you beheld your Son, your Lord and your God'[94] For Anselm, in this early plea to consider Mary, he uses the sufferings of Mary as witness to heighten his own emotions for the Passion of Christ and by doing so identify himself more closely with Him.[95] However, this devotion to Mary, in her *Sorrows*, soon acquired a life of its own and moved on from Anselm's innocent striving for devotional perfection.

In the years between the death of Mary of Burgundy in 1482, (the Mary who had bought *The Descent from the Cross* from the Crossbowmen, for the proverbial 'mess of pottage', so initiating its transport to Spain via Hungary and the delayed accession of her infant son, Philip the Fair in 1494), there was, understandably, constant political struggle accompanied by various uprisings. Historians look with cynicism on the active encouragement of the laity to engage in Marian devotions as a unifying force toward peace

[92] (Freedberg 1982) p. 136, Freedberg cites the Louven Professor of Theology, Johannes Malanus who in 1771 commented that, despite being considered apocryphal it was allowed to continue due to its considerable popularity with the laity
[93] (Schuler 1992) p.7
[94] (Anselm 1973) p.95-6
[95] (Schuler 1992) p.9.

in the Burgundian Lands.[96] [97] In, c.1492, Jan van Coudenberghe founded a *Confraternaty of the Seven Sorrows* to appeal to the Virgin to bring peace to the land.[98] The devotion was further devalued as time progressed when favours were attributed to the praying of *The Sorrows* and as Schuler writes, 'worshippers were primarily motivated by the belief in the salutary benefits of venerating the Virgin's sorrows, if not also in the apotropaic powers of the corresponding images.'[99]

The Unique T-shape of Rogier's Centre Panel

To turn next to a consideration of the altarpiece as a pivotal artefact within church furnishing, is to look at the unusual shape of this central panel of Rogier's. Unusual outside the Netherlands and parts of Northern Europe is the shape of the panel onto which *The Descent from the Cross* was painted. Customarily it is referred to as an, 'Inverted T-Shape.' Just as the paintings of the early *Primatives* have been linked to the late Gothic sculptors, so too is this unusual shape, which is a direct descendent of the carved retables. As mentioned earlier, these would have been either of wood or stone, and were to be found above altars from the early 14th Century churches of the Burgundian Lands and Northern France. That there are so few remaining is attributed to the zeal of the post-Reformation Iconoclasts.[100] The apotheosis of this religious art form, the carved retable, was to have been seen in *The Entombement,* of the eminent sculptor, Claus Sluter's (died c.1406), had it survived. [101]

This T-shape is not inconsequential. Lynn F Jacobs' paper on the subject happily gathers together all aspects of this perspective which I have used to consider Rogier's use of this format. Firstly, there is the echo of the church's cruciform ground plan as initiating the creation of a, 'holy space'. Included in this is the thought and practice of linking the

[96] Ibid.p.17
[97] (Speakman 2010) p.252
[98] (Schuler 1992) p.17
[99] Ibid.p.28
[100] (Muller 1966).p26
[101] (Lane 1975) p.26

inner decoration and artefacts to this overall structure.[102] Secondly, the question of the church as, 'God's place on earth,' from the reference to Revelation, 21.2, 'the holy city, the new Jerusalem,' is a source of some ambiguity. Thirdly, this leads onto the history of the evolution of the altarpiece as reflecting the declaration on the status of the Host at the 4th Lateran Council of 1215. It is from this that it is argued the whole emphasis on the Passion and death of Christ, as purchase for eternal life of mortals, was developed in the Middle Ages, so pertinent to the work in hand. Lastly, why did Rogier decide to use this slightly dated format for such a stunningly modern masterpiece?

Traditionally the construction of an altarpiece began with a wooden box into which the carved figures acted out scenes from the Bible but more often the Passion and Death of Christ. Not to be limited by the restraints of a repetitious rectangle, the figures spilled out into secondary shapes added to the work. This allowed for a dramatic statement, could denote the hierarchy of divinity or act as an expression of belief. These additions could be many and varied but the most practical and most used was a square or rectangular addition over the top centre of the main rectangle – to make an inverted T shape as in the square shape over the central portion of Rogier's *Descent*.[103] It is not surprising therefore, that when artistic tastes changed from the three dimensional sculptural form to the flat plane of the new 'oil paint,' erroneously attributed by Alberti to Jan van Eyck, the old inverted T-shape was retained on some occasions, even though the format was more difficult to handle in the two dimensional mode.

The imagination can easily link this characteristic T-shape to the ground plan of a gothic church; the nave rising above the side aisles and the high altar located within that nave.[104] In its most perfect form, as Panofsky writes, 'The High Gothic cathedral sought to embody the whole of Christian knowledge, theological, moral, natural and historical with everything in its place and that which no longer found its place, suppressed.'[105] It became the vehicle for the visual expression of compacted Christian thought and experience. In this cohesive exercise, architectural references spoke sympathetically to one another,

[102] (Jacobs 1991) p.36f
[103] Ibid.p.33
[104] (Jacobs 1991) p.37 and note 7
[105] (Panofsky 1976) p.44

enveloping the worshiper in a web of visual references. The carving on the surround of a retable would be echoed, in say, the casket holding religious relics, so beloved by medieval worshipers.[106] 'Because of the analogy between the older retables and other liturgical object, this imagery took on the sanctity of relics and hosts.' And as Jacobs continues, using a reference to the work of Michael Camille,[107] 'In this way, the altarpiece reflects the growing sense of the sanctity of the image that developed in the later middle ages.'[108] Thus as the nave holding the altar was the most sacred part of the church, so by association, the upward central extension of the retable, be it sculpted or painted, held the most divine image. The artist or sculptor had the daunting task of illustrating this *holy of holy* locations.

Having linked the shape of the altarpiece to the architecture of the church and its interior furnishings, Jacobs cites much literature that debates the belief that these sacred buildings represented the dwelling place of God on earth.[109] 'We have been reminded that the Christian Sanctuary is, liturgically and mystically, an image of The Heavenly Jerusalem, so that it becomes the eschatological vision described in the Book of Revelation.'[110] Momentarily accepting this without qualification, the theory behind the heavenly association of the additional rectangle is that, in hanging above the altar, this top addition is physically nearest to what is perceived to be the location of Heaven. Thus, being physically nearest to heaven, it is confirmed again as being its most holy part.[111] However, as there are no Gospel references to the necessity of a church, a heavenly place for God to reside, the link to Revelation seems too specific and limiting. But Stookey quotes Old Testament sources for this idea[112] and adds that the medieval dedication rite of a church established a literal, not metaphorical, status for the building, using as its Epistle the reading of Revelation 21:2-5.[113] That the intent of these buildings was to be an earthly anticipation of Heaven, Stookey endorses. With reference to the Cathedral of St. Denis in Paris, Bishop Sugar believed that a church should be built, 'in the likeness of things divine'. 'Gothic architecture was not just metaphor or symbol but actual representation of

[106] (Jacobs 1991) p.46
[107] (Camille 1989) p.46
[108] (Jacobs 1991) p.46
[109] (Jacobs 1991) p.48 and note 4
[110](Stookey 1969) p.35
[111] Ibid.p.48
[112] (Stookey 1969) p. 35
[113] Ibid.p.35

Heaven', or so was thought.[114] However as time moved, on this idealistic intent was open to corruption.

Perhaps the most pastoral description of the ideal of a church comes down to us from Symeon of Thessalonica who died in, only, 1429. He would have been a voice to be heard during this era of the early 15th century, with so many proposed attempts at reunification of Rome and The Orthodox Churches. 'The Church, as the house of God, is an image of the whole world, for God is everywhere and above everything ... The Sanctuary is a symbol of the higher and supra-heavenly spheres, where the throne of God and His dwelling place are said to be'.[115] This broader reference seems to fit more comfortably with the wider understanding of the religious Christian sense of the church as a building of spiritual and godly activities, in which our inverted T-shaped retables and altarpieces took their place.

The status of the altarpiece has therefore, its own Christian history, carrying with it much academic scholarship and the inverted T-shape format is only a small part of that dialogue. Beth Williamson's essay on medieval altarpieces begins with the caution that to endow a liturgical object, such as an altarpiece, as a commentary on social and religious practice, is a 'very slippery' exercise.[116] That being said, there is much text attempting to do just that. There is also the important question, as to whether altarpieces, *per se,* came into being to accommodate changes in the liturgy of the Eucharist after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, in which Canon I sets out the Doctrine of Transubstantiation. 'Jesus Christ is both priest and sacrifice, whose body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the species of bread and wine.' [117] That this statement was responsible for deciding where the celebrant priest stood while consecrating and elevating the host and that this in turn was the legitimacy for the altarpiece is the first place carries many opinions. [118] Binsky, rightly, rejects the notion that the papal decision was causal to the introduction of altarpieces and that the importance of the evolution was multi-factorial. What would be harder to contest, in relation to the practice of the Mass, is the substantial

[114] (Crossley 1988) p.118
[115] (Raitt 1987) p.p.421
[116] (Williamson 2004) p.342
[117] Ibid.p.344. Williamson has used the translation of the Papal document of David C. Douglas, ed., *English Historical Documents*,3 London, 1975,pp.643-76
[118] Ibid p.348 ff. Williamson quotes Paul Binsky in his essay, *The 13th Century English Altarpiece* at the Norwegian Conference, Medieval Altar Frontals and Related Matters. Oslo, Dec. 1989

changes brought about by the decreed transformation of bread and wine during the sacrament of the Eucharist. The fact that the Host *became* the body of Christ at consecration, understandably lead to a demand from the congregation to see this precious object and lead to it becoming the most important part of the Mass.[119] For parishioners, who increasingly found the focus of their piety in this, 'seeing,' of Christ, their actual taking of Communion was often limited to the obligatory once a year, after an acceptable confession. The historian Francis Oakley notes that it was in the 12th Century that the elevation of the Host was introduced, the 13th that saw the introduction of the Feast of Corpus Christi , the 14th and 15th the introduction of the displaying of the consecrated Host in a monstrance for public viewing and adoration.[120] Such was the intensity of focus on the Eucharist that the part played by that background altarpiece and it upper extension in front of which the Host was held, gained in importance. The physical building of 'The Church' had a long history that held much significance for Christians.

Here is not the place to discuss the theology of transubstantiation but in his late 1960's essay Oakley, in discussing the Conciliar movement, notes how during these times of, 'the Real Presence,' doctrine, 'theologians designated the Eucharist not as *mystical* but as "the true Body of Christ [verum Corpus Christi]." He further explains that the expression *Corpus Christi mysticum*, was reserved for the Church, i.e. the hierarchical management structure, which by this differentiation lost its sacramental associations.[121] This may not seem at first to be immensely important in this context but it could be considered that it served to drive a wedge between the authorities that governed the Church of Rome in the West and those Christians who struggled with a dysfunctional system in their demonstrable desire for piety and a Godly life; this separation seems to have been most apparent in Northern Europe, including the Burgundian Lands. Given the emphasis on the humanity of Christ in those late Middle Ages, amongst the laity, would it not therefore be feasible to say that the physical church as opposed to the hierarchy of the church was the place where Christians still had some freedom of expression; that the furnishing, relics, artwork and

[119](Heffernan 2001) *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, Elizabeth C.Parker, Architecture as Liturgical Setting,p.310, J.A.Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite* 1;120-22, 11 306-312 and Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture.*1991 p.49-63
[120] (Oakley 1979) p.88f
[121] (Oakley 1969) p.300

undoubtedly an amount of detritus, assisted them in that expression. As part of that expression and in the furnishing of a new church, as in Leuven, the altarpiece created by Rogier, was not merely a statement of status, but an act of faith.

If, 'Iconographically, the T-shape served most basically to emphasise the central scene of an altarpiece,' [122] and the celebration of the Eucharist, with the top of the upside down T enhancing the most solemn moment of the rite, how did Rogier use this format in his masterwork, *The Descent?* In his altarpiece of post 1436, *The Seven Sacraments*, Christ on his cross soars into this central extension and into the painted vaulting of a Gothic church. With his *Last Judgement*, the third time he used this format, the space is reserved for Christ enthroned in judgement.[123] In both these cases the artistic/theological rationale can be clearly understood. But in *The Descent*, its function is less clear. A diminutive cross, with an unremarkable outsider holding the nails of crucifixion and pliers, occupy this sacred, elevated space. References write of the confusion of, 'spatial depth' and of spatial ambiguities caused by this extension.[124] I do not consider that Rogier would have set out deliberately to create a spatial ambiguity, particularly given the lack of geometric sophistication in this era. I feel that its presence is more mundane. With the other two altarpieces of this format Rogier was working for prestigious clients; The Bishop of Tournai commissioned the *Seven Sacraments* and *The Last Judgement* – The Beaune Altarpiece - by wealthy secular patrons. With *The Descent*, Rogier was working for artisan commissioners, The Guild of Crossbowmen. This is not to demean these men who saw fit to engage one of the two premier artists of Northern Europe, but more to say that perhaps their demands were less specific and Rogier was allowed more creativity.[125] Interesting also is the chapel of the Crossbowmen, which can be seen only from an anonymous watercolour dated c.1615.[126] It is a symmetrical cruciform shape – not the Gothic model -

[122] (Jacobs 1991)
[123] (Campbell 2009) p.55 Campbell notes that though this is not an authenticated work by Rogier it has been considered to be his work due to high standard of workmanship and its dating.
[124] (Jacobs 1991) p.54 See also Lorne Campbell's, *Rogier van der Weyden* 2004 *p.10*
[125] As an aside, it is interesting to note that in modern times the only portrait that has expressed fully the magisterial status of the young queen Elizabeth II of England as well as her youth and beauty was the full length work by Pietro Annigoni, in 1956, commissioned by the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers in London.
[126] (Stock 2009) p.20

which sat, 'just inside the second ring wall' of the city of Leuven. [127] This was a modern chapel and whereas it would have carried with it all the nuances of the past, as just considered, I believe that Rogier's reasoning for using the Inverted T-shape for this work may have been different, its rationale lying elsewhere – maybe as a reference to times past, maybe offering some *gravitas* to this modern building.

When one has lived with this work of art for a considerable length of time, the appendage rectangle becomes almost peripheral to the body of the work – as if a gloss in a margin. The dominant placing of the figures of Christ and Mary so hold the attention that, the theoretically, most holy part of the painting is but part of the supporting structure of the work. Is it that this, now vestigial, appendage, was a device to integrate a blatantly new work into its historically religious provenance? Was Rogier creating a deliberate echo of older works and their iconology as a reassuring reference to the past, so ensuring that its modernity was not too disturbing, as he forged ahead into the future? Or was he being more profound. Was it that he perceived the cross to be the key element to his faith; that the body of the work represented the humanity of Christ, so appreciated in 15th century and the small upper part of the work, the truly divine sacrifice?

Having considered the commissioners and the creator of this masterwork, together with its wider religious references, the motif for the work has a broader social context. It is a context that emphasises the nature and importance of the religious life of the laity and the manner in which that was expressed outside the strictures of church practice, for their Christianity spilled out from the sanctified walls of the church building. It found creative literary form in rhetoric and drama that played itself out on the streets of Northern European town and cities. It was a powerful and innovative means of expression.

[127] Ibid.p.19

A Very 'Dramatic,' Society

'A statue of the Mother of God is carried from the Chapel of Our Lady Outside the Walls and the *Seven Sorrows of the Virgin* are portrayed in seven scenes by richly attired actors on a pageant wagon.'[128] Jan van der Stock calls on Leuven archives to explain how the first Marian processions in Leuven, go back to the early fourteenth and late thirteenth century.[129] At that time the *Ommergang,* the Dutch 'walk around' the church), as these events were called, would have been in the control, at least partly, of the Crossbowmen..[130] At this early time, these *tableaux vivants* would have only been a secondary attraction to the main sporting events. It is therefore into this context that the 'Lamentation of the Virgin', found her place.

What Van der Stock's references does, is to stitch together, within the social fabric of the 1430's, the painted altarpiece, *The Descent from the Cross,* its creator, its commissioners, and the new chapel in which it was housed. As was mentioned earlier, the reference reinforces the evidence that this masterwork did not rest in solitary artistic isolation but was a part of a greater whole. The emotional pathos of the work was not out of place, for a, 'realistic and convincing portrayal of passion and emotions, intended to evoke an emotional response from the public, are core concepts in the oeuvre of Roger van der Weyden'.[131] The manner in which these Crossbowmen of Leuven, a painter from a Guild in Brussels, the players from The Confraternaties of Rhetoric and The Jesus of Nazareth came together in the chapel in Leuven is an encapsulation of the life and value system of the Northern European urban middle classes in the early 15th century.

It was a, 'dramatic,' world, 'violent and highly strung,' as Huizinga wrote. ' So violent and motley was life, that it bore the mixed smell of blood and roses, as man oscillated between cruelty and tenderness, between harsh asceticism and insane attachments to the delights of the world, between hatred and goodness,' [132] The expression it found on the streets of the Burgundian Lands was equally complex. It was not a pre-Reformation naive

[128] (Stock 2009) p.21
[129] Ibid.p.21 and notes 37, 38 and 39.
[130] The Om de Kerk Gaan, with the *Kirk* later dropped, was the generic name given to the medieval pageants of Belgium and Northern France.
[131] (Stock 2009) p.21
[132] (Huizinga 2001) p.25

simplicity but a sophisticated engagement that could range from intense religious interpretation to the crudely cruel jest, a creative enactment of a biblical narrative or a deadly serious political statement, demanding compliance. 'The importance of the public space within a city, that area that allowed for a dialectical relationship between, on the one hand, the material reality of cities and, on the other the symbolic practices that infused this material reality with meaning.' [133] This was the *media* of Early 15th Century Northern Europe.

This, 'dramatic' society, this *Theatre State,*[134] was not homogeneous. It arose from two power bases, albeit there was an inequality about them. The ruling classes had their own genre, revolving around the fantasy of courtly love and the *Romance of the Rose,* although by the 1400's this was becoming a little tired, together with its political use. Then there were the middle classes of the third estate, with their gathering enthusiasms for their own style and their Chambers of Rhetoric. Both acted out their part in the social and political struggle that was these Burgundian Lands.

These lands were blessed with fertile farmland and great rivers to give trade routes. The urban population, as the greatest outside Northern Italy had developed trades and skills, so generating an upwardly ambitious middle class. There was a sophisticated banking system to manage European commerce. Brussels, a city renowned for its luxury goods, held the Burgundian Court for most of the year. But these Low Lands were surrounded by three powerful neighbours, England, Germany and their late parent, France. Maintaining the flow of trade between these three lands in times of conflict required intelligent diplomacy, strength and wit at home. There was a constant struggle between the ambitions for self determination by the prosperous cities and the ruling classes who wished to maintain authority and extract some of that wealth for themselves. Not having the benefit of a ruling lineage as in England, the Burgundian Dukes were vulnerable. This tender principality had grown from the marriage of the French King's son to the daughter of the Count of Flanders in 1369 and added to, mainly by negotiation and marriage. Within this mix there was not only the ebb and flow of loyalties but the cultural and social divide between those of the first order and the lower order that had risen to wealth in the cities.

[133] (Bruaene 2006) p.378
[134] (Blockmans.Wm 1985) p.225

Constant attention was needed. In this, *Theatre State,* 'public ceremonies were part of a broad effort to solve the intractable problem of difference.'[135] Unpleasant truths from both sides were thinly disguised by the masks of theatre.

In his publication entitled, *Showing Status,* William Blockmans comments on the link between literary and art history as being able to shed light on the reality of social situations and the power-brokering of rulers, but adds the rider that opinions we glean from such works should not delude us into thinking that these were general opinions as they would so often be specific to contextual time and place.[136] He comments on the work already done in moving away from judging an historical situation from extant documents and piecing together a society from its arts and artefacts.[137] A fair comment, but what else do we have? The finer tracing may have been worn away by time but the broader picture remains.

'The very aspiration to social standing, to the recognition by the community of high position, demands a continual display of superiority',[138] well applies to the great displays staged by the ruling Burgundian Dukes. Peter Arnade explores thoroughly, through 'the urban lens,' this manipulative use of ritual and drama. There dramatic events were,' well honed statements about privilege, power and clientage, aimed at townspeople [who were] divided over their [those of the first order of society] state-building ambitions.'[139] Cities were regularly burdened with, *joyeuses entrés* and *magnificences,* in a regular touring circus of aristocratic extravagance, aimed at political domination. But these could be dangerous at times. In 1437, two years after it is believed that Roger's masterpiece was hung in the chapel at Leuven, the ruling Duke Philip the Good nearly lost his life in a, 'bloody revolt,' in Bruges and had to flee the city.[140] Revenge was calculated, humiliating and costly for the city some five years later. The matter was finalised, not with bloodshed, but by a major e*xtravagance,* financially taxing on the original offenders. 'There were twenty three separate Biblical *tableaux vivants,* fire displays, public jousts and a banquet,

[135](Arnade 1997) p.304
[136] (Blockmans and Janse 1999) p.3f
[137] Ibid.p.8
[138] (Blockmans and Janse 1999) p.2
[139] (Arnade 1997) p.301.
[140] (Arnade 1997) p.310

so sealing the agreement which substantially reigned in the freedom of the city'. [141] To what extent we can extract literal truths from these, 'historical facts and fictional tropes,' is open to question but at least the lines of, 'court based chronicles,' are there to be read between.

The next question is to whom did the Dukes turn, in order to stage these magnificent events? In the first place it was the military confraternaties of archers and Crossbowmen. Every city in the Burgundian Lands had, by the beginning of the 15th Century, a strong body of such men. Their number would have included important town officials and leading guildsmen.[142] These men received lavish benefices for their work in organising the year long calendar of events featuring military competitions, a kind of military Eisteddfod. These bands of men were politically important. As Phillip de Commaynes in 1465 observed, 'the archers are the flowers of the Burgundian army.[143]

As an exclusive diet of military prowess was bound to pall after a time with the crowds, the Crossbowmen enlisted another important confraternity to add to their programmes of entertainment – the newly flourishing Chambers of Rhetoric were called upon. They were brought in, initially, to provide the *tableaux vivants* and progressed to holding competitions of drama and poetry. Records confirm the very popular depiction of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary. It is to these confraternaties of rhetorical skills, that we must look to close the social loop that brought the contemplation of The Lamentation of the Virgin Mary from the street of Leuven into the Chapel of Our Lady Outside the Walls in Leuven. In 1435 these societies were in their relative infancy, compared to the sophistication they achieved at the end of the 16th century, when they were used as a vehicle for discussion on religious changes. These public literary events were a powerful 'stage' for expression, so powerful that by the end of the 1500's they, 'were more strictly forbidden than the books of Martin Luther.'[144]

[141]Ibid.p. 311
[142] Ibid p.313
[143] (Clifford) p.249
[144] (Bruaene 2006) p.398 It is also noted that such literary expression varied with every country in Europe. They appear to be at their most sophisticated and effective in the Low Lands of Northern Europe.

By coincidence, the patron saint of Leuven was St. Catherine of Alexandria, the indomitable young women, beautiful and virginal, who with the gracious use of well constructed argument, proclaimed her Christian faith to fifty learned men. Who better could there be to act as patron saint for these fledgling rhetoricians than such an eloquent lady? Many chambers adopted her, but even more favoured a patron was the Holy Spirit. There is a touching innocence about these young amateur organisations that gathered together at the beginning of the fifteenth century, to improve their literary and cultural skills, in their own vernacular language; *Const van retorik*e, the Dutch art of rhetoric.[145] 'The plays and poems they produced had, usually, a religious message and always a didactic message.'[146]

To call on *De Heilige Geest,* the Holy Spirit as patron for a new Confraternity of Rhetoric was not a trivial decision. Any inspired work was, with conviction, held to be his work. It is yet another strand of the attempt by the laity to make meaningful their Christian faith within a malfunctioning church. Van Bruaene describes a documented occasion in Bruges when thirteen men, as they were gathered together, unquestionably in an upper room, were visited by a dove, so inspiring them to unite as a confraternity under the protection of the Holy Spirit. As Anthonis de Roovere's hymn proclaims, 'by fire the Holy Spirit has established this Art.'[147] The religious inspirations continued in the self-identification of these early scholars with the Apostles of Christ who, like them, were examples of *docta ignorantis.* But it was to break away from the *ignorantis* that they gathered together in such an, 'honourable and educational pastime and a shared religious self-image.'[148] Though the first recorded formal organisation into a guild in Leuven, was *De Roose* in 1448,[149] a full thirteen years before Rogiers work was installed, it evolved from a less formal but well established group of enthusiasts who contributed to the staging of the *tableaux vivants.*

In defining themselves, these pioneers of the Dutch vernacular culture knew enough about the classical rhetoric of the Universities to know that theirs was but a, *seconde*

[145] (Bruaene 2005) p.11
[146] Ibid p.16
[147] Ibid p.17
[148] Ibif p.384
[149] Ibid p.18

rétorique.[150] But the Chambers were to enlist the educated middle class to their number, if only as patrons, and with education and literacy increasing rapidly, some would have attended university. As Panofsky had commented, "the artisan came into profitable contact with the learned on many occasions. And as the15th Century progressed the universities moved away from their intense attention to high academic Latin." [151] And so it can be argued that there was an awareness of the nature of university teaching on the subject of rhetoric, that filtering down the social scale. The turn this academic rhetoric took was to harmonise with the religious nature of these early organisation and their ambitions for a literary culture and, as will be discussed later, religious guidance in their own language.

An assessment of medieval rhetoric, as in the *premiére rhetorique,* formulated by James Murray in the late 1960's, was refined recently by Charles Briggs who adds to the latter's full consideration of this topic The classical *trivium* of logic, grammar and rhetoric changed under the influence of Giles of Rome, (1243- 1316), that Augustinian, Parisian master of theology and the arts. There became a closer connection between rhetoric and moral theology in the curriculum of the late medieval universities. Seemingly, Giles concentrated on the first two books of Aristotle's, *Rhetoric,* at the expense of grammar and oratory. In carrying through his scholarship Briggs feels that *Rhetoric* was studied alongside Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* and that, 'quietly Giles of Rome's commentary, *De regimine principum,* became the standard access to Aristotle's texts,' and with it, Giles's emphasis on moral theology. 'Not only were those seeking education drawn increasingly from the middling ranks of society, but the object of their studies became more pragmatic,[152] more geared to the advancement of society. They, with the upper echelons of medieval European society were studying what Giles felt rhetoric should do, that is to, 'seek the roots of persuasive discourse and the reason for its success in the nature of human character and emotions ... the successful use can only be achieved by an orator's grasp of the most important features of human nature, emotional and intellectual.' [153] This very forward looking ideal, he hoped, would lead to better and more reasoned relationships between all peoples of whatever status. The burghers of the Low Countries would have

[150](Bruaene 2005) p.12.
[151] (Briggs 2007) p.251
[152] Ibid p. 251
[153] Ibid p. 249

concurred with his aspirations. Though starting from relatively humble beginnings the infant amateur Chambers of Dutch Literature determined to learn the skills of their self-acclaimed superiors, not merely in expressing their Christian beliefs, but also acquiring the skills to negotiate their civil liberties; in general, becoming more able. As with Giles though, their primary intent in these early days of the 1430's, was an emphasis on the Christian life, struggling to survive, as it was, in those changing, materialistic times of infant capitalism.

The Tool of Allegory

Common to medieval expression, be it secular or religious, be it visual, literary or dramatic, was their sophisticated use of allegory. It is a term, as Arnold Williams contended, that has caused much confusion, so much so that he believes, 'the word excites such confusion, that it should be prohibited.'[154] 'It simultaneously means a method of interpretation and a method of creation',[155] and as such serves to link many of the disparate elements of Rogier's *Descent.* The complexity of medieval allegory cannot be fully investigated here, but it is important because it is that tool which was used when theologians, dramatists, artists and the laity attempted to go beyond the literal text of, on the one hand secular matters or on the other Scripture, with the latter venturing into accessing the mystery of God: As Rothstein writes, 'the imagination of imaginelessness.'[156]

This Allegory can,' aggrandise, by subterfuge, distort, obfuscate or it can balm adroitly a difficult notion, oil the contemplation of the darkly distressing with the comfort of familiarity. It has the split personality of truth and deceit and it, 'belongs not to medieval man but to man, or even to mind in general'[157] C.S. Lewis, in his seminal work, *The Allegory of Love,* explores the literary art form of *The Romance of the Rose* that originated in the Southern French Counts of early medieval times which eulogises courtly love. Lewis

[154] (Williams 1969} p. 72
[155] Ibid p.72
[156] (Rothstein 2005) p.48
[157] (Lewis 1956) p.44

asserts that allegory was what, 'the ancient world, on its deathbed, bequeathed to Dark Ages'.[158] His focus in this text, as he admits, 'is secular and creative allegory, not religious and exegetical'.[159] Thus, there are two strands of thought that are relevant here, firstly Lewis' which luxuriates in the literary and the ancient past and secondly, that which belongs to an understanding of Christianity.

Before commenting on the latter, Morton Bloomfield's essay on allegory is interesting in its comments on the difference between the literary and the visual of 'Art and Drama'. The fact that these art forms are visual and therefore can, by their very nature, impart a greater degree of information, some which is inevitably subliminal, makes them more powerful than the written word; in whichever manner they are considered they are substantially different. As he asserts, Art and Drama are, 'often more polysemous than their creators intended.[160] Also importantly, 'non-verbal allegories may, hence, have other meanings than those the creator intended'.[161] This can be positive or negative. In the case of the latter, it becomes potentially dangerous when 'allegories get out of control.' This happens when the literary level is left to its own devices and common sense abandoned.[162] 'Allegory is something else inside language [thoughts] of the world – something real, sometimes hoped for, sometimes imaginary, sometimes the inside of the inside, as in dreams.'[163] So it is that, 'allegory allows language [and images] to be stretched that it may encompass the variety and subtlety of the world - language must be polysemous to be useful'.[164] It does, however, clearly, need boundaries.

In a secular context then, allegory is like a bush fire, unpredictable and often uncontrollable, with no bounds to hold it. There is however, the other application of allegory, which C.S.Lewis concedes he was not equipped to navigate, that of the use of allegory within Scripture. It is the twentieth century theologian Henri de Lubac who is the premier interpreter of medieval Christian allegory in his, *Medieval Exegesis:The Four*

[158] Ibid p.45
[159] Ibid p. 48 note 2: In his note Lewis, despite his own writings on Christianity, emphasises that here he is dealing with the secular literature of the courts.
[160] (Bloomfield 1987) p.337
[161] Ibid p. 338
[162] Ibid p. 338
[163] (Bloomfield 1987) p.341
[164] Ibid p. 334

Senses of Scripture.[165] A literal interpretation is the first reading of Scripture. This was followed by the typological that aimed to link the Old Testament to the New and then the tropological with its moral message. Lastly, and most important, in this context, is the anagogical. As James Ginther believes, for the later medieval times, there was great emphasis on the spiritual sense which was aimed toward life after death. [166] Allegory then is but a quarter of the understanding of Scripture which was expanded to organically link the history of the Old Testament with The New, the moral teachings of Christ and that anagogical understanding of the sheer mystery of the whole: "Whoever drinks the wine of Scripture hunts for Jesus and finds him, reaching him on the wooded heights."[167] De Lubac gives examples of this way of thinking that is rich in visual, verbal imagery and presented in the, 'didactic poetry ... .a common genre in the middle ages'; [168] "Whereas it is hard to swim the deep waters of allegory"[169] it was the only tool there was to enable one to, "soar higher, proffering to you what you should lay before you as an object of your hope".[170] Allegory then had the function of a strange language, snippets of which could be easily understood while others left profound question, the answers to which could only sensed within the context of the other three. This genre of 'allegory' was widely used in Late Medieval dramatic presentations from the Chambers of Rhetoric and within the visual arts as well as in secular communications. For religion, Lubac adds that the doctrine condensed in it, 'has very rarely been understood to the very depths of its significance.'[171] This quadrilateral methodology of coming to and working through Holy Scripture served generations as a, 'faith filled reflection,' so that in this fourfold approach there, 'was the unique privilege of inspired Scripture'. Martin Luther's attack on this method of exegesis resonated with potential Reformers who, with him, condemned those, 'impious verses' that were generated in the process of vernacular understanding and this practice was overtaken and abandoned. It could be said that it was to the detriment of Scriptural understanding. Lubac sees these former advocates of the old method, for whom the dramatic device of allegory was but a functional part, as 'upholders of something sprung from Tradition that is

[165] (Lubac 2000)
[166] (Ginther 2009) p. 63
[167] (Lubac 2000) p.3 Lubac is quoting a verse from Giles of Paris
[168] Ibid.p.3
[169] Ibid p.2
[170] Ibid p.2
[171] Ibid.p.12

divine itself, a certain fundamentally Catholic attitude in the face of the Word of God'[172] - and the world.

Returning momentarily to Lewis, he makes a telling comment towards the end of his text on medieval allegory that, 'It would appear that all allegories are likely to seem Catholic to the general reader.'[173] The reason for this, he suggests is, 'In part, no doubt, that it is to be explained by the fact that the visible and tangible aspects of Catholicism are medieval and therefore steeped in literary suggestion', for 'The truth is not that allegory is Catholic, but that Catholicism is allegorical'. [174] In our time in question, those years of the 1430's, when allegory was used fluently and without self-consciousness, it was not in the Reformed sense but in the sense of the fourfold medieval system which allowed the mind to escape its bodily confines and 'ascend' spiritually, among other things, to embrace God,.

A Theophany of Description

Almost as a post-script, but as will be seen later, it is within the spirit of this late medieval Northern European mind-set that desired a thorough understanding of its faith, it becomes necessary to mention the importance of Trinitarian attitudes within dramatic and artistic theatrical representation. The manner in which dramatists of the high middle ages portray God, 'can truly be called theophany,' writes Lynette Muir,[175] as they sought that experience of Him. In tune with the writings of Jan van Ruusbroec, 'The Father with the Son and all beloved are enfolded and embraced in the bond of love, that is to say in the unity of the Holy Spirit...an eternal bond of love that can never be untied'[176] and for the Brethren of the Common Life, 'we go beyond ourselves and meet God without intermediary, and rest with Him in the ground of simplicity,'[177] there was a sense in which the persons of the Trinity were ever present for those who were receptive. They were contemporary persons in the drama of life. 'Medieval drama does not only put God on

[172] Ibid p.9
[173] (Lewis 1956) p.322
[174] Ibid p.322
[175] (Muir 1982) p.75
[176](Nieuwenhove 2003) p.50
[177] Ibid p.64

stage as a, *dues ex machine* or a part of a ritual enactment; it portrays in most intimate and revealing detail every aspect of the history of God's relationship with Man, from the Creation, the Incarnation and beyond, to the end of the world.'[178] In entering into this mode of dramatic practice, there is a familiarity with the persons of God and attempts at creative understanding that, 'go far beyond the limits of mere dramatisation of Biblical stories' with the innocence of the protagonists protecting them from blasphemy. 'They pried into the "divine workings of the Trinity." When it came to the actual representation of God it was the theology of the Incarnation that was called upon to protect the participants against the Deuteronomic prohibition of the graven image. God the Father and God the Holy Spirit were denoted symbolically.[179] The Trinity could be represented by three voices, one high, one medium and one low.

What is most interesting in the essay is an account of a Flemish drama in which is played out a conversation between God the Father and His Son concerning the necessity of the crucifixion. The writers of the play employ the personified graces of Charity and Justice who must be answered to and later in the debate, Law and Truth entering the stage; the whole, 'being human in its characterisation.'[180] The conclusion of this debate between the persons of the Trinity and the virtues, is that the salvation of man must be done by one who is both God and man and the Son declares himself able for the task, which is agreed to by the Father and the Holy Spirit. Enquiry into this particular dramatic aspects of life in 15th Century Lowlands and reference to one specific drama may seem at first a like an unnecessary detour, but such a gem is akin to finding a priceless artefact in a ploughed field; an object thrown up that sheds intimate light on an age obscured by time. It helps to build our skeleton of understanding. It helps us to understand the very personal and creative relationship that these people of the Lowlands had with their God, in Trinity, and therefore to the altarpiece that newly hung above the main altar in the Chapel of Our Lady Outside the Walls.

[178] (Muir 1982) p.75
[179] Ibid p.78
[180] (Muir 1995) p.84f

And Lastly

Between the modernity of the work and its adherence to tradition, where did the balance lie for the congregation of the Leuven chapel? Was this new altarpiece overwhelmingly new or was it so much a part of the fabric of the present that even its newness did not disturb the status quo? Perhaps another look at the work will decide. But before that there are two scholarly opinions that are relevant for this interaction between artist, dramatist and the laity. Firstly, George Kernole wrote of the wider role artists played in late medieval society.[181] There is evidence that artists did not work in the rarefied solitude of contemplation whilst executing their latest commission. The studio workshops were mini industrial units employing several grades of artist journeymen. Where else would the dramatists and organisers of the *extravagances and joyful entrances* go, but to the studios of artists for their banners, heraldic emblems, set designs, and most importantly designs for the exotic costumes together with all the paraphernalia that went with a production?[182] An artist's working day brought him into contact with a wide spectrum of society, keeping his proverbial artistic finger on the pulse of Burgundian life.

Secondly, there is research that confirms the extent to which the aspiring dramatists of the *seconde rhétorique* took copy for their productions from art works, from the stories told in the earlier carved retables and the frescos; 'there was a tacit agreement among artists and playwrights as to the major episodes of a story'.[183] Edwards explores the techniques used by both artist and dramatist which not only served to educate and enforce orthodoxy, but to speculate and transcend, 'to move into the abstracted musings of reverie'. He quotes Pseudo-Dionysus, that 'the entire world of the senses in all its variety reflects the world of the spirit.' This medieval drama was not simply a nod to its complex social, religious and political circumstances, nor was a simplistic precursor to the more sophisticated post-Reformation European drama. The symbiotic relationship between drama and visual art had a decidedly pre-Reformation quality of its own. At its best not only did it subject biblical exegesis to dramatic account but it interchanged the physicality of the known world with the unknown of the spiritual. The physical dramatic enactment of

[181](Kernolde 1943) p.49f
[182] {Scott., 2009,153} p.142
[183] (Edwards 1982) p.103

the descent from the cross of the dead Christ was part of the same mind set from which Rogier's, *Descent from the Cross* was created.

If we accept current research as valid, then it is reasonable that in concluding this initial, 15th Century look at *The Descent,* it could be regarded at the level of a visual record of a *tableau vivant.* However, enquiry into the physical aspects of the work, confirm more profound references that offer enlightenment as to the creative newness of the work but also confirm its intensely traditional character. Association with the dramatic enactments of *The Sixth Sorrow of Mary* and the literary and dramatic aspirations of the rising middle classes with their Chambers of Rhetoric endorse the overwhelming presence of Scripture and need for God, as Christ, in their lives.

'On the 1st April 1435,' the year it is believed that the new altarpiece was hung in the Chapel of Our Lady Outside the Walls, 'Leuven's Great Crossbowmen's Guild organises a great festival, for which the Leuven town council too, spared neither trouble nor expense.'[184] Van der Stock, writes that, 'it is tempting to situate the dedication of the new retable, [Rogier's, *Descent from the Cross*], on the guild's high altar within the context of these activities. There are records that tell of the enactment of the Seven Sorrows of Mary, 'portrayed in seven scenes by richly attired actors on a pageant wagon.'[185] The costly garments, loaned for the event,[186] are described in detail in Rogier's work. Records also make note of the reaction this pageant received on the streets of Leuven; 'All those who saw it wept'.[187] Theatre and altarpiece were inseparably intertwined.

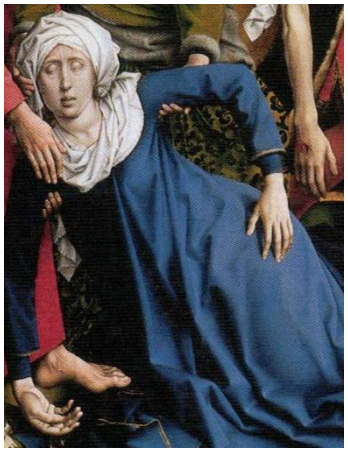
The importance of the sorrowing Madonna, taken up by Rogier and the dramatic expressions of street theatre, gives an insight into contemporary religiosity. All are part of 'knowing' the importance of the Christian life for securing salvation after death; this 'active' life as a necessary precursor for advancing toward a higher level of understanding and communion with their God, for these Christians of the 'third estate'. There were no tight demarcations for moving from the 'active life' on to the 'interior life', as described by Jan van Ruusbroec. It was more a question of a gradual refinement of the life lived and an

[184] (Stock 2009) p.20
[185] Ibid.p.21
[186] Ibid p23 note 39
[187] Ibid p.21

understanding of, and growing intimacy, with God. To venture into the 'interior life' with the aspiration of eventually having some understanding of the 'contemplative' in Rogier's *Descent,* it is necessary to first consider the second most important figure in the work, The Virgin Mary. The status, veneration and theology of Mary reached back to the early Church Fathers in the East. but from which, the West had formulated its own interpretation of the woman who facilitated the Incarnation. It is a significantly more complex relationship than is often portrayed by some modern writers but one which Rogier wholly embraced. In doing so, he, almost inadvertently, acknowledged the status of medieval women and their partial success at self-determination. He gave clues within the work to older references to Mary. However, the liturgical and literary traditions that evolved around her came, in the main, from the monasteries and the emerging middle class with their aspirations for *Drama* and *Rhetoric.* Within the matrix of the Northern European life of Leuven, Mary was culturally and religiously important, not only for herself but as a key to contemporary Christology. This is the aspect of Rogier's work that I will explore next.

Chapter Two

Rogier van der Weyden's Medieval Mary



Desiderus Erasmus is the man purported to have 'robbed the Virgin Mary of her honour'.[188] However, there is no evidence that he set out with that intent. It was rather a side effect of his scrupulous translation of the New Testament, from the Greek into Latin. But he became labelled as the man who dared to alter the *Magnificat* and the hallowed *Our Father.*[189] In contradiction of Jerome, he questions the *gratia plena* and demoted it to a mere *gracious,* in the rest of Luke's texts. Along with his general reforming thoughts, he was particularly exasperated by the cult of Marian devotions, particularly disliking the *Salve Regina.* He savaged what he considered to be mindless rhetoric, offered up as devotion to the Virgin Mary. In his brutally satirical, burlesque-like Colloquium, *The Shipwreck,* of 1523, 'the most exquisite satire on medieval doctrine ever made[190], he berates unscriptural obsequious flattery of The Virgin, with all the theatrical bawdiness he could muster. In *The Fish*, he attacks the preacher who, accused him of an, 'irreverent explanation of *The Magnificat.*[191] But Erasmus's 'dramatic response was that, 'those who count short rosaries and salutations, should rather count lust curbed, injury forgiven and puffed-up minds brought under subjection'.[192]

In mitigation of his reforming zeal and clinically accurate Latin, Erasmus was at pains to point to his own personal devotion to the Madonna. 'My devotion to the Virgin is obvious from the two prayers which I published some time ago ... and also from the

[188] (Augustijn 1995) p.155
[189] Ibid pl95
[190] (Erasmus 1965) p. 139
[191] Ibid p. 426
[192] (Pabel 1995) p.179

new Mass which I recently published ...' he protested.[193] The pen of Erasmus may have been mighty but it was never his intent to take up the sword or the martyr's crown, openly aligning himself to the shortcomings of St. Peter: "If the corrupted Court of Rome calls for prompt and vigorous remedy, that is no business of mine", he wrote. But Erasmus was not the first nor would he be the last whose reforming intentions were taken up and used *in extremis.* Luther had made no attempt to devalue Marian devotions. It was the later reformers who, in their zeal, sought to abide by the scant Gospel references and removed her, in correction of the faith. To have a man of the status of Erasmus to offer them biblical endorsement for such a stance, gave their action authority. From a minor correction of the Greek text, the whole Marian tradition became demonised to the extent that it was transformed and remains, a divisive cultural marker between the Reformed and Latin practice of Christianity.

It would seem difficult to believe that this entrenched attitude has not had influence on the manner in which the vast, extant body of Marian visual imagery has been addressed, or rather not addressed, by the modern Western world of Visual Art. I will explore the potential avenues of enquiry into Rogier's complex interpretation of Mary, in eight sections. Firstly, I will look at the history of the status of Mary within the Western world. Secondly, given that modern interpretations consistently emphasise the co-redemptrix role for Mary, I will look at the validity of this assumption. Secondly, before proceeding to the inner workings of the painting, I will look at two oblique scriptural references that Rogier must have felt were important to mention: The typological linking of Mary to Eve and Jesus to Adam, as well as St. Paul's interpretation of 'the neck of Mary' as being the link between God and the Church. For the fourth and fifth sections, I feel that the relationship of the laity to Mary is critical, as are the apocryphal texts that fed that interest. Sixthly, and following on from the last two, there was the widespread devotion of *Lamentation,* that was expressed in liturgy, visual image and drama. Seventh, there is the exceptionally modern interpretation of Mary by Rogier, particular to his Leuven altarpiece that leads on to the consideration of the unprecedented role of some women within religious life of the Northern Middle Ages. And lastly, the all important and often very personal role of the monasteries in

[193] (DeMolen 1987) p.179

initiating and fostering the wider devotion to Mary. For this I have looked particularly, and in some detail, at St. Anselm for his very new and intimate prayers to Mary, St. Bernard of Claivaux, who overall, did not dwell in excess on Mary, except for his therapeutic devotion to The Madonna, at a time of profound personal crisis in his life. And there is, importantly, St. Bonaventure, left as he was to rationalise the excesses of St. Francis's adoration of Mary. It is important to emphasise, however, that for all three, fulsome though their sentiments were, they never exceeded their devotion to the broken body of Christ and His centrality to Christian devotions.

A Brief Look at the History of Mary's Status

In looking briefly at how Mary became such a key figure in Christian devotion, I believe it is crucial to remember the initial difficulty of early Christian intellectuals had in integrating the Jewish Old Testament into the Christian ideology that was being created around the Jew, Jesus, within Gentile circles. Gambero, in his text *Mary and the Fathers of the Church,* focuses on 'the primitive Church's concern to formulate a kerygmatic definition of the person of the Lord and his earthly mission.'[194] Contention of this as heretical doctrines continued into the Middle Ages.[195] It is relevant, in considering Rogier's Mary and her dismissal at the Reformation, to look briefly at the historical legitimacy of her status, formulated as it was by the political, intellectual and cultural mores of the time. There is an historical rationality to her status.

Importantly, amongst the early church thinkers, it was Irenaeus, b.130 AD who, having come under influence of Justin, continued the thinking about Mary, within his many writings. His main preoccupation was challenging the heresies that had grown up in the intervening years, since Christ's death. The swirling storms of opinion generated by the various culture groups, into which Christianity had spread, inevitably created what were believed to be heretical thoughts and practice. The Greco/Roman pagan intellectual legacy was vast and diverse; the Jewish Old Testament authoritative. The serious challenge came from the broad Gnosnic thinking, in all its manifestation, as focused

[194] (Gambero 1999) p.25
[195] Ibid p.26

around Valentinius and Marcion, as they espoused their thoughts alongside the emerging Christian communities; in the second century Gnosticism was a world-wide movement.[196] As Frend comments, theirs was a Platonic inspired thinking, yet it despised philosophers as, 'the epitome of demonic confusion'. The ladder to the Gnostic truth lay in emancipation from Jewish and Christian writings and a proper understanding of the Old and New Testaments. That understanding of the Old Testament resulted in its rejection as being merely applicable to Jewish history.[197] Most importantly in this context, there was also a complete rejection of the humanness of Christ and therefore of His suffering.[198] Their disparate reasoning struck out in opposition to the ideals that were being established in that early Christianity [that understanding of the life of Christ that has survived today], which the latter were obliged to challenge. Added to this there was the Docetic belief, which determined the life and death of Christ was a kind of human phantasm. It is little wonder that Irenaeus held so closely to both the Old and New Testaments for authority and guidance, against such divergent thinking, believing that the one was merely a continuation of the other.

It was, however, within the unsavoury wrangling of the Council of Ephesus (431)[199] that the status of Mary was finally confirmed as the Theotokos, the God-bearer. From this ratification arose a greater awareness and concentration of this earthly mother of Jesus, both East and West. For the latter, interest faded within the 'dark ages' to be revived at the beginning of the second millennium. Given that the original confirmation of her importance and status, in relation to Christ, was first confirmed in the East, it therefore has to be asked, to what extent was the Greek influence a reality, in forming the Latin Mariology of the Middle Ages in the West? In his essay, 'Mary at the Cross, East and West', Stephen Shoemaker explores the motif of *Lamentation*, to argue that the origins of western Mariology, in the revolutionary form of 'affective piety,' that sought to concentrate on the human sufferings of Christ, originated not in 11th Century western Europe but from the Byzantine influence of the Greek monks.[200] And, that Mary's

[196] (Frend 2003) p.51
[197] Ibid.p.54
[198] Ibid.p.52
[199] (Frend 2003) p.217
[200](Shoemaker 2011) p.570

presence at the foot of the cross was the springboard for exploring the human relationship of mother and son and embellishing the experience of these contemplations.[201] Shoemaker places St. Anselm at the fore in the West of, 'defining the parameters of the divine-human relationship, placing at the fore Christ's full humanity and identifying his sufferings on the cross as the basis of human redemption.'[202] Prior to this, the role of Mary had not played a significant part in Western Christian life; Ambrose of Milan (340-395) was quite clear that Mary had no role in the redemptive sacrifice of her Son, nor did she share in His sufferings, to the extent that she neither lamented or grieved; 'I read that she was standing. I did not read that she was weeping,' Ambrose commented tartly.[203] Writers such as Southern and Fulton consider that it was Anselm who, in the course of his own mediations, almost inadvertently, was the instigator of this considerable shift in human relationships with Christ and more particularly His mother. But the thrust of Shoemaker's essay is to question Anselm's originality and ask whether his was merely a continuation of an appreciation of Mary that was already in place in the Orthodox Church in the 7th century.

If there was an influence how was it adapted to harmonise with western Christology? Fulton comments that eastern Mariology had been in place a considerable time, at least two hundred years before it appeared in the West. Why then was there such a slow engagement with this very human emotional response.[204] Did, Anselm plagiarise the devotion or as Shoemaker is anxious to confirm, did it come directly from the original texts of Eastern influence? But then he wavers, concluding that there is too much research to be completed before one can be dogmatic. This is despite Pelikan's, references that, 'draws the lines of development back from this Western version (*Mater Dolorosa*) to the Byzantine poetry of the Lamenting Virgin.'[205] Surely the circumstantial evidence is considerable?

[201] Ibid.p.572
[202]Ibid p.572 Shoemaker is quoting from Robert Southern's *The Making of the Middle Ages,* p.235
[203] Ibid. p. 588
[204] (Fulton 2002) p.214
[205] (Pelikan 1996) p.127

In his chapter on, 'The Planctus Mariae and The Eastern Tradition', Sandro Sticca[206] cites Origen as being, 'the first to have expressed the concept of the mirroring of the Passion of Christ in the soul of Mary.'[207] However, one of the first laments of the Virgin comes from the quill of Ephraim the Syriac,(d.373).[208] These were in the context of his exegetical and theological works, where he was the first to teach the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.[209] Sticca adds that Ephraim's[210] *Lamentationes gloriossisimae Virginis Mariae super Passione Domini,* is detailed and dwells on the sufferings of Christ as they would have impacted on a human mother. What he declares, within his work, to be the most famous description is,

> Tu mihi, jam Crux sanctissima, lignumque benedictum *decumbe:* ut dilectissime fili mei, ac Dei mei plagas exosculer, proprimque filium salute: ut fili mei corpus amplectar, et os suavissimum, occlosque ac faciem, manus atque pedes, et caedem iniquissimam deosculer. *Decumbe, o crux veneranda, decumbe.*[211]

This he cites as an important influence on the Marian tradition of the Middle Ages.[212]

Within the same Syriac tradition, there comes down to us the writings of James of Sarug, (451-521) also known as Jacobus Sarguensis or Jacob Serug who, like Ephraim, dwelt lyrically on the human sensitivities of Mary during her life-long mission and particularly the ordeals of her son.[213] They were written in the spirit of deep veneration and Christian thought. Their love for Mary and Christ 'is evident in their expression and their delving into Mariological questions such as the divine motherhood of Mary, her virginity, her sanctity and her antithesis of Eve.'[214] "James was a worthy rival of St. Ephraim in both his literary fecundity, is technical artistry and his great love for the

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[206] Sandro Sticca, original publication was written in Italian. Margaret Monteverde, in reviewing the work in Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England, Vol. 17, 1995,p. 366, comments that the work," is at its most incisive in the early chapters concerning the increasing focus in the early Patristic era on Mary as co-redemptix and co-sufferer in Christ's Passion.
[207] (Sticca 1988) p.33
[208] Older 20th century texts use *Syriac* rather than *Syrian*
[209] Ibid. 35 Sticca is quoting from *A Short History of Syriac Literature* by William Wright 2nd Ed. 1996 Amsterdam.
[210] Ibid note 14, p. 186 Taken from Saint Ephraim Syrus, *Opera omnia in sex tomos distribute,* 6:574-75
[211] Ibid p.37, p. 575 of Ephraim's text.
[212] Ibid.p.37
[213] Ibid. p.39
[214] Ibid. p.39

Virgin."[215] For them to have been preserved and come down to us confirms how early and from where came some of the earliest liturgical devotion to Mary.

The manner in which Christianity and society developed within Western Europe, the various national inclinations, the problem of language difference, meant that any accommodation of the Eastern model of prayerful contemplation of the suffering of Christ and his Mother would not be automatic. It would be disingenuous to deny the power of Eastern thought, particularly with the veneration of Mary, Mother of Christ but the West had its own unique journey to make in her ascendance and that must be harmonised with the manner in which the faith shaped itself in those medieval years. Few westerners knew Greek and even fewer Greeks knew, or desired to know, Latin.[216] Fulton, with others, defines the first major shift in mode of prayer, in this case to The Virgin Mary occurred around the first millennial anniversary, when Christ was expected, but failed, to return to earth. The considerable complexity of those changes and their influence on Christian practice are too complex to comprehensively engage with here. However, there is one item in Fulton's substantial text that resonates particularly with the current enquiry into the culture of identification with Christ, and the intimate engagement with the suffering of Mary – in *Lamentation.*

The Question of the Two Redeemers

The twin figures of Mary and Christ form a dramatic parallelogram in the centre of the painting; their juxtaposition and mirror-image poses present a profound dramatic effect. It could rightly be said that this was to emphasise the belief in Mary's position as co-Redemptrix with Christ for the salvation of humanity. Within the various Christian theories of atonement, it is the medieval understanding that is applicable here; that atonement was bought through the life and death of Christ, a death which was necessary to reconcile mortals with their creator, referencing Matthew 26:39 and Hebrews 9:22. In his seminal essay, *Compassio and Co-Redemption in Rogier van der Weyden's* Descent

[215] (Sticco 1998) p.38 Sticco is quoting Constantino Vono, 1953, *Omelie mariologiche di S.Giacomo di Satug.* Rome
[216] (Herrin 2008) p.260

from the Cross, Otto von Simson explores this dramatic visual statement by the artist, the medieval understanding of the part played by Mary in this atonement and the context for these beliefs. The essay elaborates on History of Art comments that the visual interpretation represents, 'the Virgin's *compassio*, her suffering with Christ, and her role as co-redeemer'[217] As Campbell wrote, 'Fainting, she is inanimate like her dead Son. The pitch of suffering here expressed is the theme of many, pious, meditation on Mary's compassion by Roger's contemporaries'.[218] In consequence, amongst other factors, there was the development of the idea that Mary, not as the God-bearer, but as her role as the suffering mother alongside her Son in His Passion, she played a part in that supreme act of redemptive sacrifice, so she may be names *co-Redemptrix.*[219]

Von Simson, cites the extant origin of this belief as being from Ernald of Chartres (d.1160) and his *De Laudibus Beatae Mariae Virginis.* Ernald describes Mary's *compassio* as a true sacrifice, conjoined to that of Christ and in every detail a parallel to his Passion.[220] The thread of this idea is retained through Bernard of Clairvaux, Albert the Great, St. Francis and St. Bonaventure. 'The term *co-redemption* seems to have been specifically coined in the early fourteenth century' by Tauler (d.1361), believing that Christ made Mary "cooperate" in man's Redemption by associating her with him in all his merits and all his afflictions.[221] Pertinent to Rogier, he cites the writings of Denis the Carthusian (d.1471) and Bernadine of Sienna (d.1444) in whom, '*co-redemptio* and *compassio* are inseparable'.

As an aside from the question of Marian status, Simson remarks how Rogier's *Descent from the Cross,* 'allows us to define more precisely the interactions between "Gothic" art and "Gothic" religion'.[222] And, importantly for chapter four, he believes that, 'Francis, who appeared to contemporaries as a living *Crucifixus,* is the embodiment of that emotional discovery of the Passion, which marks indeed the birth of

[217] (Campbell 2004) p 10 Whether in co-redemptrix, capital letters are used for the 'co' and or the 'redemptrix' is part of a complex argument both on the role of Mary and the theology of atonement which are too complex to explore here.
[218] (Von Simpson 1953) p. 11
[219] Ibid p.11
[220] Ibid p.12
[221] Ibid.p.14
[222] Ibid . 15

tragedy in Christian art'.[223] He adds that the 'salient feature of Gothic piety is of course the preoccupation with the suffering of Christ and His Mother'.

Discourse on this question of co-Redemption has been lengthy and vast. In the last century, Vatican II fell short of confirming Mary's role, 'which the work of the theologians has not yet clarified.'[224] More recently Pope John Paul II, so diligent in his devotion to Marian theology, delivered the Marian encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* during, in what he had decreed to be, the Marian year of 1987-8, but he failed to offer resolution on the question of this ultimate tribute to Mary. It could be said that this concept is the most offensive to Reformed minds. John Macquarrie attempts admirably, in his slim volume, *Mary for all Christian,* to bridge this unbridgeable gap between two thought patterns, thought patterns have become so long formed that they have all but entered into the genetic code of the protagonists. The topography of these paths can he traces back to Luther and his *sola gratia* and *sola scriptura* and Macquarrie confronts Karl Barth's stance on this issue. He applauds attempts to reconcile the two divergent doctrines of, on the one hand the utter, 'moral and spiritual helplessness of humans,' that arises from the doctrine of justification by grace, that 'shibboleth of orthodox Protestant theology,'[225] and the Judeo/Christian system of co-operative reparation that became corrupted into indulgences in the middle ages, leading to Luther's stance for his parishioners. Despite the latter, Macquarrie sees in the inclusion of Mary, so berated by Reformed thought, much to be valued and he takes the renowned Barth to task. The *solo gratia* Barth applauds is a, 'degradation of the concept of humanity implicit in the biblical accounts of creation.' [226] He presents a polarisation of opinion linking the acceptance or rejection of Mary to the differing opinions on the route to salvation. Within the *solo gratia* where, 'Redemption has been gained for us by the cross and salvation is offered to us as a free gift, without regard to our merit or lack of merit,' there is no place for the Mother of Christ. But Macquarie is optimistic and given, as he writes, that intransigent stances rarely result in accommodation, there is space within the Christian faith for both divine grace and human effort. He sees in Mary the

[223] Ibid p. 15
[224] (Flannery 1996) Lumen Gentium 54
[225] Ibid p.102
[226] Ibid. p. 104-5

combination of being, 'full of Grace,' as in the Vulgate translation and quotes W.P.Dubose, in that, 'Mary represents the highest reach, the focusing upwards, as it were, of the world's susceptibility to God;'[227] Mary is that key link between the purity of the divine and the troubled nature of humanity in its search for the eternal life in salvation.

By isolating the figures of Mary and Christ from the whole work, it becomes easier to observe the extent of the visual intent. The question has to be asked, as to whether, even if Rogier wholeheartedly endorsed this sentiment, was this his over-riding intent for the work? An initial glance at the painting would seem to confirm that this was so. Both figures are caught in a parallel posture, diagonal to the work, with their arms raised to form a cross, echoing the form of the notorious crossbow. Bodily features compare. Hands fall in a sympathetic manner, Mary's left hand hangs parallel to the pierced and bloodied right hand of Christ, while the alternate right and left hold the same pose. Rogier paints both figures with the right eyes marginally open, as are the mouths, that both reveal good teeth. But there are important differences. Mary, in her faint, retains a certain muscle tone, sufficient to keep her head erect and her pallor is not that of death. But most importantly it is not Mary but Christ who occupies the central portion of the work, commands the central role. He is there at the very heart of the work and is physically above the Madonna, who may reflect his pose but is out of the main frame. While I acknowledge and accept an interpretation of Mary as co-Redemptix, I do believe that the question is considerably more complex and sophisticated than the modern world would give credit with its techno/scientific thinking, and that such a conclusion can be allowed only within the expansive framework of the Mariology that was abroad in the early fifteenth century when Rogier planned and executed his masterwork. Mary's position within the work is *not* exclusively that of proclaiming a place as being an equal, with 'not equal' being an important caveat, in the salvation of humanity.

The Latin Church still awaits a conclusive theology of Mary. But none of these deliberations were there to cloud the vision of Rogier. Medieval Mariology has its own

[227] Ibid p. 108

genealogy. The definition of the role and status of Mary and the devotion that held Europe in its sway, had its own identity, its own expression of medievalness and, as such, rather than being dismissed as misguided or primitive, gave voice to the emotional wealth of that culture and its intelligent curiosity about itself, it's 'before' and it's 'after'. That complex body of Marian culture comes from a rich seam.

Rogier's Two Oblique Biblical References

Part of the fabric of a medieval painted altarpiece was its growing sophistication. No such image, in the hands of an artist of the status of Rogier, was a simple illustration; no mere tableau of figures acting out a brief passage of Scripture. What the medieval viewer expected was something of a puzzle to be solved; a complex series of references that related to the primary text. One of those historical links was between Mary and Eve and between Adam and Christ, referencing the Old and New Testaments and the second the 'the neck of Mary' as the metaphorical link between Jesus and the mortal Church. These may seem minor and that I seem to overplay them, but they are part of the authenticity of devotion to Mary that had developed over the years. I believe these references are contextually important as part of understanding medieval Mariology.

All modern scholarly commentaries on Rogier's *Descent from the Cross* draw attention to the skull at the feet of the Beloved Disciple, as it gazes up, eyelessly, toward Joseph of Aramathea.[228] They do not make the most obvious link to Matthew 27:33 and, 'Golgotha, the place of the skull,' rather they comment on its ancient link between Adam and Eve and Christ and Mary, that Christ and His mother's mission was to make restitution for the failings of Adam and Eve. Whereas it is not a key motif in Rogier's work, its inclusion is an acknowledgement of the ongoing contemporary understanding of Mary as being, 'the Second Eve.' The position of Mary within the Christian faith, her own birth, her conception of the Christ child, the father of whom was believed to be God Himself, had been a source of wondering controversy, since the death of Christ,

[228] Lorne Campbell, William Blockmans and Jan van der Stock, have written perceptively on Rogier van der Weyden and the depth of his Scriptural references.

only finding some resolution with the Nicene Creed. Rogier's reference is an acknowledgement of an historical, biblical reference to the matter and would have had a far greater currency than would be expected today.

The background to the thinking, regarding the human woman, whom God chose for His purpose of creating His incarnate self, seems a critically important part of understanding the pivotal role Mary played in Christianity up to the time of the painting. Mary's integration into liturgy and church practice was not some heterodox perversion of thought that came to be abused before the Reformation swept it away, but had evolved partly from challenges to the early church, particularly Gnosticism. This disparate group of thinkers had a widespread influence in the early years of the church, better understood by the recently, (1945), discovered Nag Hammadi works. They challenged the humanity of Christ, his death and Resurrection while at the same time denying the concept of The Trinity.[229] But aside from that, there was the ongoing struggle to evolve some understanding of such an extra-ordinary idea as God becoming human with the co-operation of a human woman, together with the physiology of the event and status of that woman, all of which was tangled with tradition.[230] It was in the course of these struggles that part of the theology of Mary was to evolve.

As Rogier is acknowledging, the origins of his work lie in Genesis 3, with its, 'still unchallenged structure of original sin.'[231] The damnation sworn upon Adam and Eve committed succeeding generations to suffer in life and die into dust – to oblivion. Adam may have named his wife Eve, 'the mother of all who live,' Gen.3:20, but that was only in the physical sense and in doing so she was also the mother of mortal death and suffering in life. As Gambero writes, these early Christian writers saw in this statement of Eve's progeny a prophecy of a, 'new Eve,' that was to come and this new Eve could only be the Virgin Mary. In these early Christian years, men such as Justin Martyr, (d.165) tried, to establish right thinking about the phenomenon of Christ and His birth and how he paid the ultimate price for doing so. In his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 160 AD, '[The Son of God] became man through a Virgin, so that the disobedience

[229] (Frend 2003) p.53f
[230] (Thompson 1906) p. 476
[231] (Warner. 1985) p. 51

caused by the serpent might be destroyed in the same way it had begun.' Thus it was that, 'The Virgin Mary conceived faith and joy ... Thus was born of her the child about whom so many Scriptures speak ... Through Him God crushed the serpent.'[232] In the nineteenth century Cardinal Newman wrote to a colleague that, Mary as new Eve, constituted a rudimentary but extremely important Marian doctrine, referring to the one left to us by Christian antiquity and including the texts of Justin.[233] These he suggested were the first serious meditations on Mary and her mission.[234]

It is, however, within the writings of Paul that we find the first Scriptural endorsements for the idea of the link to Genesis, not of Mary and Eve, but of Adam and Christ; the Adam whose scull rests on the ground of Rogier's painting. That first human sin Paul attributes to Adam. From 1 Corinthians, 45, Paul wrote, 'The first man Adam became a living being, the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.' In verse 47, 'just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.' And further, in Romans, 5:17 he asserts that, ' If, because of one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gifts of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.' He does not make the link between Eve and Mary; that was for the early Church Fathers to establish. But, Paul, in referring back to Genesis, makes the connection by default.

The early rationalisation of Mary would not be complete without returning to Ireneus. A diligent pastor, he considered it his mission to challenge heresies and in doing so he continued the Adam/Christ and Eve/Mary dialogue. What he saw was that God chose, through this second creation, the Incarnation of Christ through Mary, to rehabilitate his original plan for salvation which had been interrupted by Adam's fall,[235] explored in Romans 5:12f. As Pelikan wrote, 'Irenaeus then came to the most

[232] (Gambero 1999) p.46
[233] Dr. Hannah Hunt commented that typology appeared in the Syrian tradition.
[234] Ibid.p.47
[235] (Gambero 1999) p.53

innovative and most breathtaking of parallels',[236] in his, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching;*

> 'Just as it was through a virgin who disobeyed [Eve] that mankind was stricken and fell and died, so too it was through the Virgin [Mary], who obeyed the word of God, that mankind, resuscitated by life, received life ... her that was descended from Adam [Mary], preserved the likeness of formation; for Adam had necessarily to be restored in Christ, that mortality be absorbed in immortality.'[237]

Pelikan wonders whether this stance was original to Irenaeus or if he had adopted it from contemporary thinking. He adds that, the fact that he writes so confidently and without any apparent necessity to justify himself suggests that the idea already had a currency. This could have enabled him to state so assuredly, as Gamero writes on Ireneus, that 'The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience. What Eve bound through her unbelief, Mary loosed by her faith'.[238] Ireneus, begins his formulation of the soteriology of Mary,

> 'If then, the first-made man's sin was mended by the right conduct of the firstborn Son [of God], and if the serpent's cunning was bested in the simplicity of the dove [Mary], and if the chains that held us bound to death have been broken, then the heretics are fools; they are ignorant of God's economy, and they are unaware of his economy for [the salvation of] man.'[239]

Whatever the truth is, it was Irenaeus who defined the association, one which, once abroad fed the fertile imaginations of poets and artists; the Latin Eva reversed to become the celebrated Ave. For Irenaeus the Eve/Mary association was an important link between the Old and New Testaments which he believed to be inexorably joined, the one foretelling of the other. So it is that the skull painted by Rogier has its part to play in contextualising, from early Christianity, the status to which Mary had risen but also serving to link the Old and the New Testaments, in what was the beginnings of the

[236] (Pelikan 1996) p.42
[237] (Pelikan 1996) p. 42-3 Quoting from Irenaeus' *Proof of Apostolic Teaching*, 33
[238] (Gambero 1999) p.54
[239] Ibid p. 54 Gambero quotes from Irenaeus's, *Adverses haereses,*5,19;PG 7, 959-60.

complex integration of Mary into liturgy and church practice. It also lays part of the foundations for Rogier's ultimate, complex description of the role played by Mary in the Passion and Death of Christ and in medieval religious culture.

The second ancient reference Rogier makes is to the neck of Mary. Had Rogier's Mary not been in the process of falling to the ground, she would have presented as a well dressed Flemish women, suitably veiled, with only her face to be seen. But in his wisdom, Rogier has allowed the expensive, fluted linen veil to partly fall, exposing the neck and upper chest of The Virgin. I do not believe that this was simply an artistic device to flaunt his ability to paint flesh, but that Rogier was aware of the allegorical significance of laying bare the Virgin's neck.

In his writings on the role of Mary, John Macquarrie assigns two roles to Mary.[240] His first, and relevant here, her place in relation to the Church, by which he means the continued gatherings of like minded persons who have focused on striving to live in the manner set out by the life and death of the man Jesus and with the hope that in doing so they would have access to eternal salvation; the caveat he adds is that the purity of this pursuit, as within a *church,* is constantly obscured by the sin of this gathering at any one time in history. At its best, that seems to mean the, 'continuation and strengthening of that first act of faith by which the human being responds to God's initiative.' This place, this Church, was the interface charged with encouraging and maintaining that flow of divine energy that sustains the continuation of these practices and beliefs. In the context of The New Testament, was it not Mary who was first to, 'respond to God's initiative,' and in doing so became an integral part of Christ's mission and therefore a potential mediator between the divine and the human, he asks?

Before concurring with Macquarrie, it is necessary to go back to the writings of St.Paul, in particular Colossians 1:18, 'He is the head of the body, the church: He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might come to be first place in everything.' And from Ephesians 5:23, 'Christ is the head of the church, the body of

[240] (Macquarrie 2001)

which is the saviour.' The symbolic, naked, unblemished neck, rendered so exquisitely at the hand of Rogier, can then be read as that legitimate link between sinful man approaching God through the church and his Christian aspirations to eternal life in Christ. The first to formally voice this interpretation was Herman of Tournai (the town of Rogier's birth) d.1147, who called The Virgin, the 'neck' between Christ as the head, to the body of the church. But by placing Mary in the strategic position of being the connection between the two, certain questions arise. Firstly, there is an emphasis on church, so that there is the obvious attempt by Paul to establish a management body for this phenomenon of Christianity, through which ordinary mortals would be obliged to conduct their relationship with God. Secondly, can Mary, being that all important facilitator of the birth of Christ, be allowed to remain as of ordinary mortals? She must, by circumstance, be afforded super-human qualities of virginity, pre, in and post partum, be singled out from an early age for her role. And, though the Gospel text is silent, have a co-operative role in the Passion and Death her son Jesus Christ. It is therefore in the attempted resolution of these issues that a good body of the Marion theology was developed. It could be construed as conjecture, but I do not believe that in an era when there was so much questioning and thirst for knowledge within the laity, Rogier was not aware of this concept and saw fit to mention it, visually.

The question of co-redemptive value is an important one, but is not one that can be allowed to dominate such a sophisticated and theologically interesting work of art. The primary importance of the work is the interpretation of The Gospel of John and his description of the lifting down from the cross of Jesus Christ and those who attended the event. The two minor references I have considered, I would submit form part of the 'ground' of the painting: The ground, being that under-painting which influences the whole work but is largely disregarded; These two oblique references may seem inconsequential to us today, but they formed part of this back*ground* of information that would have had a significantly greater importance in the early fifteenth century. The Scriptural 'ground' and the painted ground, assist in settings the tone of the whole work.

The Medieval Mary of the Laity: The Human Trinity of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

By the time Charlemagne's *de Partibus Saxioniae* of c.785 had placed Christian practice on a statutory footing, it had pervaded every corner of life in Northern Europe. Some seven hundred years later, however, church authority was in disarray and social conditions changing rapidly. Amid the tribulations of later medieval life, there was a thirsting for spiritual comfort. As MacColloch writes, the population at large were in search of divine grace and an experience of God's love with an assured salvation. In this search they turned to a combination of the scholarly writings of the universities, notable earlier writings and various others texts, often heterodox.[241] They sought to elaborate the Christian story, to humanise it into one with which they could empathise. Rachel Fulton attributes her substantial work on The Virgin Mary to an attempt to understand this specifically medieval approach; to establish some understanding of a, 'God who so emptied himself as to become incarnate from a human women and to die a humiliating death,'[242] and how this could be woven into the human story. In medieval times, this search was, in part, conducted through the visual sense of artworks, the hearing of music and the mental imaging through texts and liturgy. Bynum lists authors, who have examined this phenomenon from differing perspectives,[243] and quotes John Benton's writing, that this turning to the inner self in relation to God was not egocentric but was, 'what they thought they were discerning was what they called "the soul" (*anima)* or "self" (*seipsum),*or the "inner man" *(homo interior).*' As Benton concludes, it manifested itself in the discovery that, 'within oneself of human nature made in the image of God,'[244] which permitted an increasingly personal relationship to the humanness of the Christian story.

Attention to one aspect of this story, the status and respect lacking toward Joseph, the earthly 'father' of Jesus, was highlighted by the eminent theologian, Jean Gerson, 1363-1429, at the Council of Constance in 1414, 'with a paean of three thousand words

[241] (MacCulloch 2003) p.22
[242] (Fulton. 2002) p.3
[243] (Bynum 1982) p.82f
[244] (Benton 1973) p. 64-65

to St. Joseph'.[245] Behind this rehabilitation of Joseph lay the intent of church reformers to place families at the centre of their agenda. By so engaging and equating their life to the earthly life of Christ, they hoped to strike an empathetic chord with their parishioners.[246] Gerson drove home this message with sermons, particularly a Christmas one, to portray Joseph not as old and feeble but a fine man, though chaste, the head of the earthly family to whom Mary and Jesus would be bidden. Emphasis was on the earthliness of this 'Holy' family, of father, mother and child. In doing so, Gerson gave full licence for the parishioner to relate the holy family to their own sufferings and bereavement as they inevitably came along. He, unwittingly, emphasised the very contemporary 'normality' of Christ and Mary as portrayed in Rogier's work.

But this human, heavenly family did not depend solely on Gerson's interpretation. The foundation of the Holy Family lay in texts such as the apocryphal, *Protoevangelium of James*, which added flesh to the Gospel narratives. 'The Holy Family became a kind of earthly trinity, intersecting the (Divine) Holy Trinity through Jesus. In the earthly family, Joseph shared the power and responsibility of human fathers.'[247] While this digression may seem unrelated to Roger's *Desent*, it is important as it partly explains the profound expression of human emotion in the work. Rogier is using, the quite understandable, human distress at the situation recounted in John 19, to draw the viewer, through their own emotions, into a greater appreciation of the Passion and Death of Christ, one which I will explore further in Chapter Four

To what extent did Rogier express this new way of approaching faith, this need to elaborate the narrative, the growing belief that it was not only the 'religious' who could engage with Christ? The rise in the veneration of the Virgin Mary and her place within the Holy Family, Gerson's promotion of St. Joseph and his espoused attention to the human life of Christ within a human family, was often played out in the rise of the Confraternaties whose intent was devotion to the *Sorrows of Mary,* as detailed in Chapter I. There is certainly an expression of the familiarity and comfort with which people sought to interact with this Holy human family as part of their vernacular piety.

[245] (Warner 1985) p.189
[246] (Atkinson 1991) p.159
[247] Ibid.p.159

The overall schema of Rogier's work endorses this familial sentiment, as the earthly family, from whom Christ has been taken, mourn their loss. It conforms to Gerson's preaching and the expressions of lay piety. The visual text is overtly human with strikingly few obvious references to divinity. As we have seen, this intimate relationship had not always been the case. Mary had had a journey to travel, from the scant Gospel texts to the innermost hearts of European Christians, assisted not least by the Apocryphal writings.

Mary of Those Apocryphal Texts

Where do we turn for substantiation of the mythology and legend that built into such a formidable biography of Mary? In the years following the death of Christ, communities had struggled to make sense of the seemingly impossible events, so it was that reported eye witness accounts merged with the creative imagination. Luigi Gambero's chapter on *The New Testament Apocrypha,* in relation to The Virgin Mary, shows how abundant these writings were.[248] Many only remain with us as fragments and they vary widely in credibility, but they offer tantalising details that can be found echoed in texts and artwork. The presence of the Ox and the Donkey in the manger where Mary laid Jesus Lk. 2:12 can be read in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. But from those scrolls, lost and those extant, it is the Protevangelium of James, The Gospel of James, the James believed step brother of Jesus, which as a composite document has come down to us from the oral and written accounts, the Jewish Scriptures and in scant Gospels,[249] that are significantly important. It is believed to have been written, not in the Middle Ages but, between 140 and 150. It was of a sufficiently high standard to be widely copied and was the first account to really have an impact on Christianity, regarding Mary, and as such was the most important apocryphal writing during the Middle Ages. Not only does it set out, in detail, the genesis of Mary and the early life of Jesus but it explicitly confirms Mary's Virgin status. It also adds greatly to the much needed, 'story', to which people could relate and artists illustrate. So high was its status

[248] (Gambero 1999) p.33
[249] (Cameron. 1982) p.107

that, as Gambero confirms, the notables, Origen and Clement of Alexandria write as though it were considered to be authoritative, particularly when writing and speaking to the laity.[250] Without these writings it is difficult to believe how the 'story' of Mary and the Holy Family could have become so credible. The world of visual art would have been bereft without them.

The Protevangelium, and others, do however have their limitation when attempting to give a comprehensive biography of the life of Mary. One account that was more fulsome was, *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, in that it recounts the time from before her birth to her *Dormition* and is believed to be from the 7th century. Expert opinion attributes it to the Georgian, Maximus the Confessor (580-662), but there are dissenters.[251] Originally written in Greek it is extant only in the Georgian. At the believed time of its writing, Mount Athos, in Greece, was an international centre for the religious and for Church scholarship and the Georgians maintained a substantial presence there. Shoemaker believes that, even if Maximus was not the author, 'the text remains essential for understanding the formation of Marian piety during the early Christian period and the transmission of these beliefs and practices to the medieval church.'[252]

In its introduction, Maximus opens in praise of Mary, 'our all-holy incorruptible and most Blessed Queen, The Theotokos.'[253] He then reassures his readers that what he is about to write, 'is trustworthy and reliable,' as he has taken his sources as, 'first the holy evangelists and apostles; then from the holy and devout Fathers ... Gregory of Neocaesarea the Thurmaurge, the great Alexandrian of Alexandria, the blessed Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagyte.'[254] Apart from the competence of text, there is an authoritative feel to the work. It is particularly interesting, in the context of Rogier's work, that it pre-dates the believed 11th century introduction of empathy to the suffering Mary.[255] There is a substantial inference as to Mary suffering *with* Christ and an

[250] (Gambero 1999) p.15
[251] (Maximus 2012) p.2f
[252] Ibid p.3
[253] Ibid p.36
[254] Ibid.p.38.Chapter I, paragraph 2
[255] Ibid p.24

indication of her co-operative involvement in the redemption of humanity. Lastly, there is the sense of the authority of Mary, who remained with her son during his mission on earth but, disobeying his wish, left John's care and followed James to Jerusalem to assist in the foundation of the infant Church.[256]

Understandably, these texts presented an enormous challenge to the early church and many were outright heretical, but at their best, they went towards explaining key events and domesticated the lean Gospel accounts of the background to the life of Christ for the laity. As John ends his Gospel that, 'If all were to be written regarding the life of Jesus, no books could contain them (John 21:24). Also, not all Christians could be expected, nor would have had time or ability to ruminate on the more esoteric aspects of theological discourse, these stories were invaluable in engaging the laity in a meaningful understanding of the events and circumstances of Christ's life on earth.

To return to Maximus, there is the sense in his text, of immense respect for and understanding of the Christian Gospels and of Mary. His writing enabled the text to harmonise with later writings that consider the religious relationship between earthly Mother and Divine Son. The Protoevangelium of James and Maximus' *The Life of the Virgin,* are important in that they laid a biographical foundation for the substantial medieval relationship with Mary, regardless of the accuracy of the texts. They filtered through into a synthesis of Scripture, history and legend and created a bountiful resource for artists and writers and appeared to substantiate the ministry of men such as Gerson in his dialogue with the laity; a culture against which Rogier laid his masterwork.

A Contemporary Devotion to Mary – *The Lamentation*

From the motif of Rogier's work, the late medieval culture of *The Seven Sorrows of Mary* and the parallel expressions in drama and liturgy, as I set out in Chapter One, there was empathetic compassion toward The Virgin Mary in her personal suffering at

[256] (Fulton 2002) Chapter One documents the, often difficult, evolution of Mariology during the Carolingian Era to begin its passage through the early second millennium.

the brutal death of her Son. This *Lamentation,* became a dominant feature of medieval life, in art, literature and liturgy but, as Rachel Fulton asks, why did this only become established, in the West, during and after the 11th Century?[257] It was not, as she argues, an automatic addition to the increase in the devotions to the death and suffering of Christ himself, as with the *Imitatio Christi*: 'The image of the crucified Christ in the early eleventh century was not one of compassion but of judgement'.[258]

Fulton, acknowledges that Marian piety had its roots in Eastern Orthodoxy but wonders as to how this could infiltrate the West[259] and in particular influence St. Anselm of Canterbury with his innovative prayers to The Virgin Mary; prayers written at the monastery of Bec; intimate, emotional, passionate and introducing a new affective piety of *Lamentation.* Was it that the Eastern influence came more directly through the apocryphal texts that gave such necessary background to the 'story of Mary and Jesus', and Joseph? Was it from the extensive library at Bec that held works from the East, as argued by Gasper?[260] Perhaps Fulton's most interesting contention is her consideration of the whole notion of lamentation. As she argues, public expressions of grief, particularly for the death of a son by the mother have, from ancient times, been accepted as being particularly painful. This is despite such outpourings being considered distasteful, as well as a public 'denial of faith, the Church and the Resurrection'.[261] While being a part of the human journey, that grief which plays a part in the public imagination, in relation to Christianity, are 'historically contingent'. This can be seen to compliment the growing trend at the beginning of the second millennium, of requests to The Virgin for her Intercession for the forgiveness of sins. For the Carolingians and Anglo Saxons, who was there better to act as intermediary with 'The Judge' (Christ) than his mother? 'Who better to ask, to placate the Judge, than the Mother who comforted him when he was a baby?'[262] From being the remote Queen of Heaven, Mary descends to be at the side of all those who sought her compassion, albeit she occasionally withdraws her protection – doubtless due to human frailty.

[257] (Fulton.2002) p. 215
[258] Ibid p.214
[259] Ibid p. 215
[260](Gasper.2004)
[261] (Fulton. 2002) p.215
[262] Ibid p.224

To advance Fulton's argument, St. Anselm of Lucca d.1086, the first St. Anselm, Pope Gregory VII and Matilda of Tuscany are key figures. "You will find her (Mary) quicker to respond and more gentle than any carnal mother", Gregory wrote to Matilda. However, Matilda was no ordinary devout aristocratic women. She was highly educated, a 'spiritual daughter of the pope', described as "this warrior woman (who) disposed her troops as the Amazonian Penthesilea is accustomed to do",[263] and who was recommended to Anselm by the Pope. [264] Anselm advised her to pray to Mary, not as the Queen of Heaven, but as a human woman, reflecting on the most difficult moments of her life; to empathise with Mary. This seems to be the first record of such an intimate contemplation of Mary. Fulton asks, was this theologian conscious of the superior ability of women, to relate to Mary, through their own experience, of childbirth and bereavement, plus their wider experience of maternal responsibilities? As studied from the few extant texts, the prayers of women 'are much more self-assured, not to say joyous. They are also less self-centred ... less selfish, not only in respect to those praying but also in respect to the Virgin herself'.[265]

Fulton, in her chapter, *Praying to the Mother of the Crucified Judge*[266] dwells meticulously on gender difference reflected in prayer and lamentation to the Madonna in that early second millennium. From her argument, there is a tacit understanding that it was women who guided the masculine mind toward solidarity with The Virgin Mary and a companionship with her tribulations, including her *Lamentation.* Women, and The Virgin Mary, became the subtext to patriarchal Christianity.

[263] Ibid p.228
[264] Ibid p.226
[265] Ibid p.229
[266] Ibid p.204-243

Rogier's Modern Mary of the Chapel Outside the Walls: The Medieval Voices of Women

If taken in the context of contemporary or earlier depictions of The Madonna, what is striking in Rogier's, *Descent from the Cross,* is the modern simplicity of the Leuven work. Mary is not crowned and jewelled, as in Jan van Eych's, *Adoration of the Lamb,* nor is she clad in the historical accuracy of ubiquitous drapes. Her gown is simple and of excellent cut, sewn from the finest wool, dyed to a heavenly blue and edged with a simple black and white braiding. The wearer of the robe, despite her distress and temporary loss of consciousness, has an air of wellbeing and confidence. She does not present as a victim, a fragile women, beaten by circumstance. Rather she has an air of self-determination, a woman of some substance.

Much literature dismisses the lot of women in the Middle Ages as being a dismal prospect and that it certainly was for many. Oakley wrote, women were 'an item of property to be transferred from father to husband ... to serve familial needs'. This did indeed happen, particularly within aristocratic circles, but within this seemingly repressive society, many women did succeed in achieving a high degree of self determination and making their mark on the religious landscape of medieval Northern Europe. The English woman, Margery Kempe (d.1438), was outstanding. Earlier, Brigitta of Sweden, was influential on Clement VI in Avignon, as later was Catherine of Sienna on Pope Gregory XI.[267] Within the rising trade Guilds, women had an important part to play, and used their influence accordingly.

In amongst the complex mix of Northern European peoples at this time, two groups of woman stand out in the world of the mid to late Middle Ages of Northern Europe. Firstly, the Beguine communities of women, the semi-religious groups, who for one reason or another chose to live together in chastity and to survive by their own labours, in a spirit of Christianity. Secondly there were the women mystics, a quite remarkable tradition, sometimes difficult to understand, but highly influential.

[267] (Bovey 2014)

The semi-religious houses of the Beguines had become integral to society in Northern Europe. Cardinal James of Vitry, d.1240, wrote, 'many holy maidens had gathered in different places ... they scorned the temptation of the flesh, despised the riches of the world ... earning a sparse meal with their own hands.'[268] The Cistercian monk, Heisterbach, confirmed later that, 'those women ... live among the people wearing lay clothes, they still surpass the cloister in the love of God. They live the eremitical life among the crowds, spiritual among the worldly and virginal among those who seek pleasure.'[269] Their houses formed rapidly throughout the Northern lands of Europe.[270] They were, as Caroline Bynum comments, 'probably the first, "women's movement" in western history.' Although they were often in receipt of donations, their aim was to be self-sufficient, to operate independently, mainly in urban areas where they ran hospitals and cared for the sick, the old and unwanted, the lepers and any who fell outside the usual workings of society. The rise of these communities, it is argued by scholars was, 'an expression of protest by the urban poor'. Due to the demographics of the male population, diminished by war, death and disease, many women were left husbandless and without means of support or chose the alternative lifestyle. The monastic orders, unable to accommodate demand, had restricted new entrants.[271] Undoubtedly it was more multi-factorial than we can accurately judge at this distance but there was clearly a need across all classes of women, for the opportunity of independence, outside the norms of marriage or the cloister.

In the early years the movement was attractive to women of the privileged classes who had the resources to establish such communities, but as the years went by the houses became populated by the lower and middle classes; 'By the 1400's, those of the middling and even popular strata were more numerous.'[272] These communities offered a meaningful alternative to the fully cloistered life. But as Bynum points out, the virginal life 'was a compelling ideal in its own right, not merely a second-best substitute

[268] (Simons 2001) p.35
[269] Ibid p.35
[270] Ibid.p.24f. Simons writes at length on the mistaken attribution of the foundation of the movement to the dissident cleric, Lambert le Bégue of Liége.
[271] (Bynum 1982) p.14-15
[272] (Simons 2001) p.91

for marriage.'[273] Virginity carried a status of its own and had a spiritual currency not to be underestimated; because virginity was the state of our original creation, a virgin could escape the double curse of subjection by men and the pain and possible death in childbirth.[274] These women also appreciated the contradictions in the life of the Virgin which also characterised their beguine life.[275] They were not bound by vows and had a self-determination which many women could only envy.

Walter Simons detailed survey of the movement, is a fascinating addition to our knowledge of these remarkable women and the opposition they faced from clerical authority, particularly John the XXII and his papal bull, *Cum de Mulieribus,*1322, which sought to have the Beguinages dissolved. But, that is not part of the current argument. However it does serve to emphasise the determination and power of these single women in the mid to late middle ages, as they steadfastly hung onto their chosen way of conducting a religious life, setting an example both to the wider community and their religious superiors. These were women, within medieval society, who, at their best, triumphed over male domination and lived out their own understanding of a life, in Christ, whilst contributing to the wider social needs of society. And surely, this independence would not have gone unnoticed within the women of the prosperous, rising middle classes of the Flemish cities.

The second group of women who entered the consciousness of medieval Christian thinking were the women mystics. This has been another historically marginalised group, women not only marginalised but derided. In his now dated appraisal of them, William. James dismissed them as, 'pathetic, absurd and puerile.'[276] Bynum censors him as being only partially informed and unaware of the necessary historical context.[277] Being of a mystical nature and embracing often erotic bridal images from The Song of Songs, their writing could seem to stem from the frailer aspects of the female personality and embrace extrovert references to bodily functions, surprisingly distasteful to our libertine secular society, but that is to shy away from the broader

[273] (Bynum 1982) p.15
[274] (Atkinson 1991) p.71
[275] (Simons 2001) p.87
[276] (James 2002) p.275
[277] (Bynum 1982) p.171

picture. These 13th century women mystics, 'were responsible for encouraging and propagating some of the most distinctive aspects of late medieval piety: devotion to the human, especially the infant, Christ and devotion to the Eucharist.'[278] Bynum writes, 'For the first time in Christian history certain major devotional and theological emphases emanate from women and influence the basic development of spirituality.'

From where did these women gain their learning, their ability and their authority? Women such as Gertrude the Great, d.1302, Birgitta of Sweden, d.1373, Catherine of Sienna, d.1380, Hildegard of Bingen d.1179 and Julian of Norwich d.1416 whom Bynum suggests were either entrusted to convents as young children, where their world was exclusively female and was without the conditioning dominance of men or they were widows of wealthy men, educated and accustomed to personnel management. Birgitta raised eight children before widowhood took her into the cloister, age 41. They had an outstanding sense of self, a confidence in their purpose in life and a determination to carry it through. Believing that, 'Christ acted through them, the mystics of Hefta, (Gertude's convent), functioned with the full range of His operations – royal and parental, judgemental and loving':[279] self doubt was not part of their agenda. Although much changed into the late fourteenth century and early fifteenth, women achieved things they would not now be able to do in our 21st century society: Only five years before the *Descent from the Cross* was unveiled, rightly or wrongly, Joan of Orléans had raised an army against the English, because God had spoken to her.

Despite the Church's unease and outright opposition to the power of women, both as writers and in un-vowed communities, they became a considerable force to be negotiated. Jean Gerson was particularly vigilant in monitoring the power of these women, particularly with reference to their relationship to the priests whom they confessed.[280] Voaden writes as to how the sacrament of confession was used to monitor them. The aim was to ensure they did not stray from orthodoxy nor become too influential. [281] Pope Clementine's, *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus,* of 1311, endorsed

[278] Ibid.p.172
[279] Ibid p.227
[280] (Voaden 1999) p.132
[281] Ibid p.119

this control. Snippets of the tensions between the two parties have come down to us. Ita of Louvain had a, 'miraculous ability to see unworthiness, especially un-chastity in priests celebrating the Eucharist'.[282] This non-miraculous female intuition, together with sharp tongues was decidedly unpopular with the clergy. However, these women refused to be cowed, so that Catherine of Sienna felt free to tell the Pope that, 'the stench of the sins of the Papal Court in Rome reached her in Sienna'.[283]

Rogier van der Weyden's Mary of *The Descent,* is so exceptional when compared to other contemporary Madonnas, exceptional even within other works from his studio. She was not merely a beautiful but empty vessel, used by God to fulfil his grand plan. She was not a broken woman, her heart pierced by the sword of Simeon. I sense that Rogier's depiction, despite, the meticulous care he took with his work, was not consciously contrived. I sense that he painted that which was presented to him; a well fed, well educated and intelligent woman with a satisfactory degree of self-determination, from the town of Leuven. It was the custom, at the time, to include the figure of a commissioner, as one of the players in a religious scene. In this case it could have been the wife or daughter of a prominent Crossbowman, who acted as the model for Mary. Rogier van der Weyden, I am convinced, did not stop to intellectualise the temporary improvement in the lot of some Northern Women – rather he painted exactly what he saw.

The Monastic Measure of Mary: St Anselm, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Bonaventure and their personal devotion to Mary as the Mother of Christ.

In her pre-text, introductory notes to the reader, Rachel Fulton draws attention to the manner in which the monastic writers of the middle-ages approached biblical texts. They were not considered as a direct transcript of the word of God but rather, 'for medieval readers, the goal was always to discover the true meaning contained in the "shell" of the text.'[284] And into that shell they felt free to pour their innermost feelings

[282] (Bynum 1982) p. 172
[283] (Voaden 1999) p.130
[284] (Fulton. 2002) p. Introduction

regarding Christ, His Incarnation, His life and death as well as sentiments towards His most precious mother, The Virgin Mary. Added to that, as Fulton continues, the monks were accustomed to quote Scripture from memory, a memory informed rather by the singing of the liturgy than quotation of the original Vulgate text. With that freedom, which seems to have gone unchallenged, there was much scope for creativity in the pursuit of an understanding of Scriptures, often coloured by personal emotions and contemporary circumstance. Particularly fertile ground was the thinking they dedicated to their devotional response to the person of Mary. It seems that it is from this monastic source that most of the liturgy of the medieval culture of Mariology evolved.

To untangle the complete evolution of Marian devotion emanating from the monasteries in the Middle Ages is a formidable task, one which lies outside the scope of this work. However, by editing the consideration down to three theologians, there may be a compromise that will, hopefully, give some of the flavour of medieval Mariology, its intensity and integration into everyday life. St. Anselm, St. Bernard of Claivaux and St. Bonaventure are my chosen advocates. From within their work there is inescapable emotional emphasis on the suffering of Mary at the time of the Crucifixion and a personal engagement with her status within Christian theology. *The Lamentation* was a recurring theme.

One powerful and widespread devotion was the dramatic, *Planctus Mariae.* Also, following on from Chapter I, was the significant prayer, composed between 1303 and 1306[285] the *Stabat Mater* which related to the sixth sorrow; a *'*sequence of technical and emotional perfection,'[286] which expresses the essence of late medieval devotion to the Mary, who has just witnessed the degradation, torture and death of her beloved Son. From its, *Stabat mater dolorosa/ juxta Crucem lacrimosa/ dum pendabat Filius,* with its empathetic account of the Mother of Christ at the Cross, it moves in stanza nine to a heart-wrenching plea for us to enter into the pain and suffering of both Christ and Mary until finally, *Quando corpus morietur,/fac,ut animae donetur/paradise Gloria.* These verses, so integral to late medieval religious life, rest in parallel to the visual representation Rogier van der Weyden created for the worthy Crossbowmen of Leuven.

[285] (Sticca 1988) p.96
[286] (Warner. 1985) p.213

Sandro Sticca's text of the *Planctus Mariae,* roundly gathers prayers and context for this intense devotion.[287]

There have been several contenders, in the past, for the authorship of this important Marian prayer However the agreed author was the Italian Franciscan, Jacoponi da Todi (1230-1306), a Franciscan, The whole sense of the work, however, brings us directly into contact with the spirituality of the Franciscan Order, its work and influence in those late Middle Ages and its part in energising the whole corpus of Marian devotion. For although great attention has been given to the lay movements in Northern Europe, equally important for urban life was the rise of these Medicant monastic orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans being the most dominant. The former are especially relevant in the context of Mary. In one of his last writings, Heiko Oberman explores what he considers to be important issues relating to the mid and late medieval European social history, one of them being the monastic mission to the masses.[288] He questions why the story of these Medicant orders, in particular how the itinerant Franciscan preachers, 'never made it to the list of key events of the century (15^{th}).'[289] He asserts that, 'the themes of superstition, papalism and anti-Semitism have kept our friars on the books but only as an *exempla* to prove the need for a Protestant or Catholic Reformation in the century to come'[290]. And Oberman continued, 'They were engaged in a concerted effort to defend and extend the boundaries of the *civitas Christiana* in a crusade against the devil'.[291] He further crystallises thoughts on the theology of the Franciscan mission in the figure of St. Bonaventure and his influence in saving the order from itself and making it so powerful. He suggests that the very name Bonaventure should alert historians to, 'the importance of the paradigm shift, a momentous transformation misleadingly simplified in our textbooks ... carried beyond the monasteries in the fifteenth century by the Franciscan preaching crusade it shaped the piety of Western Europe's laity.'[292] As he remarks, they were integral in forming the bridge between the medieval era of *Frömmigkeisheologie (*theological piety) and the era of

[287] (Sticca 1988)
[288] (Oberman 2002) p.5
[289] Ibid.p.16
[290] Ibid p.16
[291] Ibid p.16
[292] Ibid.p.29

Konfessionalisierung (denominational theology). And important in this movement was Mary. The wave of devotional literature, predominantly from the authenticated pens of Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure, as well as works merely attributed to them, the *pseudo* writings, 'swept over the continent and unified Western Europe as it had never been – and would never be again.'[293]

That is one perspective, and it does highlight the woeful neglect of such a powerful body of influence, particularly that of the Franciscans on medieval society in so many texts. But I believe the whole question of the friars is broader and deeper than even Oberman suggests, though it is not unusual for history to edit out issues that it finds difficult to deal with. To speak of the 1430's, the Franciscans with their founder St. Francis, the status and veneration of The Virgin Mary and the intellectual theologian St. Bonaventure, is to speak in one breath; they can appear disjointed when viewed from later modern times but it was more of a polyphonic harmony - even though the voices have aged unequally.

Bonaventure was lyrical and poetic in his theology. This latter comes through in his writings both for academia and for his flock. The fact that his *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* (1273), presented in the last year of his life, was of little use to subsequent theologians in the course that Christianity took, should not undermine the status of his intent. With great intellectual sophistication he argued that Christ was at the centre of world history and the source of all knowledge, historical and philosophical and he related the six days of the creation of the world to the six ages of mankind in what he believed to be a finite world.[294] This was the same intellectual ability he applied to the contemporary mystical thinking when he penned his, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum.* But it was when writing in pastoral mode and in the spirit of the Franciscan movement and its founder, that he most tenderly relates to matters concerning the Mother of God, drawing on that medieval facility for imagination and empathy. As the official biographer of St. Francis of Assisi for the Franciscan Order, he concurred with the earlier work of Thomas of Celano, that Francis, 'reached an intimacy with God in an

[293] Ibid.p.29
[294] (McGinn 1978) p.78

indescribable way.'[295] And within that relationship he held to an intense devotion to Mary, The Virgin Mary. As an aside, neither Bonaventure nor Thomas Aquinas subscribed to the possibility of the virgin birth, unlike Francis and his brother monks. Empathetically, as Bonaventure wrote of Francis, ' He loved with unspeakable affection The Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ foreasmuch as that She had made The Lord of Glory our brother...for who can make the Lord our brother if she is not our mother?' [296] And to this Mother, Francis prayed with adoration and petition, for protection, salvation, faith and grace. Bonaventure also reflected and added his own thoughts on Mary as in the *Officium de compassione B,Mariae Virginis;*

> "Psychologue et poète, St.Bonaventure avait été attiré par le mystère des souffrances et des joies de Marie et par celui de sa vie intérieure. Joies et apprehénsions de l'enfance de Jesus, joies et douleurs de la Passion. Devant celles-ci surtout, il laisse parler son âme."[297]

And so it was that Bonaventure played his part in the expansive, Franciscan culture of the veneration of Mary. But if Bonaventure's writings, with regard to Mary, are set within the context of all his writings it becomes clear that they were only a part of the greater reverence and love for his Saviour, Christ. As Sticca writes, 'Bonaventure, allowed his soul to speak, with all the force of his impassioned, emotional intellect, in his *Officium de comassione Beatae Mariae Virginis*,' where he offers us a concrete poetic representation of her bloodied maternal heart ... especially at the moment he (Christ) is taken down from the cross.' He continues, Bonaventure turns directly to the Virgin, identifies himself with her and feels himself shot through with her sorrow so that the lines in the *Stabat Mater* if not written by him echoed his sentiments toward the suffering Madonna. [298]

Given the formidable presence of The Franciscans, it is reasonable to look to the manner in which they merged Mary, the Mother of the Incarnate Christ, into their new ways of thinking. Without them would the cult of the Virgin have gained such

[295] (Fulton. 2002)p.460
[296] (franciscan-archive.com) *Leg.Mai ix,3*
[297] (Sticca 1988) p.124 Quotation from De Dieu, *La Vierge et l'Ordre des Freres Mineurs.* P.790-91.
[298] (Sticca 1988) p.124-5

popularity? With their avowed poverty, humility and chastity, who better amongst mortals, could better speak to them and their flock than the Blessed Virgin Mary. In their central dwelling on the Passion and Death of Christ, which for Bonaventure was, 'the centre of all man's hope of salvation, his only consolation, his sorrow and his delight,'[299] they were inevitably drawn to empathise with the suffering of His mother. The *Meditationes vitae Christi*, questionably attributed to Bonaventure was the 13th Century text contributing to the devotion. But it was the Franciscan friars, working in the community and also more importantly preaching who sought a deeper emotional, spiritual involvement with The Virgin. Ellington writes, how in their sermons the Franciscans, like Jean Gerson, tried to help their audience to recreate, in the interior of their own minds, solid mental images drawn from their sense of sight (and experience of suffering). In that way they, 'fostered a piety based not on abstraction and intellect but rather on sensible experience that was created by the imagination,'[300] Rogier put tangible endorsement of this ideal into his masterwork. This reiterates Fulton's comments on the creative perception of Scripture by the monastic orders. The Franciscans encouraged active worship, centred round empathetic thoughts of Mary and Christ's suffering. They introduced, the Feast of the Visitation in 1269, gave official support to the recitation of *The Angelus:*[301] However, more than that they encouraged creative thinking far beyond scriptural texts. Sticca, documents how they were instrumental in encouraging dramatic presentations of The Death and Passion of Christ which were acted and re-enacted with intense pathos.[302] These men, in obedience to the call of Christ, (Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-34 and Luke 5:1) had isolated themselves from mothers, sisters and possible wives, in order to 'mother' their urban flock. For the love of Jesus they encouraged the acting out of these emotional dramas amongst the laity; principle amongst these productions, being the *Seven Sorrows of Mary*. As Rubin writes, in their labours of 'performance art,' the Franciscan monks, using the church to provide the bones of religious life, they 'added throbbing flesh to the bones, with

[299] (Sticca 1988) p.11
[300] {Ellington, 2001 #301} p.45
[301] Ibid.p.29
[302] (Sticca 1988) p.118f

urgency and exhortation.'[303] Mary was brought out from the sacred quiet of the chapel onto the bustling medieval streets, to jostle with productions that were political, social, humorous and even bawdy. There she became a soft target for the zealous reformers of the next century who quickly dispensed with both the dramatics and with Mary.

In the unequalled harmonic beauty of the Cistercian Clairvaux Abbey, St. Bernard (1090-1153) worked for his order and for his vision of God and left the Christian West with a robust legacy of opinion, prayer and devotion. He is the man who, 'overshadows the whole (13th) century'. Through association with the contemporary move towards a, 'spirituality – more emotional, more personal, more private and more preoccupied with individual will and inner piety,'[304] than had been the custom, he won his supremacy. Dante assigned to him a major role in his drama of ascent into heaven and his continued presence in the 21st century is in no small part due to his being favoured by Luther,[305] and the reformers.

The inclusion of St. Bernard in Dante Alighieri's (1265-1320) epic work, *The Divine Comedy*, written at the end of his life, is an important aside, not only because it references Bernard but also for its historical religious significance in describing a medieval spiritual *Ascent* to God in vernacular Italian. He gives voice to St. Bernard as he accompanies Beatrice through Canto xxxi, pausing to seek the necessary grace from the Virgin, to prepare for the ultimate destination:

> 'And the aged saint said: 'In order that thou mayst complete thy journey to the very end, (the spiritual ascent to God) for which prayer and holy love have sent me, fly with thine eyes through this garden, for seeing it will prepare thy sight to mount higher through the divine radiance; and the Queen of Heaven, for whom I

[303] (Rubin 2009) p.197
[304] (Oakley 1979) p.87
[305] (McKim 2003) p.69-70

am all on fire with love, will grant us every grace, since I am her faithful Bernard'[306]

As Sinclair quoted, "St. Bernard, probably more than any other great teacher of Christian society, influenced the moral and spiritual life of Dante'.[307] And Dante, probably more than any writer, embodies the sense of the medieval world.

For Bernard, however, 'His own familiarity with the text of Scripture was so great that it became almost impossible for him to write except in its language, with quotation and allusion moving in and out of his prose in every sentence.'[308] He was a powerful man in his years as leader of the Cistercians, but with apparently two sides to his character. There was the prodigious preacher, the biblical exegete who manipulated texts and spoke of, 'love'; the vogue word for the era, and of man's spiritual ascent to God. The manner in which he held a congregation or orchestrated his Latin texts to a lyrical musicality earned him his title Doctor Mellifluous; his literary legacy is copious. But, there was another, political, side to the man; the Bernard who engaged his influence in support of his former pupil, the Cistercian Eugenius, who became pope. He also set his meditations aside to head the organisation of the Second Crusade to free the Holy Land, in the course of which he founded the Knights Templar. Under Bernard's guidance and with the help of the groundswell of popularity for the monastic life, the Cistertian Order expanded rapidly and became wealthy. Even a modestly close study of Bernard throws up contradictions and a sense of questioning at the superlatives he attracts.

Frequently one finds Bernard referred to as the Marian Doctor and it is true that it was during his adult life and beyond, that devotion to Mary in the wider population escalated to a point of almost eclipsing devotion to Christ. But how valid is this or is it rather a construct of later years, particularly when linking him to the Virgin Mary. Bernard's writings, when compared to his lifetime output, were modest. When he does contemplate Mary and offer praise and devotion he goes directly to Scripture and to

[306] (Dante 1961) p.451
[307] Ibid.p.459
[308] (Evans 2002) p.p.95

Luke. These he considers with the assistance of the Fathers and by reference to existing liturgy.[309] As Waddell remarks, 'Bernard's lack of originality and of theological hardihood in Mariology has been variously evaluated ... it is at best regrettable, at the worst a bit scandalous, that a Doctor of the Church of Bernard's stature contributed so little in a positive way to the three points of Marian teaching which were being developed:'[310] Those stalwarts of Mariology, the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption of Mary and the spirituality of her motherhood are what we associate with this high Middle Ages. Maybe the answer can be found by looking at the ethos of the Cistercian devotions to the Holy Mother. Aelred of Rievaulx, in the late 12th Century asked, in his nativity sermon, 'Is she not our mother? Through her we are born, through her we are nourished, through her we grow in virtue.'[311] Within the Cistercian order particularly, the monks saw themselves as foster brothers of Christ who received spiritual nourishment from the milk of Mary's breast. The theme of lactation was to the fore in the late 12th, early 13th century and artists took up the idea. There are extant paintings showing Bernard himself being nourished by milk that spurts from the Virgin breast.[312] Caroline Walker Bynum devotes a whole chapter to the themes of 12th century Cistercian writings and their relationship with Mary and the use of, 'mother,' to describe even male figures of authority, such as the Abbot and even Jesus.[313] She also comments on the lactation theme. 'Breasts, to Bernard, are a symbol of the pouring out towards others of affectivity or of instruction'[314] Bernard's perseveration with The Song of Songs was where his maternal imagery was at its most complex.

Within those complexities and contradictions, the best expressions of Bernard's very personal literary expression to Mary can, I believe, be understood in a modest set of homilies, *De Laudibus beatae Mariae,* written before he established his career and at a time when he was mentally and physically, seriously ill. Chrysogonus Waddell, in his introduction to the homilies, writes that these texts were not written in the regular

[309] (Bernard 1979) Introduction p.xvi
[310] Ibid. p. xvi-vii
[311] (Roux 2005) p.55
[312] Ibid, p.55
[313] (Bynum 1982) p.112
[314] Ibid.p.117

course of Bernard's work but as an almost juvenile expression of his devotion to the Virgin Mary as a therapeutic exercise. At the tender age of twenty five Bernard had been sent, with twelve monks, to found a new abbey in the lonely, 'Valley of the Wormwood,' later to become Clairvaux.[315] As a result of the mental and physical demands, Bernard's health broke down completely, judging from the treatment imposed upon him. His excessive asceticism and difficulty with his brother monks seemed the cause. He was forced, by his superiors, to live in a hut outside the monastery, the kind allocated to lepers, and was suspended from all duties for a whole year under obedience to William of Champaux. William of St. Thierry, his eventual biographer, wrote candidly that Bernard's companions were daunted by the exceptional intensity of his spirituality and there was, 'something a bit inhuman as well,' about him. [316] Not an auspicious start for one who was to rise to become head of his order and such a wielder of power.

The four homilies, the writing of which were his only luxury during his time of his recuperative internment, are perhaps the most insightful of all his writings regarding Mary, despite the purist's criticism of his Latin. Alone in his, 'paradise of the Scriptures,' he steals time to assemble all that the sacred text can offer in explanation and honour of Mary. In his, 'most congenial habitat ... the garden of Holy Writ', he strings together his pickings to form the four chains of his homilies. His findings he intersperses with brief reposts that wonder at the virginity and humility of Mary, her life with Joseph, the prophecies of her in the Old Testament and the wonders of the Annunciation and Incarnation. Waddell writes, with exasperation, that Bernard is, 'hopelessly unoriginal,' in his offerings with no single new thought. But maybe that is to ask too much of a sick man. What the homilies are more accurately, are an insightful glimpse of current medieval thinking on Mary, at its most intense. It could be said that their value lies in their very unoriginality. Bernard's post-script to his writings is touchingly sad. The solitary monk in his leper's hut apologises for the sin of self indulgence in conducting this unrequited task of assembling biblical texts in praise of Mary. He notes that his efforts have been condemned as being, 'oriose and

[315] (Bernard 1979).p. xiii
[316] Ibid p.xii

unnecessary'. His reasoning was to, 'seize from the Gospel, an occasion for speaking about something which it gives me great joy to speak about.'[317] And he concludes, 'The gracious Virgin can make excuses to her merciful Son for my sin. Whatever its worth, I dedicated this little work of mine most devotedly to her.'

In the millennial year of the anniversary of the Death and Passion of Christ, 1033, another devotee of The Virgin Mary was born in the town of Aosta in Italy, St. Anselm. In anticipation of this millennial anniversary, Western Europe had allowed itself to be brought into a state of considerable agitation and was in apocalyptic mode. Any natural phenomenon that would otherwise have been passed off as part of the natural world was read as a portent of the reappearance of Christ and the great Revelation predicted by John the Evangelist. If the world, as it was known, was about to end, there was a considerable burden of conscience to be dealt with and deliberations as to where one would be placed after the event.[318] But, Anselm was safely delivered and the world did not end; it was neither better nor worse than before; it continued to be difficult. However, society was left in an acute state of anti-climax. Was it anti-climax or as writers suggest merely a figment of historical imagination? Cranmer says of it, that this turning of the millennium saw replacement of the spoken word, with its subtleties of oral tradition, by written text and documentation; it was the era of The Doomsday census and the compilation of new collections of Canon Law, [319] but that was only part of a bigger picture. The sentiments generated by the turn of the century cannot be dismissed lightly. Fulton explains how this post millennial mind-set threw up dissenters who, among their other activities, promoted a form of iconoclasm, focusing particularly on demands for the removal of the crucifix.[320] Amongst the innumerable factors at play there was, significantly, the desire to reclaim the Holy Land and the ongoing struggle

[317] Ibid.p.58
[318] (O'Leary 1994) The validity of the claims of the Apocalypticism around the beginning and early 11th century taxes writers, who arrive at varying conclusions. It seems to be a question of balancing those in denial with those who place recorded events and texts in context.
[319] (Fulton. 2002) Peter Cranmer quoted. P.79
[320] Ibid.p.82f

for supremacy between church and state,[321] as well as the ever growing *human* approach to Christianity. It was as the first century of this youthful new millennium was approaching its middle age that the young Anselm left his hometown and sought his education in the North of Europe, settling, after much deliberation, on the Benedictine Abbey at Bec in Normandy under the tutelage of Lanfranc, unaware of the bountiful legacy he was to leave for his faith.

For an understanding of this important, early medieval theologian with his contribution to Marian devotion, we are indebted to his disciple and friend Eadmer of Canterbury 1060-1141, who authored Anselm's biography. It is a unique and richly intimate portrait of the saint. To begin, Eadmer felt it necessary to tell his readers of Anselm's childhood and he described a father, careless of his goods in his munificence... a prodigal and spendthrift.'[322] In contrast his mother was, 'prudent and careful...both spending and saving with discretion.' It does not need a psychoanalyst to determine the extent to which good and loving mothers laid the foundations for the Marian devotions of medieval cloisters. Eadmer records that when she died, for Anselm, 'The ship of his heart ... lost its anchor.'

Anselm comes down through the years as a self-effacing, sensitive man, who was intense in the defence of his faith. He was seen as a man of prayer, a man who sought an intimacy with God and was capable of guiding others along the same path. 'The affective devotion he developed changed the whole atmosphere of Western devotion for the years to come and beyond.'[323] This was not done in a harsh, revolutionary manner but in a manner whereby his goodness and love of God flowed out from the cloister to be taken up by the laity.

In the course of his time at Bec and then Canterbury in England, it is not Anselm's important theological works that are important here, but a small body of work, *The*

[321] (Whalton 2009)
[322] (Fulton. 2002) p.186-7
[323] (Anselm 1973) p.81

Prayers to the Virgin Mary.[324] In considering the three prayers Anselm wrote to Mary, it is worth reiterating Fulton's belief in the freedom of expression open to the religious of the medieval times in their round of prayers and meditation. Under the rule of Benedict, the Psalter with its one hundred and fifty psalms, would have been chanted every holy hour of the week and begun again each Sunday at Matins.[325] Similarly the Scriptures, read at mealtimes, were not edited highlights but readings taken, ' in 'continuo',[326] so that there was a great sense of cohesion between the Old and The New Testaments that contextualised man's brief earthly sojourn.

When Anselm turned to the composition of prayers and meditations in the years, 1070-80, he was, as usual, responding to personal requests. It was not public liturgy that he was writing but a 'more potent distillate of ancient psalmody, Scripture and an intense personal devotion and understanding of his Christian faith'. Such writings were meant be read carefully, slowly, in the manner of *Lectio Divina*, by those who already had an empathy with and comprehension of their purpose. The three prayers Anselm wrote 'To The Virgin Mary,' were ostensibly written at the request of a monk, the first two attempts were returned as being unsatisfactory. Southern maintains that this could well have been a literary ploy to protect a personal desire for such an expression.[327] In responding to the rejections, Anselm is allowing himself to develop a very personal theology of The Virgin Mary within the Scriptures; each one refines his thinking. In the first prayer which carries the preliminary line, 'When the mind is weighed down with heaviness,' In such mind he begins, 'Mary, holy Mary, / among the holy ones the most holy after God. / Mother with virginity to be wondered at'. [328] Anguishing over his perceived sins he declares, 'I long to come before you...in pain from the wounds of crimes, putrid with the ulcers of sin.'[329] He calms himself and continues, but his transgressions weigh heavily. 'Hear me, Lady, and make whole the soul of a sinner

[324] (Anselm 1973) p. 18 The Preface to Anselm's prayers and meditations makes the comment that it has taken time and scholarship to isolate those prayers authentic to Anselm and those in the same manner which gathered under his name after his death.
[325] Ibid. p.27
[326] Ibid.p.29
[327](Anselm 1973) p.12
[328] Ibid p.107 lines 1-3
[329] Ibid p. 107 lines 12-15

who is your servant, by virtue of the blessed fruit of your womb.'[330] Is he implying that Mary has the power to loose sins? Rather, the working subtly moves from received wishes of the penitent into an understanding of the ultimate power of the Father and the Son.

Despite the fact that Anselm's first efforts were curtly returned as being unsatisfactory, the saint to be patiently took up his quill again to write his second prayer to Mary, subtitling it, 'When the mind is anxious with fear'. With lyrical phrases, he describes the unique position of, 'Virgin venerated throughout the world, Mother dear to the human race'[331] He then moves, in the consideration of his sins, to the huge torments he deserves; how will he be judged? Most important in this prayer is the equanimity Anselm maintains between Mother and Son; who bestows judgement and who mercy? He vacillates and balances. 'O human virgin/ of you was born a human God, to save human sinners.'[332] In his distress the sinner flees from God to mother and viva versa, so that, 'the accused is carried from one to the other/ and throws himself between/ the good son and the good mother.'[333] And, in the last verse of his dialogue, he implores, 'God, who made the son of a woman out of mercy, / woman, who was made mother of God out of mercy / have mercy upon this wretch.'[334] Again, despite Anselm's seeming equal acknowledgement of Mother and Son he ends, as always, with a tribute to the undisputed supremacy of God, 'God who is worthy to be praised and exalted forever. Amen.' [335]

With a second rejection, self rejection, lying on his desk, Anselm bravely trained his mind towards a definitive devotion of Mary, to the third prayer which gave honour and glory and yet perspective: 'he asks for her and Christ's love'. But he finds himself lost for words. 'What am I saying? / My tongue fails me, for my love is insufficient.'[336] Yet, he continues to summon fluid phrases that verbally caress the wonder and goodness of Mary. In a complex verse Anselm argues that whereas, 'Nothing equals

[330] Ibid.p.107 lines 87-9
[331] Ibid.p.101 lines 1-2
[332] Ibid p.111 lines 56-61
[333] Ibid p.112 lines 63-4
[334] Ibid p 113 lines 16-19
[335] Ibid p.114 line139
[336] Ibid p.116 line 48

Mary, / nothing but God is greater than Mary,' [337] so that 'God is the Father of all created things / and Mary is the mother of all re-created things ... Mary brought forth him by whom all are saved.'[338] Anselm has moved in his thinking from a position of total abjection to one of familial association with Christ and Mary: 'The Saviour of the world is our brother/, and finally our God through Mary, is our brother.' This means that, 'with what confidence then ought we to hope/ and thus consoled how can we fear.'[339] As he moves to the end of his final soliloquy, Anselm confirms his belief that it was an immense spirit of love that triumphed. And with that, how can the sinner not rest in humble confidence of salvation, as he contends, 'I so venerate you both, / as far as my mind is worthy to do so: / I love you both, as far as my heart is equal to it... Blessed will be the Lord forever, Amen.'[340]

In all three prayers, Anselm had journeyed from a position of utter dejection to arguing, with himself, a relationship of his God in Trinity and with Mary, 'the instrument of God's intent'. He had, despite his learning and intellectual ability, struggled to formulate an understanding within the limits of human faculties. He had called upon what he knew of human relationships, particularly that of the parental, to annunciate an understanding. Mary holds her rightful place, as second only to God; this he reiterates continually but constantly refers to their interchangeable ability, to act in judgement and in mercy. He sails dangerously close to confirming that Mary is fully co-Redemptrix with Christ but always falls back on his confirmation of the supremacy of God.

No commentary on The Virgin Mary from the Middle Ages would be complete without the considerable contribution made by the monastic orders, each expressing the ethos of their order and the worldly circumstances in which they found themselves. With varying degree of success, they held Mary close to their own devotions and as an *icon* to which the laity could relate and thus be guided toward God. In the course of those long years between the early Church Fathers and the Reformation, Mary was

[337] Ibid p.120 lines 177-78
[338] Ibid p.212 lines 101-96
[339] Ibid p123 lines 260-80
[340] Ibid p. 126 lines 363-73

cherished, venerated to the point of worship, adored, as she vacillated between heaven and her empathy with what could be hell on earth. Some of the most tender, loving and peaceful verses ever written, flowed from the quills of celibate monks.

As Rogier set about his task of creating his monumental altarpiece, St. Bernard and St. Anselm's devotion to Mary would have been a part of the great legacy of the earlier Middle Ages, Bonaventure's would have been more recent and Franciscan, which overfilled itself with wildly creative Marian thoughts, producing boundless copy for the artisan painter or sculptor. No text was too extravagant to give inspiration to the creative artist who added, often to excess, extensions of their own imagination. For Rogier, in the thriving 15th century Burgundian Lands, this would have been a style and body of work that was probably already being seen as dated, one to react against, as he goes to the opposite extreme of pared down simplicity in depicting his Virgin Mary, albeit she would inevitably carry with her the legacy of past times. It is as if Rogier has acknowledged aspects of Mariology as they had come down to him. And from this vast body of thought and experience, from the ultra-orthodox, the intellectual, the expansive monastic deliberations, he has plucked Mary. He has plucked her from the detritus of sentimentality, naive mythology and clerical coercion and has presented her, in simplicity, with Christ at the, 'Hour of His Death.' And, for all that transpired in later years, it is this relationship that, as uttered by Anselm in the tradition of monasticism, I believe most nearly resonates with Rogier's visual prayer. The understated reflection on the human condition in relation to the Passion of Christ and the Salvation of man, expressed with a subtlety of understanding that gives reverence to Mary but acknowledges her place in the scheme of matters and, crucially, without whom the event is diminished, nay impossible. The whole is held in a fragile dynamism, as fragile as the human persona itself.

"Mother of the life of my soul"[341]

How may the "Mother of the life of my soul", be fashioned with the painter's palette? No expression, however sublime, will comprehensively corral all the spiritually human emotions that had accumulated from the birth of Jesus to the time of the late Middle Ages, when Rogier van der Weyden was inspired to paint her in *The Descent.* Rachel Fulton takes up Brian Stock's argument that, in being forced, out of necessity, to debate the question of The Eucharist, as in 'the real presence' the peoples of Western Europe, had to 'forge new tools with which to think'.[342] It became necessary to consciously differentiate between writing and speaking, between tradition and modernity, the fact of the natural world and its greater significance. In those early years of the second millennium, in the Europe that had neither the legacy of classicism nor the more uniform conformity of the East to Christianity, there evolved a more sophisticated ability to formulate ways of expressing the 'senses'. Medieval Christians were forced, 'to forge new tools with which to *feel'.*[343] As Fulton explains, this was done, externally, through texts and artistic images and internally with meditation, remembering and prayer. Arid Dogma was wilting before the power of emotion. It was 'the object of much debate' this discovery of consciousness, as 'a recognition of the self as *imagio Dei'.* Therefore, 'to move inward to the image of Christ in the heart, the soul must first move outward, to compassionate others in pain'. [344] This 'soul' had to remember its place, 'in the order of the universe', a place that could easily be lost if it "ever became forgetful of the divine likeness in which it had been made."[345] The mechanism for this remembrance, was as Fulton concludes, best stimulated by the compassionate empathy with pain – the pain of Christ – and by association, that of his mother Mary.

In that pre-scientific age, physical pain, severe pain was commonplace, as was witness to it. The image of the sword that Simeon prophesied would pierce the soul of the Virgin, Luke 2:35, was a focus for such contemplation. Christ's mental and physical

[341] (Fulton. 2002) p.203
[342] Ibid p.197
[343] Ibid p.197
[344] Ibid.p.199
[345] Ibid p.119 Fulton is quoting Etienne Gilson

pain, in the final analysis, was not wholly human – no person could appreciate the unique pain of the God-man suffering and dying for the sins of the human world.[346] With the disgrace and degradation, and being God, His pain was, in the final analysis, without understanding. The mortal Christian could, however, better understand the suffering of Mary: 'it was her pain that provided the model for compassionate response to Christ's pain, a pain that taught Christians what it was like to have seen Christ die on the Cross'.[347] It was, through the instigation of this sensitivity to Mary, mainly originated by St. Anselm in the West, that the act of 'compassioning the woman and through her, the God-man ... that we may make sense of the power that (medieval) devotion had in its day'.[348]

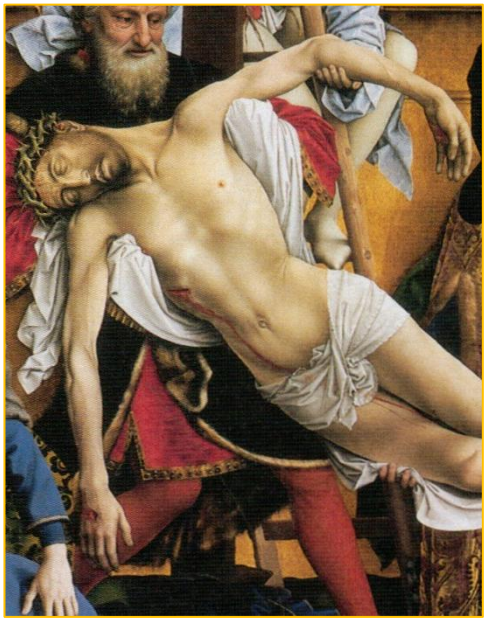
It was this ability to extract oneself from self-absorption and engage, with compassion and empathy, without sentimentality, in the pain of another. To engage with the pain of Mary, not only through the events she witnessed, but in the remembrance of the bond of love for her child, was to move closer to Christ himself: "You gave birth to the restorer of the world for whom the lost world longed ... (There) is no salvation except what you brought forth as a virgin",[349] wrote Anselm.

Even as we begin to understand the importance of Mary, in the development of medieval piety during the Middle Ages, and realise that the legacy of devotion to her cannot rationally be dismissed by the curt words of one over-enthusiastic academic translator, the subject still taxes minds. Her place in Rogier's work is central, but off centre, which is probably the most historically accurate placement. Mary may have been a popular motif with artists and an approachable advocate, but for theologians, she was always subordinate to the figure of Christ. It is this complex, medieval understanding of the Son of God, portrayed by Rogier van der Weyden, to which I will devote my last two chapters.

[346] (Fulton. 2002) p.199
[347] Ibid p. 199
[348] Ibid p.192
[349] Ibid p.203

Chapter Three

An Initial Ascent to the inner life of Rogier's Christ: 'Sailing to Byzantium'[350]



Crowned in a wreath of viscous thorns, of a golden hue, the slightly athletic body of the dead Christ is perfect in its pallor, except for the restrained bloodiness of His wounds. Overt brutality, if there is any, is reserved for the utter distress of those gathered around, in whom the blood of life still pulses. Mary has fallen away into the grieving assembly, as they now become an aura of earthly, breathing humanity, cocooning their lost Saviour, lost to them in the inevitability of human life – in death. As Christ is central to the depicted gathering, so now he must become central to any further consideration of Rogier's masterwork, central as He, Christ, was to late medieval Christianity.

Having looked at the socio/political context of Rogier's masterwork and the more obvious references within the work, together with his potentially contentious 'Mary', there is still more to be gleaned from this image; from the artistic influences and the accumulated medieval theology and religious practice. I will use the last two chapters of this enquiry, firstly to deal with the artistic non-Western influences that prevailed and also, the legitimacy of the visual image within religious practice, while in the last chapter, look at the evolution of the spiritual dimension of Christianity in the West, that

[350] (Yates, W.B.) 1928 Poem, *Sailing to Byzantium,* describes the metaphorical journey of man, pursuing his own vision of eternal life as well as his own conception of Paradise.

provided the climate for the creation of Rogier's masterwork, with the aim of seamless union of the two.

If my ultimate aim is to link Rogier's image to the spiritual dimension of late medieval Christianity in the Lowlands of Northern Europe, neither can be addressed in total isolation. In spite of Bernard McGinn's extensive work on medieval mystical theology, he acknowledges the lack of scholarship on the union of word and image in the medieval West, but offers no resolution. Jeffrey Hamburger, the eminent art historian, in his insightful writings linking the religious thinking and practice of the Northern Middle Ages to visual images, endorses this problem.[351] [352] Scholarship on this subject remains actively, work in progress.

The question is where to begin? Given that the West's only formal sanction for the physical visual image, within religious practice, was that of its educational value and that the East had, in contrast, formulated in the second half of the first millennium, a sound intellectual validation for the image in the Icon, enquiry into the latter would seem essential. By looking at the Icon and the arguments for its legitimacy or otherwise, by exploring its apophatic/cataphatic nature and how its acceptance relied on the incarnate, mortal nature of Christ with its Triniarian dimensions, it will then be possible to see what parallel there was between the two modes of understanding.

Removed as we are from the early fifteenth century, it is sometimes difficult to realise the influence the Orthodoxy of Byzantium, and the Byzantium Empire had on the West. There were many, very tangible, points of contact; the official clerical exchanges arising from the Schism and attempts to resolve it, trade, pilgrimage, Crusades and conflict. Running parallel to that there was the emergence and flourishing of the mystical dimensions of Christianity in the West which drew on ancient authors and on the visual. On the one hand, in the Orthodox, we have a practice whereby the religious image is integral to the liturgical practice of the church – the image has a function in embracing the Scriptural and spiritual aspects of contact with God but it is an image strictly controlled by the Church. On the other, in the West, there was a faith

[351] (Hamburger 1990)
[352] (Hamburger 2005)

that had a rich creative and disparate culture of visual imagery, alongside an emerging and inordinately complex understanding and practice of mystical theology; the recalling of the Christian story in the three dimensional, on the flat plane, in luminous glass and in dramatic interpretations, was unbridled. Physical visual expressions of religious sentiment abounded, people 'saw' with their mortal sight interpretations of their faith and it is difficult to imagine how this could be detached from their contemporary spiritual understanding.

In considering the early fifteenth century, (Nicholas of Cusa had yet to make his journey with the Orthodox hierarchy and write his *De Visione Dei)* and there was still no significant linking of the image within mystical religious thought in the West. Jan van Ruusbroec, in outlining his methodology for a spiritual ascent, cautioned that, "The heavenly Father shall strip your memory and bare it of images and shall urge, draw and invite you to his exalted unity".[353] But, all those western images had a place.[354] The mystical ascent, for those laity with such ambitions, began with their daily physical lives, their religious duties, their worthy secular contribution to their society and the visual reminders of their Christian faith that surrounded them. As Rogir's masterwork hung in the Chapel of Our Lady, it was only a part of the multi-faceted religious life of its creator and commissioners; it hung within a far broader theological landscape, in part an ancient landscape. Time has dislocated a wholly cohesive understanding of the Leuven of the 1430's, confirmed by the current isolated secular location of *The Descent from the Cross.*

I believe that an exploration of the theology of the Icon will be valuable in broadening the perspective on medieval Northern European religious images and the attendant thinking about spirituality, the thinking about medieval mystical theology. In a secular world it is so easy to isolate the image from its original habitat – to assume we fully understand it.

[353](McGinn 2012) p.28 Taken from Jan van Ruusbroec's *Sloten* 152-59.
[354] I am not underestimating the complex use of imagery in medieval western religiosity, including the medieval use of indulgenced designated images. In this context, my concern is their use in spiritual piety that sought to go beyond doctrine and Scripture and make a mental ascent to God.

Western Europe had links with the East, mainly via Venice, through trade, pilgrimage and religious politics and I will explore their relevance in relation to Rogier's work. Theologically, the Eastern intellectual defence of the image as Icon, has a resonance with how mystical theology developed in the West, particularly up to the beginning of the fifteenth century. However it was not the intellectual arguments that made their way so easily to the West, but rather the influence came via the visual; religious images, manifested in the Italian reproductions and original Icons. Also there is the recorded fact that Rogier van der Weyden had daily access to original Orthodox Icons through his master's workshop.[355] Though in the West, the image was never equivalent to the Icon, I will argue that in the case of Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, the work was an integral part of the mystical theology of the era and that a part of that theology, originated in the East: There were significant parallels between how the image in both traditions, was perceived and justified its position. Significant to both is the fact that it is the incarnate nature of Christ, who is the key to the justification for the physical image providing access to a spiritual ascent toward, He who is without description – to God the Father,

In 1435, when Rogier van der Weyden, presented his monumental visual interpretation of grief, in relation to the death of Christ, Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment were all pre-partum and every strata of society felt comfortable in the expression of their religious emotions. The world in Leuven still lived predominantly in an expressively empathetic manner. As Mary Carruthers has remarked,

> 'The medieval taste for sweetness was due to lay inspired Gothic pathos, an emotion noted especially in the Cistercian and Franciscan Orders ... which replaced , "the old calm of symbolism with a terrible and sorrowful realism of detail".[356]

Rogier's masterwork, leaving us as it does, with the discretion to gaze with wonder on his facility of description and even venture into the cultural history of the work, does carry with it a substantial agenda for emotional engagement. Unequivocally it offers us

[355] (Thomas 1998)
[356] (Carruthers, 2013)

a tragic situation, one that may be embraced solely in a Christo-centric manner or it may be more widely read, in the context of national or personal misfortune. It solicits our, 'empathetic response,' on a variety of levels which for some in the modern world is not only distasteful but painfully difficult. How can a sense of the medieval intensity of this empathy be accessed? Not only that, but how can it be related in a language that rests kindly on the ear and lightly on the soul?

St. Augustine and the Value of Empathy

There are potentially insurmountable obstacles to overcome in undertaking a prolonged engagement with Rogier's *Descent from the Cross* in the twenty first century. The nature of Rogier's artistry, his visual expression, is such that it will not permit a wholly linguistic cognisance. It attacks the emotional jugular. Sensitivities that have been tidied away in words for centuries, expose themselves to our vulnerability. This central motif throws down a gauntlet of challenge, to dare to look and engage with how intimately the medieval viewers regarded their God, their own emotions and their mortality. Not only may it conduct the viewer into the inner reaches of Christian Orthodoxy and the way minds have conjured to comprehend the divine sacrifice and its relevance to the human condition, but it also breaches the entrance to the innermost sanctuary of human relationships, in a manner with which we have learned to become uncomfortable.

One who considered, at length, the limitation of language in attempting to express, to another, the depths of emotion was, St. Augustine. Such a reflection he committed to posterity in his advice to the presbyter Deogratius, in his, *De catechizendi rudibus.* In Augustine fashion, he was his own severest critic. Even when his listeners applaud his words, he finds they fall short of his own intent.[357] 'For in this life, who sees except as "in an enigma and through a glass"? 'Neither is love, itself of might sufficient to rend the darkness of the flesh, and penetrate into that eternal calm from which even things which pass away derive the light in which they shine.' But he continues and contends

[357] (Augustine) Chapter 2.4-4

that we are listened to with greater appreciation if, 'the thread of our address is affected by the very joy of which we ourselves are sensible, and it proceeds from us with greater ease and with more acceptance', to which we could also add, the tragedies of life. For, despite the innate limitations of verbal power to alter opinion, to excite emotion, to motivate into action and firm resolve, the actual mechanics of expressing deep emotion, even now, remain elusive. How, puzzled Augustine, could he through his clergy transmit the ephemeral experience of the love of God, to the Incarnate Christ in particular, to these first century people? To make sense of the Christian ideology in any era is extra-ordinarily difficult. Albeit in his archaic manner, he decided that the only way was to think of the emotions that bond humans to one another, and know that these are engendered by God and are our only means of sensibly coming close to any mortal understanding of His love for us. If considered correctly, believed Augustine, these personal emotions, can guide us to a more fulsome enactment of our love for Him and our neighbour or family, as under the two most important commandments, even if this human effort of love is seldom balanced in the earthly domain.[358] For Augustine, our clue to understanding, His love, is through the imperfections of our human love and our even greater imperfections of its expression.

'The history of compassion is yet to be written,' wrote Karl Morrison.[359] He is quoting the French empiricist, Bernard de Fontenelle (1667-1752), as writing for all empiricists who expounded that, 'intrusion of feeling into observation, reflection and verification was exactly what had brought science under bondage to theology.'[360] To be condemned was any tendency to engage emotionally in what was defined as a *pathetic* or *affective fallacy*. This was, unlike the medieval mind, which could embrace the challenge of mentally bearing the sufferings of another and in particular the Passion of Christ. Morrison's enterprise, on the question of empathy, is full of promise but by not embracing the pre-Reformation sensibilities of interpersonal understanding and its importance in relating to the Christian dialogue, it ostracises a vital section of our

[358] Ibid. Chapt.4.8
[359] (Morrison 1988) p .xix

emotional history. His hyper-analysis of the, 'I am you', interesting though it is, is focused on modern opinions that deny fuller considerations of the medieval communion with Christ as God, in his earthly suffering. Where does compassion, sensitivity, emotional expression, have its boundaries? The chasm that had opened up at the time of the Reformation, in its iconoclastic fervour, was to endorse modern thinking, when it filleted out the subliminal language of the visual from the Christian faith. Alien to modernity, was their custom to gaze upon the *Mater Dolorosea* and share her sorrow, to look with tenderness on the infant Jesus and weep at his impending fate, and to mentally scream at the wounds of His Passion; to become personally involved with the life and sacrifice of Christ. Such reactions may be seen, as endorsed by the hierarchy, as a tool for manipulating the masses but I would argue that they went beyond that and gave the humble Christian direct access to a personal relationship with Christ and The Holy Family, sharing as they had done in the bitter injustices of the human span: They, that Holy Family, were ever present to empathise. But now minds have been worn down with perplexing as to cultural emotional probity, particularly in relation to Western Christianity. The whole question of the expression of deep emotional responses to situations of the human condition is vexed with opinions. There is a fine balance point where empathy tips over into sentimentality, which has so plagued and devalued much religious art work in the West. It is the same dilemma which has bedevilled the spirituality of mystical theology, when it is not restrained, when it loosens its Scriptural bounds and becomes fanciful.

But in some ways that is a step too far, too soon. To equate the painter's understanding of the relationship between inter-human loving relationships and the love of God in the context of the death of Christ, is too wide a chasm to leap in one stride. Additionally, from the time of Augustine's ponderings, the Augustine whose thoughts form the bedrock of Western theology, the emotions Rogier's motif described, had travelled a lengthy journey. The influences that formed the young painter, artistically and religiously, were a composite of the passage of Christianity from that fateful death, from which we may scavenge as best we can. What cannot be adopted here is any modern view that the Incarnation and Death of Christ was, 'undertaken with a view to inaugurating a radical new relationship between human beings and God and that the

Nicene Constantinople Creed of 381 should be understood as myth and as non-historical,'[361] Any reflection on the informing theology of Rogier's, *Descent,* must be grounded in the Nicene Creed - and in the medieval, historical sense of Christ formulated through its theologians and the interpretation of that thinking by the laity. The work demands, a sensitivity to Roger's Christian God, for ultimately we are looking at a very personal statement of one man, as to his understanding of the importance and meaning of Christ in 1435. This inner sanctum of Rogier's painting will never be totally accessible to the modern mind and will always depend on, *animi compatientis affectus,* for its ultimate appreciation.

It is, however, time to put to one side the 'gaze' on Rogier's masterpiece in order to consider as fully as possible, within this context, the sub-text of the work; the very specific theosophy it offers, which ultimately discards the image itself. As Henry Suso wrote, despite the image of Christ in his humanity being precious to us, we must bid farewell to it in order to partake of the Holy Ghost. 'We take farewell of this lovely image corporeally, sensually and imaginatively, just as his own disciples parted from their Master'.[362] Now is not, as Suso was indicating, to embark on a mystical journey, but a different journey, one to consider some of the dimensions of Christian life, particularly the mystical theology that had by circumstance, to have played a considerable part in Rogier's *Descent from the Cross*. It is necessary to stand back and allow the work to have a perspective.

Within Rogier's masterwork is the powerful expression of human grief at the cruel loss of a beloved fellow human which, within the context of the image, is an expression of the love of God, the Incarnate Christ and The Canon of The Mass. Whatever boundaries of taste or culture this breaks are solely within the psyche of the viewer. How do you express to another, a set of feelings and belief which can potentially arouse in that other, discomfort, misunderstanding, tedium, rejection and even contempt? From where and how can the words be found? We may struggle with words but Rogier used the silence of the image. Rogier uses those very human loving relationships, a Flemish

[361] (O'Collins 2002) p.1
[362] {Ringbom,1965} p.17

family experiencing an intense with excruciatingly controlled grief. And, he insists that it is the viewer who completes his masterpiece.

'*On Mysticism and Art*'[363]

This masterwork of Rogier van der Weyden is such an exceptional example of the visual religious expression of late medieval piety, that 'visual' is only one aspect of its being. To limit an exposition of such a work solely to its visual nature is a travesty; like assuming we know an individual by their physical appearance alone. Bernard McGinn's essay on *Mysticism and Art* opens by his commenting on the contradictory nature of any attempt to link the two together. How can a purely physical object play any part in that which, by definition, is beyond physical description? As he phrases his appraisal, you get the sense that he is attempting to be theologically inclusive of non-Christian faiths, commenting that mystics have always created visual imagery throughout history.[364] There were the diagrams, the unsophisticated cartoons, the visual musings of creative mystics as opposed to the sophisticated work of master craftsmen, as in the Flemish. But McGinn becomes more specific when he credits the work of Jeffrey Hamburger, as I mentioned in the Introduction, in opening up the perceptive appreciation of mystical theology linked to some images in the Lowlands of Northern Europe, in the mid to late Middle Ages. Further, McGinn considers the nebulous nature of any definition of *mystical theology* as he quotes Tauler that 'mystical theology has no confession (of faith), no dogma, it has no church.'[365] That, importantly, is particular to the Latin West. With uncharacteristic hesitancy, he all but admits that, for the Latin West there never has been a theological linking of the two; commissioners and craftsmen bundled along until Reformation was decisive on both matters.

To make any sense of a body of thinking conjoined as it was to the Christian Faith, in the context of Rogier's *Descent*, that mystical theology has to be defined by its contemporary circumstances and the manner in which it found expression. That

[363] (McGinn 2008)
[364] (McGinn 2008) p.131
[365] Ibid. p.132

expression was particular to the way in which it had evolved from the beginning of the second millennium in that Northern corner of Europe. And surely, it is inconceivable that a masterwork from that time would be bereft of such influences.

For Northern Europe, at the time Charlemagne forcefully introduced Christianity, the emphasis was on establishing a uniform religious culture and practice, rather than encouraging any personal spiritual understanding. The West did, however, as the Middle Ages progressed develop a unique understanding of the spiritual dimension of Christianity, one that from the late thirteenth century was taken up by the laity. It had arisen, like grass on a parched landscape after the rain, as the general populace made their way out of feudal servitude, became literate and attained a degree of self-determination. There were undoubtedly mystical elements to the thinking of many theologians as they made their own personal journey into the inner reaches of Christian theology, but I have limited my interest to three, whom I consider to be key to this mission, and to whom I will devote the last chapter. Before that there is more information to be won from the painting itself and the course that high art had taken during those medieval years, which will assist in trying to bridge the gap between the painted image and the mystical theology of fifteenth century Leuven and the laity, contemporary to Roger van der Weyden.

Within the complexities of the long life of the Middle Ages, the question is how was that paradoxical link between the uncircumscribable mystical culture married to the physical reality of the 'artistic' religious image? Official acceptance of the image in the West was grounded in its ability to instruct. Even today the religious sentiments surrounding religious art works are rarely grounded in any real understanding of how Christianity is officially understood and are more contemplative in nature.[366] That religious imagery was prolific, from high art altarpieces to illuminated texts, church artefacts, relics and market stall memorabilia, is well documented. Amongst this conglomeration of religiosity there began to appear on church walls, in religious houses and homes, works of art that bore a striking resemblance to the Greek Icon; works painted in the *Greek* manner, mainly in Italy.

[366] (John Paul 1999) I am referring here to Pope John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*

These imitative Paintings, as well as the original Greek icons that were brought to the West, became highly prized religious objects throughout the Middle Ages. Seen today, they are not merely the remnants of successful international manufacturing and marketing, they represent items which were revered as part of a particular manner of religious practice, by another Christian population from whom the West had severed itself in the early years of the new second millennium. It was a culture in which the image had a theologically legitimacy, a presence and a purpose. Bearing this in mind, I will next look at how and why these Orthodox images held such a fascination for the West.

The Nature of the Painted Panel: Religious Images in Northern Europe, prior to 1435

Prior to the development of oil painting, seen so perfectly exploited in the work of *The Primitives,* the didactic images so favoured that formed part of church decoration were painted as frescoes; figures painted into the wet plaster of walls. For portable works it was the medium of tempera that was used to create relatively small images. The cultural provenance of Rogier's *Descent* has been explored in Chapter One. However, aside from its evolution from the sculptural of Gothic France, the carved retables of Northern Europe, and the glory of medieval stained glass work, there is another dimension that entered, as the Middle Ages advanced, that from the East. The most comprehensive and visually convincing argument for this influence has been forwarded by Hans Belting. [367] As he writes in the introduction to his book, his intention is to focus on the image of 'the person', as interpreted through the medium of the two dimensional coloured image from antiquity to the modern time, (though he does give text to the sculptural) and that the image is a 'Holy Image'. A cursory glance at the book will quickly show how heavily he has relied on images that came from the East or were Eastern in appearance. The matter is complicated by the fact that from the point of

[367] (Belting 1994)

view of the art historian, the prescriptive and theologically controlled nature of the Greek religious paintings, of necessity demoted the artist to artisan, which he clearly sees as detrimental to their value;[368] understandable so when the theological dimension is omitted. If anything, his book is too wide ranging but his work is invaluable historically. Of particular interest is his chapter "*In the Greek Manner"*. The Icons imported or looted into the West and many reproductions confirm how the Italian painters of mid to late medieval Europe, succumbed to the influence of the Orthodox form of religious image. In Rogier's *Descent*, it is important to state that he has, obviously deliberately, moved away from this format of Italianate work. His is, as I have argued, boldly new. But that is not to say that the sentiments, that the influence of the East has disappeared.

I cannot emphasise enough the complexity of religious imagery in the West from earliest times and how it has been influenced by theological thinking and political circumstance. It is so complex that one can only consider 'cameos' of particular interest to prevent becoming lost. In terms of the Orthodox Icon, however, there are two points to be made. Firstly, the most important Icons that found their way to the West were original Orthodox ones, which had been in their country of origin an integral part of worship and often carried with them very specific miraculous properties. It was known that they were created under strict regulations and that the act of 'writing' an Icon was an act of worship and their symbolism complex. But there were also those, 'Icons' that arose from the burgeoning industry of copyists. From these, it is only a short step to the home-grown Italianate interpretations, not purporting to be Icons but images to be used in a religious manner. Such images abounded. However for a fifteenth century, ambitious artist from North of the Alps, there would have been the desire to progress, to step away from this repetitious copying, to create something new. It was in this climate that the Masters of Netherlandish art produced a unique body of religious imagery that reflected their time and place. But in terms of formally linking these religious images they created to their religious Christian life there was still something missing. There is something particular to those images in their perfection, their stillness and their intensity, that has yet to reveal itself.

[368] Ibid.p.19

The Unguided Complexity of Western Religious Imagery

The 1965 book by Sextin Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, is important in the searching for some of the answers.[369] He acknowledges the western, St. Gregory the Great's curt consignment of the image to the education of the un-educated and the vacuum which that left. It left way for what he calls the 'cultic' image.[370] He limits his definition of this to an aspect of the ancient view that by honouring an image of God or Emperor, that honour is transferred to the 'prototype', the real God or ruler. He also defines a third type of religious image, that of the 'empathetic' image. By this he means, an image that was not merely didactic or reverential but enters, by virtue of its visual properties, into the imagination of the viewer and engages with personal sensitivities and emotions.[371] Ringbom notes the compatibility between the 'emotional attitude of the beholder' of an image with the heightened state of mental awareness within mysticism.[372] 'As a psychological entity the concept of the image occupies an important place in mysticism, although the concept originally appeared as a negative argument it is within this trend of thought that we should look for the elaboration of the emphatic attitude toward images.'[373] In this context he reminds the reader of St. Augustine's 'psychology of sight', the corporeal, the spiritual and the intellectual. He goes on to consider the 'portrait- like' images of Christ or Mary, isolated figures with whom the viewer could engage in contemplation. Erwin Panofsky commented, in his work on *Early Netherlandish Painting*, on the evolution of this format and attributed its genesis to Rogier van der Weyden but adds, importantly, that this has its origins in the Greek Icon.[374] The master art work of *The Descent* is different again with additional figures contributing to the pathos.

The most over-riding sense you get from looking at Western medieval religious art is that it was eclectic. There was no theological rationale to substantiate it, there was certainly no quality assurance, relying on the arbitrary funding and tastes of the

[369] (Ringbom 1965)
[370] Ibid.p.11
[371] Ibid.p.12
[372] Ibid.p.15
[373]Ibid p.15
[374] (Ringbom1965) p. 39f

commissioner and the Guild's standards for artisan skills. The artist as 'creator' with his own intellect and sensitivities, his own artistic references was only beginning to emerge, when Rogier van de Weyden took up his apprenticeship with Robert Campin, intent on becoming a master painter.

Mystical Theology of the Northern Lowlands and the Laity

A testament to the complexity of the Western mystical tradition is the time and effort expended by Professor Bernard McGinn, over a quarter of a century, in compiling his seven volumes of, *A History of Western Christian Mysticism.* In his introduction to book five, he begins his exploration of vernacular mysticism between 1350 and 1550. He writes of the mysticism that flourished in the Lowlands of Northern Europe, a time that, 'witnessed a florescence of mystical authors writing in the Dutch-Flemish language, a proliferation that testifies to the literacy of the urbanised Low Countries, as well as to a widespread hunger for spiritual literature.[375] He quotes, in a note, that this time saw seventy to eighty per cent of texts, available in Middle Dutch, religious in nature.[376] It could be argued that all this endorses the importance credited to Rogier van der Weyden's sensational altarpiece when it was newly hung in the Leuven chapel, even the mind-set that inspired the worthy Crossbowmen to make such a lavish investment. It is also why it is so important to set this movement in parallel with the wider expressions of religious art created and valued during this era

The particular expression of mysticism by the laity of the Burgundian Lowlands has, in the past, been set aside and largely ignored. The last twenty years, however, has seen a considerable reversal of this neglect. Many works of mystical writings have been translated into European languages and become open to a wider audience. So also the work of The Blessed Jan van Ruusbroec's Middle Dutch has become available and his influence on lay piety better understood; the wider availability of his writings, allow the modern world to appreciate the originality of his mystical teachings, which were

[375](McGinn 2012) p.2
[376] Ibid p.495 note 2

'determinedly Trinitarian', and also the creativity of his Dutch prose.[377] In amongst the history of mystical theology in Northern Europe, the manner in which his work and mystical theology in general was embraced, in this corner of Europe, at this time, was unique and pertinent to Rogier's *Descent.*

Particular though this flowering of mysticism was, it was only one flower from an enduring and often prolific source. In his searching for the origins of mystical theology, Andrew Louth believes that, 'the study of Patristic mystical theology is important for any study of Christian mysticism'.[378] And, he insists that for a true understanding of this early mystical understanding, both (dogma and spirituality) must held in harmony, as they are (theoretically) inseparable.[379] 'The basic doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, worked out in these centuries, are mystical doctrines formulated dogmatically. That is to say,

> "mystical theology" provides the context for direct apprehensions of the God who has revealed himself in Christ and dwells within us through the Holy Spirit; while dogmatic theology attempts to incarnate those apprehensions in objectively precise terms which they, in their turn, inspire a mystical understanding of God who has thus revealed himself which is specifically Christian."[380]

This is a vitally important statement, one that has perennial ramifications for any history of European theology, and religious art, but is particularly important in this current context of seeking the true theological content of Rogier's masterpiece.

There is a dilemma in making definitive statements regarding mystical theology. It has an amoebic quality that allows it to accommodate the shape of the environment in which it finds itself. There is also a problem in solely attributing its origin to Eastern sources; What of St. Augustine, what of Ambrose, Marius Victorinus and Cassian, all Latin's, but scholars of Greek texts? Aside from the Greek philosophers, Plato, Philo,

[377] (McGinn 2012) p.5
[378] (Louth 1981) p. xi
[379] Ibid p. xi
[380] Ibid p. x

and Plotinus from the ancient Christian world, Origen and 'Nicene Orthodoxy' are the early practitioners and the desert monasteries had their own interpretation; all torch-bearers for mystical theology. As For the East, spirituality was, as noted earlier, an organic part of the whole, and one which, theoretically, applied to all Christians regardless of status. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams writes of mystical theology, 'in its refusal to limit God with concepts, it stands closer to and points more clearly towards the summit of theology'.[381] How then did the laity of Northern Europe find themselves embracing, in *almost*, Eastern fashion, that which had originally come from those distant lands? McGinn does stress that in the West, mystical theology outside the monastery, where it grew as a 'distinct element in Christianity', did not develop until the beginning of the 12th century: 'New styles of religious life, especially the medicants and the beguines, new forms of mystical expression as well as the sudden emergence of a more powerful role for women, all pointed to an important shift'.[382] This is key to the theologians I have selected for the last chapter, as being an important links in the enrichment of the mystical within the doctrinal.

The Entry of Denys the Areopagyte into Western Europe

In the Latin West, Gregory the Great, on his return from his mission as papal legate to the Emperor of Constantinople, c.585, had stowed in his luggage, a codex of the *Areopagitical Corpus*, written it was believed by the Denys who is mentioned as having been converted to Christianity by listening to St. Paul's defence before the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:34). It was centuries before the fallacy of this provenance was uncovered and the work confirmed as being of late fifth to early sixth centuries; This Denys was, in fact, a Greek speaking monk, living in Syria, where he had freedom from Orthodox censorship. However, returning to Gregory's literary booty, it seemed not to have made a great impact upon contemporary Latin theology at that time.[383] It sprung into life again when the Byzantine Emperor Michael the Stammerer gave a copy to Louis the Pious in 827 and the text began its slow but momentous journey into the

[381] (Williams 1975) p.12-13
[382] (McGinn 1998) p.ix
[383](Louth 1989) p.120

Christian life of Western Europe. It took the translation of the work by the Irish monk, John the Scott, (815-77), Eriugena, as he liked to be known, to really allow this text to enter the Latin West in comprehensible form, but the West had to wait another two centuries before it was actually used by scholars.[384]

When finally, key figures in the West took Denys to themselves, he was able to offer them a foundation for expanding Christian thought. It opened the way for a more expansive and personal engagement with Christian practice, one that steadily gained ground during the mid to late Middle Ages. However, there is an important caveat here. Whereas the influence of Denys is especially important, particularly where mystical elements are being sought to be included in ecclesiastical writings, it is another when they come from the "the independents" as McGinn calls them.[385] As he writes, 'they, (the mystics) were not revolutionaries, or even critics of the institutional church. The mystics of the era were… beguines, poets, philosophers, hermits and anchoresses'. To modern minds, their literary remains and witness accounts can make perplexing reading. Their writings were intense, but found ready hearers. Whether it was the composite effect of the Black Death, the hundred year's war or the other plagues of famine and brutality, but there was suddenly, in Western Europe, a great spiritual hunger to be satisfied. To be added to that, again from McGinn, there was the rise in the growing sophistication of the vernacular languages, inevitably more expressive than the Latin, but also elevating the value of speech about God in words by people, whom Hamburger comments, had a natural ability to unite the two[386]. There developed a greater comprehensibility and establishment of non-clerical Christian thinking.

To return to Denys the Areopagyte, despite the plethora of mystical thinking that seemed to have arisen from nowhere, his text was considered authoritative. From the contradictory adjectives, there emerges a God who is an, 'inexpressible and unutterable God, dwelling in the Divine Darkness' and 'a cosmos as a glittering sequence of hierarchies all serving to express and effect the assimilation of all thing in God'.[387] This

[384] Ibid p.22
[385] (McGinn 2012) p.493
[386] (Hamburger 1990)
[387] (Louth 1981) p.178

God who, 'creates out of nothing' was 'clearly recognised by Byzantium' and as Louth concludes, 'for all his (Denys the Areopagyte's) deep and diverse importance in the West, it is there (in Byzantium) that Denys (and mystical theology) finds his true home;'[388] 'home' denoting a permanent situation.

That is as may be but Denys was not the only export from those Eastern Lands, those lands so physically close to *The Bible.* Through trade, Crusade and pilgrimage, goods, ideas and people were exchanged. Despite the Great Scism of 1054, the Byzantine scholar, Judith Herrin, comments, ironically, it was following the disgraceful sack of Constantinople by the West in 1204 that Byzantium exerted its most powerful influence on the West.[389] And where should one look for the most convincing confirmation and dynamic understanding of that influence, than to Venice, the most powerful and wealthy Western European City State and trading port of the Middle Ages?

The Abiding Eastern influence on the Western Late Middle Ages

The Byzantine Empire, "presents a disgusting picture of imbecility", wrote Hegel in his *Philosophy of History* in 1805/6.[390] In his essay on the erroneous categorisation within the History of Art of Byzantium, one usually isolated between that of Roman and Islamic art, Robert Nelson attributes this belief to the 'Orientalist prejudice' of the eighteenth century; a severe case of ethnocentricity. As he writes, 'the alterity of Byzantium Art and the denial of its coevalness with Western medieval art have been features of the general history of art for the last 150yrs'.[391] Additionally, it is a prejudice which he believes is, 'historically distorting and ideologically motivated'. If one adds to that the continued dominance of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance Italian arts, the cultural exchanges between the Byzantine and Latin world in the Middle Ages become grossly distorted. In order to understand fully the masterwork by Rogier van der Weyden however, it is necessary to review the actual situation and investigate how

[388] Ibid p.178
[389] (Herrin 2008) p.xix
[390] (Nelson 1996) p.7
[391] Ibid p.8

Byzantium did influence both art and theology in the Middle Ages of the West. It is only now that muted acknowledgements are creeping into academic texts. One important reference for both theology and visual art is that of Lieve Uyttenhove's, where she notes the parallel thinking of Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381) and Gregory Palamas (1296-1359)[392] the monk from Mount Athos who later became a priest.

Though having its own specialities in brutality and human mutilation,[393] the Byzantine Empire, had an exceptional measure of sophistication and opulence, at which the West could only wonder. The sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 that split the Roman Empire left Constantinople untouched. Supported by rich provinces, this Eastern part of the old 'Empire' survived for over a thousand years. What became known as Byzantium was a vast, multicultural collection of states and provinces that flourished under rule from Constantinople. Absorbing Greek pagan culture into its Christianity, it developed its own distinct character. Whereas at first, there had been a mutual tolerance, there developed a mutual intolerance of East/West mores. In the early days there was a certain conviviality of shared languages but which decreased with time,[394] until in the early 15th century, Greek speakers in the Latin world were rare and it was even rarer to find a Latin speaker in Byzantium. So self contained was the Byzantium Empire in its success, that it had little interest in the West. At its height, it was sumptuously wealthy, culturally sophisticated and with a 'more clearly articulated theology', than the West.[395] With these advantages it was that former Eastern part of the Roman Empire, to which the Latin West looked with a 'green eye', not only with material covetousness but with a fascination for its interpretation of Christianity, one which arose from its philosophical heritage. As the years progressed and the language barrier almost hermetically sealed this great Empire within its own borders there was, however, one accessible line of communication, that of visual art, the 'linguistic filter' as Louth calls it. There was a powerful universality about the art and artefacts of that storehouse of Byzantium, which held the West in trance. Louth comments that, the 'united Byzantium Orthodoxy formed in the wake of iconoclasm ... thus held to those symbols, the liturgical ceremonial and

[392] (Uyttenhove 2012) p.1-4
[393] (Herrin 2008) p.160f: For the historical use of Eunnuchs.
[394] (Louth 2007) p.4
[395] Ibid p.8

the cult of Icons',[396] and in doing so gave a physical dimension to the split of East and West. The interface of these cultural differences, somewhere that wholeheartedly embraced both traditions, had to be Venice.

Medieval Venice and Byzantium

'Venice was born Byzantine, in her art and in every other aspect of her life.'[397] 'No city is as Venice, so freely disposed to transform itself into a work of art,' for, 'this is a city that astonishes the whole world'. And so it is that, 'She took the name "Venezia" almost as if she were saying, with inviting sweetness, to the departing guest: *Veni etiam'.*

Almost as a veneration of the great empire of the East, in the mid 11th century the magnificent Basilica of San Marco was begun. It aimed, without embarrassment, to replicate the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, and be a suitable resting place for the purloined bones of St Mark. Craftsmen, skilled in the ancient art of glass mosaic, were imported from Greece to decorate the Basilica and other buildings including the 'fairly pure Byzantine style' of Santa Maria Assunta on the island of Torcello, close to Venice. The special glass *terrasae,* were backed with 18carat gold leaf and set at slightly different angles so that, to the passing viewer, the whole mosaic seemed to sparkle in the light. It was an art form the West never mastered but was in mesmeric admiration of, particularly in the 11th and 12th centuries, when Byzantium culturally claimed Venice.

Sadly, Venice was not all 'sweetness' and extravagance of culture. She had a formidably dark side to her character, one that came to world attention with the Fourth Crusade of 1204. To be fair, it was not Venice alone that conducted the appallingly disgraceful destruction of Constantinople in April of that year: Northern Europeans were also involved with others.[398] After the conquest Venice gained the sea ports that had belonged to the city, and consolidated her embrace of Byzantium. As an eyewitness

[396] Ibid p.9
[397] (Vianello 2002) p.69
[398] (Herrin 2008) p.262f

wrote, "Constantine's fine city, the common delight and boast of all nations, was laid waste by fire and blackened by soot, taken and emptied of all wealth, public and private ... by the scattered nations of the West ... the dashing to earth of the venerable icons and the flinging of the relics of the saints ... seizing as plunder the precious chalices and pattens'.[399] What was not destroyed was plundered. The magnificent gold and enamel reliquary of the True Cross c.963 found its way to Germany, four magnificent bronze horses that had guarded the Hippodrome were 'relocated' to St. Marks Basilica. Anything of antiquity, carvings, Icons, manuscripts and precious liturgical objects[400] were seized to decorate the Latin West. Beside the years of trade that had legitimately brought goods and craftsmen from the Eastern Empire to Western Europe, the sack of Constantinople finally confirmed how despicably in awe was the West, of Byzantium. The influence of the Eastern Empire on medieval Europe is not as easily dismissed as Hegel demeaned himself by claiming.

If proof be needed, a more questioning look at the golden background of Rogier's *Descent from the Cross,* will surely endorse this claim. Evening Mass in St. Marco's, Venice is the only way to truly experience the spectacle of that influence, the 'golden mosaics', when the great Basilica is lit to perfection and blazes forth with a 'heavenly' light. What has always been taken to be, in considering the background to the figures in *The Descent*, is Rogier's imitation of the faultless, smooth, gold surface of the Icon, is surely, with its appearance of a regular broken surface, an emulation of the high carat gold mosaics of Byzantium and St. Marks in Venice.

In spite of the facts of history, religious art within Western Europe was still trapped between its mandate to educate and its desire to please as an aesthetic object. It may have accompanied all manner of devotions, decorated churches, chapels, religious houses and domestic homes and even as McGinn comments, have given imagery to the visions of the women mystics,[401] but there was no theologically argued case for its being. I believe that it is necessary to take a detour, to look at what argument those in favour of the religious image put forward to defeat the Iconoclasts, who sought to

[399] Ibid p. 264
[400] Ibid p. 254-5
[401](McGinn 1998) p.30

destroy those images and the Christians who valued them. What was the argument of those who venerated that which, through the image, held the physical and the spiritual in harmony, so that the mortal might have the opportunity for a greater closeness to the indescribable God?

The Debt to the Iconoclasts

When considering Iconoclasm, the attention is usually centred on the 16th century Northern European Reformers and their abhorrence of all religious imagery, which lead to the indiscriminate destruction of religious art and artefacts in 16th century. It was Andreas Karlstadt's bold *Invocavit Sermons* of 9-16th March 1522, whilst Luther was in the protective custody of Wartburg, that was, 'virtually the first significant discussion of iconoclasm in the Reformation[402] and in the West. Karlstadt's arguments were based solely on the Scriptural prohibition of the image as idol and he, 'repeatedly hammers' that theme. Whilst this was his prime endorsement, he decorated his references with his own opinion, that images were, 'harmful and devilish' and their removal was an act of cleansing in a church that was in sad need of refreshment.[403] Whether he realised it or not this opinion was to become a profound cultural marker within Western Christianity and has served to reinforce the very permanent division, between the old ways and the new, as well as to significantly alter the course of visual art, religious and secular in the West. This is the iconoclasm that has come down to us in the West and that iconoclasm of the Reformation has remained within its own time capsule, with its own tight boundaries, but with a disproportionate influence, one that inevitably distorts any perception of pre-Reformation visual imagery. It is important to acknowledge it, not least for its apparent lack of intellectual theological reasoning.

The Iconoclasm of 16th century, however, was an iconoclasm which was never to offend the ears of Rogier van der Weyden. He would have surely agreed with the later painters, Albrecht Dürer and with Leonardo da Vinci, on the particular nature of the 'genius' artist and his *scientia:* 'He,[the artist] shares with God the insight into the

[402] (Leroux 2003) p.78
[403] Ibid.p.79

universal principles which underlie the individual things in nature and is thus able to "generate" – not to "create".[404] Sadly, not all artists were blessed with such attributes, nor commissioners with discrimination. What is important here is that the masterwork of Rogier's *Descent* cannot be evaluated using post-Reformation parameters. The image he, 'generated,' was an integral part of the Christian life of the early 15th century. It was applauded not only for the facility of the artist but also for the expression it gave to the religious sentiments that prevailed. Iconoclasm, if any were to be considered, would have been that of the historical triumph of the Orthodox Churches that restored the Icon to its former place in Christian contemplation and prayer. For an artist of the stature of Rogier van der Weyden, there must inevitably have been a fascination with the manner in which the Christian East 'generated' these panels that held a legitimate place in liturgy and the religious imagination of its people.

The long, 117 years of bitter, often brutal, debate on the Icon,[405] were responsible for stringent reasoning as to its validity and its function within Church practice. For Orthodoxy, there was set down a theological integration of the visual within Christian faith, one which we owe to those who so vehemently opposed it. It is an argument which deserves to be revisited, firstly because there are echoes of it to be found within the contemplations of the three theologians I have chosen for my next chapter. Secondly, I think that it is not without significance that the counter argument of the iconoclasts is still held in such high regard by the reformed denominations. It is still a relevant marker of denominational definition.

The Christology of the Iconoclast Dispute

It is regularly noted that medieval mystical theology was highly Christo-centric. So also Christ, in his humanity, was central to the theology of the Icon. The fact that Christ took human flesh to become mortal and could be seen, listened to and physically touched by another human, they contended, legitimised the reproduction of his earthly

[404] (Panofsky 2005) p.281
[405] (Kostas 2008) p.370

image. But that image was but the key to accessing a highly spiritual understanding of God the Father and the Holy Trinity.

The Christological thinking within the Orthodox Church of the later first millennium may, at first sight, seem far removed from an extant artwork of the fifteenth century Lowlands of Northern Europe. Within Rogier's masterwork, the central motif is the supreme visual description of the dead Christ. Christ is not merely central to the whole original triptych, but to the religious culture in which Rogier lived and worked. The *Imitatio Christ*, alleged to have been written by Thomas à Kempis played a significant part, particularly amongst the laity, as well as being the inspiration for countless visual images.[406] It is important, within this context, to note how Christ, in his dual natures inspired particular theologians in the West. It appears in their writings when they are attempting to rationalise that which is beyond the understanding of man. Christ was the central focus of thinking and 'Icons are the ultimate pictorial summary of the Greek Orthodox understanding of Christology, forged over three centuries of theological struggle,'[407] 'The Icon upholds the church's teaching of the true humanity of Christ, while maintaining his singular personhood as the second person of the Holy Trinity. The hypostatic union did not render Christ uncircimscribable ... the defence of Icons was thus an important step in the working out of the Christological formulation of the Council of Chalcedon ... Icons are part of the divine condescension to our weakness'.[408]

I will restrict my references to the Icon, to those of Christ, because it was the making of an image of Him and the subsequent veneration of Him through the Icon, which was central to the defence of the image. The iconodules [defenders of the Icon] set on record, "That our minds through the visible character might be caught up into the invisible divinity of his majesty through a spiritual order in accordance with the flesh, which the Son of God deigned to receive for our salvation."[409] Their argument continued; "Christ's icon and portrait bears the character of him who became incarnate for us and took the form of a servant and not any character of divinity, which was united

[406] (Kempis. 1979)
[407] (Kostas 2008) p.360
[408] Ibid p.371
[409] (Giakalis 2005) p.102 Mansi 12, 1062B

indissolubly with the spotless flesh, for the divine nature is invisible and uncircumscribed." [410] John's Gospel was quoted, 'I and the Father are one '(John 10:30), to emphasise that these words had been spoken, "by a human mouth and a physical tongue." They rationalised the belief that both natures of Christ could be contained within the Icon through the acknowledgement of a *Prototype* (Christ) and its relationship to the Imitative Icon.

In creating an Icon, the challenge was of representing on a flat surface, a two dimensional image of one who is both, 'circumscribed within his humanity yet is uncircumscribeable, bodiless and formless according to his divinity.'[411] There was no single, or for that matter simple, answer to their defence from iconoclast attack. Rather, it seems that the answer grew almost organically out of the Christology of the Orthodox Churches, which in turn rested on the thinking of the Desert Fathers and tradition; those practices that had evolved with the early Christians, following the death of Christ and before the Gospels had been written. From the earliest days, the conflicting beliefs as to the nature of the, 'person of Christ,' generated multiple interpretations. There followed centuries when that understanding so taxed logic and imagination that differing opinions fell into heretical groups. So critical was a 'true' understanding, which rested on the ability of skilled and lucid argument, that the debates generated *Handbooks of Christian Logic* to bring conformity and clarity to ongoing arguments. Calling on Aristotle and Porphry, with others, but expanding to include the names of St. Peter and St. Paul as well terms such as *ousia* and *hypostasis,*[412] these texts filled the need of those to whom it befell the task of defining the faith.

At their most basic level, the Archetype, prototype and their relation to the imitative image, the Icon, were the cornerstone of all arguments against the charges of idolatry. Basil the Great was quoted as writing, "For where there is one source and one issue, one *Archetype* [God] and one image, the principle of unity is not destroyed. Since the Son is begotten by the Father and naturally 'expresses' the Father in himself, as image or icon he possesses the exact likeness, and as offspring he maintains the identity of

[410] Ibid p.104
[411] (Karahan 2010) p. 37
[412] (Louth 2002) p.43

substance".[413] However, it is impossible to ever see or represent The Father, but because of the incarnation, Christ had been seen by humankind and may thus be called the *Prototype* of the imitative image; all icons of Christ in whatever form they took were an earthly visual interpretation of Christ, as the *Prototype,* As later was decreed, 'the icon is one thing, the prototype is another and no sensible person will look for the properties of the prototype in the image ... there is nothing in the Icon other than participation by name in the subject of the Icon, and not by substance".[414]

I labour the argument for the importance of understanding of the centrality of Christ in the argument for the Icon for three reasons. Firstly, the whole argument is centred round the once mortal nature of the Son of God, Jesus Christ who had in his life on earth been physically 'seen'. This is important because it resonates with the growing emphasis on the human Christ with whom the medieval laity related so intensely. Secondly, it brings into focus and accepts the balancing dimension of the utter incomprehensibility of God with the indisputable corporeality from which the divine in Christ may not be separated. This lack of separation it a vitally important concept when entering into the realms of mystical theology; it confirms the undeniable mystical element and seeks to offer a methodology for handling this understanding within prayer and meditation. 'The master paradigm of *exidus* and *retidus*, the procession of all things out from and their return into God, inherited from Platonic and Neo-platonic thinkers, had been utilized by Christian thinkers since the time of Origen.[415] But talk about the intangible is undeniably challenging and an easier option is to circumnavigate. 'Since we know God the Father through Christ, and Christ in the Spirit, it follows that by approaching grace via Icons, we love, by means of them to know the Holy Trinity in an experiential way, if we are duly pure'.[416] Thirdly, the argument can be transposed into later discourses on the nature of God and the Trinity, as I will hope to show in the next chapter, culminating, for those in the environs of Brussels and Leuven of the early 15th century, in the writings of Jan van Ruusbroec along with the wider acceptance of the mystical within Christianity that had been evolving in the West since the 12th century.

[413] (Giakalis 2005) p.104
[414] (Giakalis 2005) p.105
[415] (McGinn 2012) p.9
[416] (Caramos 1978) p.297

As McGinn comments in summing up the subject, 'Given the centrality of the Trinity, in Christian belief, all mystics are Trinitarians in some way or another; with the proviso that they exhibit considerable diversity of thought'.[417]

To clarify, the validity of the Icon rested on the interpretation of the incarnate nature of Christ, whilst still acknowledging his divinity, one being inseparable from the other; a concept that the iconoclasts found so difficult to grasp and inherently heretical. St. John of Damascus elaborated, "As one of the Holy Trinity, the Son has the Father, as 'archetype'. However, that which refers to the Icon of Christ, has Christ himself as the 'prototype'. " This could lead to the accusation, as it did, that the Father may be dishonoured, as within the Trinity, and that there was the claim [wrongly] that, "in the Icon, his divinity was being portrayed pictorially".[418] Within the complex theological defence, there is an inherent understanding that in the incarnation, Christ was at once human and divine and that these two natures were indivisible. Both could not be represented physically in the human world, but that in representing the humanness of Christ, there was, according to Scripture, the understanding that the divinity was present; it was by its, unutterable, indescribable nature that this was not to be capable of physical expression in the human world. When Christ walked in the world, his 'unutterable and indescribable nature' was not visible other than in his miraculous works and then the manifestations were physical and visible. As was explained to the iconoclasts, "If it is not possible in the case of a body and its shadow to be separated as it always exists alongside it even when it is not visible, neither can the Icon of Christ be divided from Him [God] ... the veneration of these is one because there is a single character in both ... and for the same reason the Icon is identical with its archetype, not with its nature but with its hypostasis":[419] If you stand, out of view, behind a large rock on a sunny beach and your figure casts a shadow beyond the rock, even if we cannot see you directly, we know you are there, because we see your shadow; this was their vernacular argument for understanding the invisibility of God the Father in Trinity and the once mortally visible Christ.

[417] Ibid p. 8
[418] (Giakalis 2005) p. 107
[419] Ibid note 54

The Historically important Rejection of Created Images

The inclusion of the case for the Iconoclasts may not immediately seem relevant to Rogier and his work. However it is highly significant within the wider consideration of the future of the religious image in the West, to this day. Also, it is not totally without relevance to Rogier van der Weyden, as much of his work was lost to post-Reformation Iconoclasm. Equally clear in their rationale for *rejecting* the use of any image of Christ or Holy persons, were the iconoclasts, the destroyers of the Icons. For them, aside from questions of idolatry, was their insistence that in so portraying Christ in the Icon, his human and divine natures were being rent asunder and generally confused; the former implied Nestorianism and the latter, Monophysitism.[420] Hearing how the defenders of the Icon used the language of *prototype* and *imitative image*, they were insistent that in order not to be considered an idol, the image, [of Christ] must be consubstantial with its prototype, [Christ Himself]. As this is an impossibility in the natural world, the icon was therefore deemed to be idolatrous. In order not to separate the human and the divine natures of Christ, their conclusion was that the only true Icon of Christ was a, 'natural,' Icon only to be found in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist.

Writings from the iconoclasts are mainly lost, presumably because they did not win the argument and their beliefs can only be reconstructed from attacks on them from the later iconodules.[421] This is unfortunate as it robs us of a truly balanced perspective. One remaining fragment, for the losing side, from a *Peuseis* of Constantine the Fifth, is a fair summary of their opinion. "[The Lord] commanded his holy disciples and apostles to pass on a type of his body, in reality, through which he might be loved, in order that through the priestly leading upwards, which comes about through participation and ordinance, we might receive it as genuinely and truly his body."[422] This thinking, however, imposed limitations on the understanding and relationship of the Christian with his God, for all agreed that, whichever side of the controversy is explored, the

[420] Ibid p.131
[421] (Louth 2007) p.55
[422] Ibid p.57

arguments were based on the particular understandings by each side of Christology. Both used the word, "Icon" in different ways, in line with their differing concepts of the 'person' of Christ. It was the more expansive, creative understanding that prevailed within the Orthodox Church for whom, " We execute the icon of his humanity in pigments and venerate it ....We venerate the icon of Christ, that is, the person seen by men, not separated from his invisible divinity ... but united with it from the moment of his conception.'[423]

The Influence of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, East and West

If the visual religious imagery from the East so influenced Italian panel paintings of the mid to late Middle Ages in Europe, there had to be more that attracted the West, than the decorous nature of the superficial image: that it held more than a 'reminder' of Christ, his Mother Mary and the various Saints. How far had Western mystical thinking advanced in order to comprehend the significance of these, at times strange and dark, painted religious panels from the East? There was little communal language to augment any understanding, so that any engagement had to come from an understanding within their own spiritual [mystical] understanding. Western mysticism was relating its own interpretation of Christ, in the image of the Icon/Iconic image, to an understanding of another.

A detailed look at the Council texts, are important in balancing both sides of the argument. It was a document which was important not merely for the fate of the Icon but in that the matter of religious imagery had been considered theologically, at length and that their decisions and triumph, set the Orthodox Churches on a path which took them further away from the Roman West.[424] The inclusion of the visual image had a corpus of opinion to rationalise its use, which was reflected a different approach to integrating dogma and spirituality. Inevitably, there were those who believed strongly

[423] (Giakalis 2005) p. 103: Quotation from the proceedings of the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

that the church could not be in the stranglehold of tradition, a significant argument on which the iconodules depended. Opponents thought it was arcane to continue with practices that could so easily lead to abuse and with some justification could, on occasions be construed as idolatry. The East was not immune to the populist corruption of Church practices. Importantly, however, at its purest and best, the Eastern interpretation of Christ, written in the Icon, also carried with it, 'the unity of the triadic God in connection with the homoousion of the Father and the Son'.[425]

The conclusions of The Seventh Ecumenical Council were not unanimously supported. Aside from those within the East who were still defiant, there was Rome and the Frankish peoples of Northern Europe, still within a unified Christianity, to be acknowledged. The King of the Franks, Charlemagne (742-814) had not attended The Council. For its findings he had to rely on a poor translation from the Greek into Latin. Whether this was the whole reason or not, he staunchly supported the iconoclasts. Their mind-set found favour with his style of Christianity, enforced under pain of death and guided by St. Augustine of Hippo's *The City of God,*[426] according to his contemporary biographer. The nuances of the Greek understanding were lost to him. In aligning himself with the iconoclasts, his rejection of the Greek model reinforced the dogmatic at the expense of the spiritual. It was a decision that was to have a profound significance for western theology and for western Art; The Reformed Church has always rejected the findings of The Seventh Ecumenical Council.[427] Charlemagne's rejection was to limit both the spirituality with religious practice, but also how imagery was to be used in that context.

To assist in this, it is helpful to look at one scholar, from the early twentieth century who has written, with authority, on the comparison of East and West, in their mysticism, even though his argument can be seen as not being totally understanding of pre-Reformation mystical thinking. Vladimir Lossky (1903-58), born in Germany but

[425](Giakalis 2005) p.105
[426] (Einhard) Web page
[427] (Ouspensky 1978) p.173: After noting that the iconoclasm of the first millennium may be likened to the Reformation, the writer comments that, following the triumph of the Icon, the iconoclasts did not strip their church walls, as in the Reformation, but decorated them with images of landscapes and wildlife as well as secular subjects.

raised and educated in St. Petersburg,[428] had lived through two world wars, Revolution and final expulsion from Russia. Such is the importance of his writing that Rowan Williams, 'the principle living authority on Lossky's work', chose him for his Oxford doctoral thesis in 1975.[429] One of the key beliefs Lossky had, was that 'In the West, at least in recent centuries, mystical theology has been a subject-matter'[430], that is that it does not have the holistic place within Christian faith that it occupies within Eastern belief. He contends that, 'Far from being opposed to each other, theology and mysticism mutually support each other. One is impossible without the other'.[431] It is easy to see, within the context of the global politics of his lifetime, how he came to have such a negative view of Christian spirituality in the West and we can presume that his contact with the West would have been, in the main, through reformed thinking? He comments, in his work on *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* on the difficulty of venturing to understand the differing cultural theological perspectives of East and West, in terms of mystical theology. Acknowledging the debt each side owes to the other, in terms of the founding Fathers of both traditions and the commonality of origin, he warns of an over scrupulous objectivity, camouflaging indifference (by implication the deeper, religious nature of any enquiry as damaged by secularism and the emphasis on historical fact rather that the dogmatic beliefs of each).[432] He insists that, the very unfashionable, *Dogma,* is of vital importance when one side is considering the other from its own perspective. It is dogma after all which has shaped belief and practice and defined how the mystical within theology is embraced, or not. He suggests two possibilities for progress, the first, 'to place oneself on Western dogmatic ground and to examine the eastern tradition across that of the West ... or else to present that tradition [that of the Orthodox and the Icon] in the light of the dogmatic attitudes of the Eastern Church,'[433] with the Icon being one key to such understanding and to mystical theology.

[428] (Nichols 1995) p.21f
[429] (Williams 1975)
[430] (Nichols 1995) p.27
[431] (Lossky 1957)p. 9
[432] (Lossky 1957) p. 12
[433] Ibid.p.12

So differently did the Eastern Churches develop within the lands they served that they became a collection of Churches, 'a federation,' each in tune with its geographical and cultural situation, there is a generous fluidity of organisation and particular practice. For them, 'there is no sharp distinction between, theology and mysticism, between the realm of the common faith and personal experience.'[434] Thus, claims Lossky, to speak of mystical theology within the Eastern Churches, is to speak of the dogma that it embraced; and that includes the iconoclast arguments of the first millennium. With the absence of a rigid hierarchical structure, in the East, there was a restive, 'religious vitality, an intensity of spiritual life which penetrated the whole mass of believers.'[435] And it was from the perspective of dogma enlivened by that vitality that the arguments for and against the veneration of the image were made, with the core arguments resting on the understanding of the nature of Christ and, as explicitly argued by St. John Damascene and the definition and manner of venerating that Christ, in his *On the Divine Images.*

'The Icon is ... a sacramental medium, a meeting point between the divine uncreated light and the human heart.'[436] 'The Icon is a, 'door ... which opens our minds, created in accordance with God, to the inward likeness of the prototype.'[437] In the Icon, 'We "see" The Word through the medium of the flesh of Christ and its extension in the Icon.'[438] In these few statements we can begin to see how within the Eastern tradition, the supremely esoteric definitions of the person of Christ were clothed in a reasonableness of human experience. Rather than accepting that the divine nature of Christ can only be experienced through the sanctified bread and wine of the Eucharist, as purported by the iconoclasts, there evolved a means of, 'coming to and experiencing God' in both his humanness and uncircumscribeable divinity, using the more egalitarian approach, as in the contemplation of the Icon.

The holy grail of objectivity, so quickly succumbs to the subjective. I would submit that there has yet to be born a theologian/historian who does not let slip denominational

[434] Ibid p 8
[435] Ibid.p.16
[436] (Collins 2002) p.14
[437] (Giakalis 2005) p.112
[438] (Collins 2002) p.8

inheritance, or lack of, but that if the reader is fully aware of the legacy of historical decisions, then there can still be a widening of understanding even through subjectivity.

How the West developed Iconic ideals within its own Christian understanding

To assist in the integration of the Icon/Iconic image into an understanding of Western Christianity, there are two key concepts, shared with the Eastern Churches that are important. Firstly there is the integration of a mutual appreciation of the dual nature of Christ and the accepted *inability* to 'understand' the nature of God the Father: The *Mystery.* Secondly, there is the understanding of God's created world, different from our scientific understanding, in that it had been created by the God of Genesis: *Matter.*

From the East, there was the dogmatic belief that the Icon expresses both the incarnate nature of Christ and his divinity. This at once embraces the cataphatic and the apophatic understanding of God, and it can be argued, the natural world with its Cosmos. The dual understanding of the former, which 'constitutes the fundamental characteristic of the whole tradition of the Eastern Church',[439] appears to rely heavily on Denys the Areopagyte's *Mystical Writings,* the Denys who played such a substantial part in the medieval Western understanding of mystical theology. Dionysius the Areopagite, Denys the Pseudo-Areopagite that, "lonely meteorite, in the mighty story of Patristic and Byzantine thought",[440] is never far away from any consideration of mystical theology; Louth has commented on the apparent antipathy toward Denys from reformed thinking. He also demotes the contention that Denys was 'all pervasive' to that of merely pervasive. Within the Orthodox tradition, theirs was not the practice to publicise personal thoughts regarding God. The way of mystical union was one of a private nature between the Christian and his God, divulged to only a few;[441] it was part of the monastic tradition of Orthodoxy as it had been in the West from Benedict. Louth suggests that within the writings of Denys, his use of language displayed a 'creative

[439] (Lossky 1957) p.31
[440] (Louth 2008) p.585
[441] (Lossky 1957) p.20

delight' in exploring that which had 'mystery', that which was *apophatic*[442] and in doing so gave, 'singular expression to tendencies and characteristics of the Byzantine tradition.[443] He even suggests that, at the time of Denys' writings, he was merely absorbed into the greater scheme of religious life. However, he goes on to document the important influences he had within the Byzantine world, particularly on Maximus the Confessor and St. John of Damascus. However, so great was his influence on Western mystical theology, that one can understand it being questioned. Could it be that, it was the bringing to the West of that which was, and always had been, inextricably Orthodox, that which had been, not least from Charlemagne's cursory dismissal of the arguments of The Seventh Ecumenical Council, disenfranchised from the West?

Denys wrote his prayer to the Holy Trinity seeking to be guided 'to the supreme height of mystical writings, which is beyond what is known, where the mysteries of theology, simple, unconditional, invariable, are laid bare in a darkness of silence beyond the light'.[444] The aim was to penetrate, "the darkness wherein He who is beyond all created things, makes his dwelling".[445] A purification of self was necessary for that ascent of the soul and Denys used the text of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai as an example. "It is necessary to denounce both sense and all the workings of reason, everything which may be known by the senses or the understanding, both that which is and all that is not, in order to be able to attain in perfect ignorance to union with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge".[446] As Gregory of Nyssa wrote, 'every concept of God is a simulacrum, a false likeness, an idol'.[447] What is left can only be described as an intuitive sensibility, borne out of the progressive refinement of the contemplation of God. "It is a great thing to speak of God, but better still to purify oneself for God" as Gregory of Nazianzen concluded it was, 'an existential attitude which involved the whole man/woman".[448]

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[442] (Louth 2008) p. 587
[443] Ibid p.588
[444] Ibid p.27
[445] Ibid p 27: Lossky is quoting from Denys's *Mystical Theology I, 3.*
[446] Ibid.p27
[447] Ibid.p.33
[448] Ibid.p.39

As dark needs light to define it, so for the mortal world, the apophatic needs the cataphatic, as well as the symbolism included in Denys's triad, (apophaticism, cataphaticism and symbolism). Those affirmations, with which we can praise God, are a necessary part of the journey toward the ultimate rejections of those affirmations, in that progression toward a deeper knowledge of God.[449] It has to be acknowledged that this ultimate ascension to ultimate apophaticism was, for many, only an aspiration and as all Christian writers acknowledged, was only granted to the few. As always though, it was the intent, the journey, the theoretical knowledge of the apophatic, borne out by Scripture, and bountiful writings, that engaged most laity. To emphasise the practical grappling with abstract ideas and their relationship to physical understanding, Louth quotes Lossky as writing, "This is why the revelation of the Holy Trinity, which is the summit of cataphatic theology, belongs also to apophatic theology". [450] That interface where man refines his words to make a 'reasoned' explanation for that which is inexplicable and beyond rational thought, yet needs some touchstone of reality. It also has to be added that, within the Orthodox, the Icon played its part in that subliminal transference between the two understandings. To what extent did those in the West, who acquired an Italianate version of the Icon, bring to it the mystical theology that was a part of <u>their</u> Christian practice one that had evolved from the twelfth century?

As a logical extension of the previous argument, the mortal nature of Christ and so by extension, the physicality of the mortal world entered into the dialogue. This idea so infused within the Orthodox, also had considerable relevance to the medieval Christian of the mid to late Middle Ages of Northern Europe, as noted in chapter one and will be further explored in the last chapter. It has, within the secular, scientific modern world, lost its wonder and it is difficult to recreate the spiritual understanding of that which was made by God. However, it is clear, from the work of *The Primaives*, that they were keenly aware of the divine significance of the physical world. There is an, almost obsessive description of the physical within Rogier's masterwork and in that of the whole *Primitive* movement, to the point that it could be claimed that their 'creation' was an act of devotion.

[449] (Louth 1981) p.168
[450] Ibid p.166

As a perspective on the pre-scientific world of Gregory of Nyssa, Lossky, writing on *Created Being,* has an illuminating passage on 'matter' that appears to answer the integration of the corporeal and the divine and hint at Resurrection. "All things exist in each other ... and all things mutually support each other, for there is a kind of transmuting power ... everything remains within its primordial limits".[451] There appears to be a holistic cosmology that circumnavigates scholastic reasoning, science or philosophy. The overriding emphasis is one of global physical and spiritual unity. It is the thinking that evolved from the Doctrine of Creation as being, *ex nihilo;* God created earth and the firmament from nothing, not from any manner of raw material but from absolute nothingness and was 'satisfied with the result', (Genesis 1:31).

Referring back to St. John of Damascus, Andrew Louth cites the latter' s references as contesting that humankind is a being that mediated between the extremes of creation, uniting the invisible and the spiritual to the visible and material; humankind is a being on the frontier, as it were, linking what is separate.[452] Nazianazen concluded, man was created, 'as a bond between visible and invisible nature'[453] and as such has a unique position within creation to understand his own position. This is further endorsed, by the argument of St. John of Damascus's belief, that in Old Testament times God could not be represented as He was invisible and incomprehensible but, 'under the New Covenant he had become human ... he had in fact, united himself with *matter.*'[454] The iconographers were very particular as to the reality of what was portrayed. That which was not perceived to be 'real' in human terms, such as God the Father, could not be portrayed. Similarly, anything that was conjured up by the imagination was consigned to idolatry. It is interesting to note, as referenced in chapter one, that the Chambers of Rhetoric of the Low Countries had a similar scrupulousness. This was because, for that which was real and made, in holiness, by God there was always the caveat that the physical image was not the prototype; was not in itself divine. St. John of Damascus wrote, 'I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter (God the Son), who became matter for my salvation ... I will not cease from reverencing matter' As Giakalis

[451] Ibid p.103-4
[452] (Louth 2002) p. 133
[453] Ibid p. 133
[454] (Louth 2002) p.102

asks, 'How does finite man reach up to the infinite God? The answer given by the Seventh Ecumenical Council is that material things filled with uncreated grace – can raise those who are worthy, the uneducated along with the learned, to intimacy with God.'[455] To John Damascene, the necessity of images, was that they were, ' a way of capturing for the human imagination a sense of the richness of God's manifestation and helping the heart to turn to God in praise, a praise ultimately expressed in the silence of prayer.'[456] Within the Eastern tradition, the prayers from that lived in, suffering, mortal world may look to and, if fortunate, find pleasure and beauty in God-created matter. In such prayer, they may also take their troubles to that same Incarnate Deity whom they know, by faith, has like them, 'suffered' mortality. Though not found within the formality of doctrine, Western Christians lifted their hearts and minds, in spirit, to the incarnate Christ, to the uncircumscribable Father, in companionship with the *matter* of the image.

The *Matter* of the Icon and of Rogier's *Descent,* is expressed with monumental facility and intellect. For the Icon it is the gathering of raw, earthly materials, the prescriptive physical and prayerful actions of its manufacture, the liturgical intent that imitates a God-like act of creativity which is embodied in its knowledge of the inseparability of its divine assumptions. So too with Rogier, the *Matter* he seeks to present, he does with a felicity to their nature: He does not seek to interpret, to indulge his own creative interpretation, he seeks to describe, as truthfully as he is able. In both, there is a perceptible respect for the *Matter* of God's creation, even where that matter has been wrought into fabrics and jewellery, stocking and shoes.

These were two parallel lines of thinking concerning the place of the religious image within Christian practice. That from the East had been rigorously defined and produced a rigid formula for the creation of and use of that image: It was designed to integrate the physical, Scriptural, dogmatic with the spiritual so that which was unfathomable was built into its being. The West was disorganised, free thinking, producing aesthetically good, often exquisitely wrought paintings as well as mediocre and often poor quality images that were of indeterminate value to the Christian. But when it was good, it could

[455] Ibid p.137
[456] (Louth 2002) p.27

be spectacularly good, free as it was to integrate its own understanding of the mystical Christ. Parallel lines never meet, but that depends from where they are viewed. The East never looked to the West but the West was always ready to learn and adapt and understandably, in adapting there were significantly different perspectives.

From Icon to Image to the Iconic

From a History of Art perspective, conclusions have generally been that, the influence of the Orthodox Icons on medieval Western religious art was dependent on 'Italio-Byzantine prototypes.'[457] The implication was that the motifs and sensibility which were adopted by Robert Campin, (Rogier's tutor) in his works, were done not directly from Icons, but with reference to Italian works which had themselves been influenced by the Byzantine Icon; the influence, therefore, being second-hand. But what of the genuine, the *bone fide* Icon, bought or pillaged from the East? How available were they and how were they interpreted by the *intellegentia* of the practicing art world in the late Middle Ages?

In his doctoral theses, Stanton Thomas argues that the influence of the Eastern Orthodox Icon was in fact direct on the artists of Northern Europe and he cites Robert Campin as being one such artist, despite loses of his work at the time of the Reformation and difficulties with attribution.[458] He presents evidence that Campin held such original Icons in his studio. It therefore follows that, by default, Rogier van der Weyden would have had daily access to them during his apprenticeship. And, as Thomas states, 'the apparent ease with which Van der Weyden adopted the icon into his own work suggests that he may have been following a tradition established by previous generations of painters such as his teacher Campin'[459]. We do, however, enter into a very grey area of proven influence, but it is important to record that Rogier did have access to original Greek Orthodox Icons, as well as western copies and other religious

[457] (Thomas 1998) p, 6
[458] (Thomas 1998) p.12 Thomas suggests that many of those which survived Western Iconoclasm came to be in the possession of religious houses.
[459] Ibid.p.26

works carrying the *greca* influence. In his tutor, Campin, he had an exceptional man, who, breaking the strictures of artisan painter limitations and the long established manner of painting, forged a new form of visual interpretation, one that could not have been won from parochial references. The circumstantial evidence is compelling.

I have briefly looked at two key elements within both traditions, the Icon and the work of *The Primatives,* the understanding of the dual nature of Christ with its acknowledgement of the super-natural nature of God and the importance to the medieval Christian of the physical world as created by God, albeit that they both followed a different evolution within their respective traditions. With both, there is a similarity yet a difference. What are, maybe of equal importance, are things less tangible within Rogier's work, things that are not initially appreciable. First, there is the linear nature of his, *Descent from the Cross,* which is significantly, more of the Icon, than it would at first appear to be. This is a particular marker of pre-Reformation works of art. As a tradition, this suited the new manner of oil painting but referenced the earlier tempera painting. All was planned with a high degree of accuracy; nothing left to chance. There was no allowance for a careless stroke of the brush or creativity once the design was secured. This gave the work strength, a power and a sense of authority. Secondly, there is the abstract nature of mortal time, inherent in the Icon that assisted in lifting the work into the spiritual.

One of the preliminary steps to 'writing' an Icon was the drawing of the outline of the image onto a pristine gesso panel: 'The image must be translated into precise lines. These lines would vary in thickness, defining the form with its subtle configurations and geometric patterns. The drawing is completely linear'.[460] So important is this 'line' that it was then incised with a sharp point, so that the linear motif is etched onto the surface of the panel. Commentators remark that, Rogier van der Weyden, 'was a draughtsman; Jan van Eyck was a painter'.[461] As Buck explains, Rogier emphasised the contours of his figures to such an extent and reached such a degree of expressivity that he earned the epitaph of 'draughtsman'.[462] 'And like the musician, the draughtsman phrases his

[460] (Ramos-Poqui 1990) p, 13
[461] (Buck 2009) p.146
[462] Ibid p 147

lines'.[463] Fra. Angelico wrote, "The intention of such style is to present the subject matter as calmed, disciplined by an unbroken outline and subdued to the surface".[464] The Greeks had written lyrically about 'the line'. 'The line partitions a form or "pattern" out of *apeiron,* formlessness, and makes it existent, essential". It creates being out of non-being. A line that circumscribes a point, at equal distance, creates a circle and with it considerable metaphysical speculation. Later in the century, Nicholas of Cusa (an absolute contemporary of Rogier) was to use his mathematics and the circle in his foray into mysticism and with its aid, come to the conclusion that apophaticism was neither dark nor incomprehensible.[465] For Rogier, however, his lines had a Gothic fluidity and grace as well as a complex tranquillity, giving the work a great sense of stillness and silence, comparable to the Icon: The silence of deep space – an *Iconic* silence.

That silence, draws us into the second, not immediately recognisable, attribute of Rogier's work that was, for the viewer, its relationship to mortal time. For those who regarded this work, with prayerful intent, to draw closer to the Christ portrayed, there was the stillness of 'stilled time'. 'For, "Whoever treats time like eternity and eternity like time, will be liberated from strife".[466] The Greek, Byzantine dual idea of time, that of *chronos* and *kairos* was compatible with the Icon. There was the quantitative *chronos* of temporal time in which it was viewed, in the context of the life of the viewer, and there was the more abstract notion of *kairos.* Kairos was not synchronized with linear time. It had no boundaries, with its particular value, out of all proportion to its relation to chronological time. It keyed into the cosmos. The sense of it is, that of a special time, that moment, the revelation, the 'intersection with eternity'.

How then may this ephemeral concept be described on the flat two dimensional plane? Does not the explicit rendering of the scene preclude its qualification for the transcendence of the *kairos*? Within the culture of the Icon, there was a realisation that there are moments that are pivotal, having occurred at a specific time and space, that break the boundaries of natural laws and continue to re-enact themselves within the

[463] (Rawson 1989) p.95
[464] Ibid p.97
[465] (De Certeau 1987)
[466] (Onasch and Schnieper 1997) p. 271

successive generations of chronological time. The monumental image of Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross,* treats the passage of time with contempt. It holds still, yet frees, the iconology to occupy the time and space required by the viewers, who bring their own *kairos.* What is depicted in Rogier's work is, 'a visual manifestation of The Word of God, a symbolic actualisation of the Gospel',[467] and one, like the Icon, one which defies time and space.

With the Icon, Christ, even though not figuring specifically within a particular Icon, he is central to its being, through definition. The protracted struggles with Christological understanding wound their way through the Middle Ages. Not only was the dialogue there to confound heresies but was to place the, 'personhood of Christ' at the centre of Christian understanding. Somehow the Immanence and the Transcendence of God had to be held simultaneously through vision and mental prayer. For John of Damascene, in the Incarnation, 'there is a "wonderful exchange" between God and humankind ... in which we gain the splendours of divinity.'[468] John of Damascus believed that the image was, "a way of capturing, for the human imagination a sense of the richness of God's manifestation and helping the heart to turn to God in praise".[469] While the West did not have the formal dogmatic arguments to legitimise the image within liturgy, there was a commonality of sentiment, East and West; the image, at its best, gave wordless grace to the fragile human heart.

For Rogier's *Descent,* while we could succumb to believing that the image was equally of Mary and Christ, I will argue that ultimately it is Christ and Christ alone who is central to the work and as such the image must, by definition, give access to both the human nature of Christ and his divinity. If there is a resonance of the theology of the Icon within Rogier's *Descent,* what was it that he was searching for? What was it that he found lacking in the contemporary interpretation of the 'mystery of Christ', as he created his masterwork? The most obvious answer is that western art did not have an authorised spirituality; it depicted 'religious' motifs and was decorative; it could be liberally creative and form a focus for attention and devotion but what it did not have

[467](Collins 2002) p.8
[468](Louth 2002) p.179
[469] (Giakalis 2005) p.118

was the established theological unity of the Scriptural and the spiritual – it did not aspire to the apophatic. But before it can be so dismissed there has to be considered the mystical theology in the West: Often wildly creative, even heterodox it did use the image in an unregulated manner. Mystical theology was integral to the Christian life and understanding of the laity in particular, the laity of artist and commissioners. Was it that Rogier was aiming to bridge that divide, maybe completely unconsciously and created a work in which, as in the Icon, held both the human and the divine nature of Christ in equilibrium?

How does Rogier, in his visual deliberations, fabricate his masterwork to create a balance? How is compassion saved from mutation into cold charity or stifling sentimentality? How does he maintain the integrity of the work? If we consider the figure of Christ alone, it has a pared down to an almost brutal simplicity. The thorns of the Crown are enlarged beyond reality and yet they have caused relatively little injury. The stigmatas drip elegant but minimal rivulets of blood with no co-lateral damage. The body is pale and perfect in the whiteness of its death. Those who mourn, do so with a searing, anguished control, their tears held in the animated suspension of time, while the Jewish prayer shawl flutters overhead – the only movement in the work. The 'Passion' of the work lies in the fact that Rogier, like Augustine, calls upon his public to complete the work. He offers a stunning portrayal of the grief of bereavement, of betrayal and brutality, parental loss and worldly injustice. He simultaneously offers a visual account of a passage from Scripture and a mystical experience. Once attuned to their own emotions they, the viewers, are then ready to move towards a spiritual engagement with He, "Who blossoms in beauty through/thy goodness more than all mortals, / appears now, as dead and without form, / He who is the jewel of the Cosmos".[470]

For Rogier van der Weyden, it cannot be said that any influence of the mystical theological perspective was wholly retrospective; he would have been challenged to avoid the multiple manifestations of, 'mystical theology' in his everyday Christian life. In the critical years before the installation of *The Descent,* the highly respected, Denys the Carthusian (1402-71) had begun his, *mystical* writings at the Carthusian monastery

[470] (Onasch and Schnieper 1997) p.113: A verse from an Orthodox hymn for Holy Thursday.

of Roermond (Dutch Limburg) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) had yet to discover Orthodox apophatic thinking and 'befriend' Denys the Areopagite.[471] Cusa was pursuing his career as an eminent political churchman. Both theologians were to be influenced by Denys the Areopagite and Jan van Ruusbroec, and there was some important thinking and texts to be written on the apophatic nature of theology. These two contemporaries of Rogier's were not in a position to influence him directly in the late 1420's but they illustrate the ongoing and very active exploratory nature of Christian life for many. Even for those not directly connected to the Beguines or the houses of the Devotio Moderna, the writings that formed the foundation of their philosophy permeated the wider community

In exploring the lives and work of the three theologians I have chosen, I am acting subjectively, as Schmidt concludes is the only way to proceed, in order to explore not only the mystical elements within their writings, particularly in relation to the laity, but also the accompanying use of the religious image and to access some of the spirit of their time; to place them in a degree of context with the painting and so, re-place, Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, not merely within the social and political culture of early 15th century Northern Europe, but within a continuity of Christian understanding since the beginning of the first millennium. I want to understand some of how that mystical spirit had evolved in conjunction with the faculty of physical and spiritual sight.

[471] Denys the Carthusian, only left the seclusion of the monastery twice during his lifetime. The first was in 1451 when he accompanied Nicholas of Cusa on a mission to reform the ailing German Churches

Chapter Four

From "Immanuel"[472] to a Local Curate: the complex provenance of Rogier's *Descent from the Cross*

"A man of sorrows, acquainted with suffering"[473] was how the laity of medieval Northern Europe knew their Christ. A phrase not originating after *Anno Domini,* but from the verses of Isaiah and the messianic prophesies of the Old Testament. Veldman sheds light on the vernacular translations available during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and their importance. [474] The Old Testament was a 'moral exempla', setting standards for rightful behaviour. Its 'stories' presented bountiful copy for illustrators, some little more than diagrammatic descriptions of events. But most important, in this context, is the authority it gave to the man they knew as Christ, their "man of sorrows" who was prefigured in so many Old Testament references: The man of whom was said, "And he shall be called, Wonderful Councillor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace".[475]

'Covenant' is seen as a constant theme within the Old Testament, that of entering into an agreement with God: Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, were each stages in the negotiations between Yaweh and his people,[476] with Jeremiah being the first to speak of the *New Covenant* to come[477]. Despite the almost obsessive focus on the Passion of Christ during the Middle Ages, The Old Testament was there as the bedrock for The New; it was part of the fabric of the whole, always present. And for Rogier van der

[472] Isaiah 7:14
[473] Isaiah 53:3
[474] (Veldman 1995) p.215
[475] Isaiah 9:6
[476] (Taylor 2001) p.217
[477] Jeremiah 31:31-33

Weyden, amongst many other artists, it gave an authority to their work, referencing the antiquity of that which they were endeavouring to express. They knew that, in the image of Christ, in whatever context, there was something older, of which he was a part, something at times wholly inexplicable. As the Jewish prayer shawl flutters above the dead Christ in Rogier's painting, it confirms man's long and complex 'covenant' with God. It is Rogier's acknowledgement that the death of Christ was part of antiquity, part of the history of humanity on earth, the door to that which is unfathomable and to which reference must be made.

It is only now, in the beginning of the new third millennium, that scholars are really beginning to make serious entry into the complexities of medieval religious, social and political life. As translations become available and context is created through research, it becomes easier to explore the inner reaches of a religious painting such as Rogier van der Weyden's. Gone are the days when it is acceptable to critique such a work solely through its superficial appearance. The ever abiding problem, however, is how to contain this vast body of information, how to select a thread of thinking that is relevant to the work in hand. Having looked at the physicality of the work, the question of Mary and the possibility of links to the East, with its theological integration of the image into liturgy, the work would not be complete without a closer look at the 'truly dominant theology' of Rogier's *Descent:* that Western Christian religious theory and practice, from the early second millennium to the day that the altarpiece was newly installed in the Chapel in Leuven, in 1435. There is a selection to be made, figures from whom a thread of thinking can be constructed but the selection will inevitably be subjective. With this caveat, I have chosen St. Anselm, St. Bonaventure and the Blessed Jan van Ruusbroec, as the theologians from whom I can most easily establish a thread of thinking, in relation to the religious culture that commissioned the painting.

Christianity in the civil life of the West made its own particular way through the Middle Ages, in response to the demands on the lives of its participants and their ambitions. Running parallel to the academic medieval Scholastic Movement of the secular universities, there was an enduring search for an understanding of God, manifest to man through the life of Jesus Christ, beyond Scripture and Church Dogma. There was

an aspiration to break the binds of mortality, to reach out, however fleetingly, to a union with God. It ran as a sub-text to the socio-political machinations of the Latin Church.

It was, however, surely not from the academic Scholastics that Rogier drew his inspiration for his *Descent from the Cross*, but from that deep river of thought and practice that had flowed since the time of the very early Church Fathers, albeit that the river had divided, to continue its course East and West. Was not much of what Rogier and his master Campin wondered at, held within the vernacular sub-text of the Middle Ages and glimpsed, however obliquely, through the Icons of Orthodoxy? Was it not, in part, the 'legacy of Western monasticism' (of the first millennium), as well as that ever widening stream of 'vernacular mysticism that informed those who played an active part in society? '[478] In the course of this western theological development, who were the theologians, who spoke with a contemporary voice, yet opened thoughts of perennial value to humbler mortals? Who were the men who saw a need for a resolution of contemporary failings and misunderstandings and attempted to address them, saw the need to go beyond the Scriptural Word and the authority of Catechism, to offer to every Christian a methodology for aspiring to reach the unknowability of God? Was not that thread, *The Flowering of Mysticism?*

No one who enters the world of medievalism goes there with the expectation of gaining a comprehensive understanding, of being able to confidently draw from what remains, to conjure a totally accurate interpretation; too much has been lost or was never recorded in the first place. In an attempt to add to the 'clothing' of the painting in its social and religious context I have, in introducing my theologians, added a note on the influences which I feel were most dominant in forming their Christian thinking and the particular circumstances that influenced their lives. In that way they do not live in a vacuum. Anselm may not be considered without his Benedictine Order, nor the ideals of its 'Rule'. What validity would there be in a reference to Bonaventure, without first considering St. Francis of Assisi, who dominated his life, even from birth and whose legacy he had to rationalise. And what sense could be made of Jan van Ruusbroec

[478] (Schufreider 1994) p.1

without the forerunning thinking of Meister Eckhart and the spiritual aspirations of the laity?

There are two important points to make for this last chapter. Firstly, I have formed it the way I have because I believe that to understand the inner reaches of Rogier's masterwork, it is necessary to look at how earlier religious thinkers reacted to the situations in which they found themselves. However, by necessity, that quest has had to be severely edited. St. Anselm was Archbishop of Canterbury, circa, three hundred years before Rogier's painting was commissioned. If we pause to ask, what were the predominant religious/intellectual influences in Europe some three hundred years before our current early twenty first century, a world dominated by the Enlightenment we realise though their texts rarely cross our path, the custom and practice they instigated remain: John Locke (1632-1704), the most influential Enlightenment thinker advocated the separation of Church and State, classless and gender equal education, social contracts, together with the origins of the American Constitution.[479] There are many strong intellectual threads that make their way through the Middle Ages, often criss-crossing politics and social matters. Within the limits of this short enquiry, it is a question of the strictest selection and choosing those that relate to one another and blend most appropriately with spirit of Rogier's intent; inevitably the choice is restrictive and subjective.

Secondly, there is the question of the image and the quest for the religious context of that image – Rogier's image. The whole consideration of the physical visual'picture', perceived with the faculty of sight and so valued by Ruusbroec,[480] is an image, interpreted by the mind; a debate that goes back to Plato and is one which expands exponentially. Denys Turner in his text, *The Darkness of God*, succinctly writes of how he understands it in the context of (Western) Christian mysticism[481] which is useful here. As he writes,

> 'We have seen that, for Augustine, the crucial point of division between "exteriority" and "interiority" lay in "imagination". A mind which sees the

[479] (Sharma,Urmila and Sharma S.K 2006) p.440
[480] (Ruusbroec,Jan van 1985) *The Spiritual Espousals,* Book One,p.43
[481] (Turner,Denys 1995)

> world and the self within "imagination" is living "outside" itself and in so far as it cannot raise itself above this level, the mind remains trapped within corporeal images of both God and the self.'[482]

'The achievement of "higher", more "inward" experiences, or both, acts by which the mind moves further inward to itself and then above its own source of Truth [that image which has been the focus for contemplation] are acts which liberate it from the limitedness of the corporeal image'.[483] Yet as he asks, 'is there not an unresolvable paradox in the fact that that whole process of transcending imagination has to be described in metaphors of inwardness and ascent?' This is because, 'such metaphors are themselves paradigmatically the products of imagination?'[484]

As he confirms, 'Imagination is, in a human, the faculty of 'experience', which in this particular case is the viewing of Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, in the context of the religious mind-set that had created it and viewed it. Turner questions the meaning of *imaginatio*, in this particular case an early 14th century meaning, which he contests, differs from that of later fourteenth century and our modern understanding.[485] Importantly that 'image', was for the viewer intent on a greater closeness to God, 'a step on a ladder which ultimately has to be thrown away'. This is why, the painting, *per se*, ultimately ceases to be the focus of attention, which is turned to the corpus of influences that provided for its commission and execution.

St. Anselm of Bec and Canterbury

It is to be wondered if, in his few solitary moments, Rogier van der Weyden ever considered how what he believed about Christianity had come about. Since the time of the great Schism between East and West of 1054, the West had made its own particular religious way, in responding to the political situations, its own dynamics and the challenges of war and adversity. Running parallel to the dominant Scholastic Movement

[482] Ibid p. 170
[483] Ibid p. 170
[484] Ibid p.170
[485] Ibid p. 171

of the secular universities, there was an enduring search for an understanding of God, manifest to man through Jesus Christ. There evolved an aspiration to break the binds of mortality, to reach, however fleetingly, to a union with God. It was a movement that ran as a sub-text to the socio-political machinations of the Latin Church, very often appearing to be unrestrained by its authority.

St. Anselm is important, in my quest for the religious context for Rogier's masterwork, for three reasons. Firstly there is his acclaimed position as 'the bridge between St. Augustine and St. Aquinas'. However, that is something of a misleading statement, as it focuses more on the post-Reformation interest in Anselm.[486] I will look briefly at the socio/political/theological importance of his later life and claim that he was more of an anchor than a bridge. Secondly, there is the considerable importance of Anselm's cenobitic monasticism, under The Rule of Benedict. To think of medieval monasticism, is to think of the medicant Franciscan and Dominican Orders, but as I will show, there is an important reference to the ethos of the Benedictines within the devout laity of the mid to late Middle Ages, which contained an holistic mysticism. Thirdly, there are the prayers of Anselm. His unrestrained, intimate outpouring of emotions toward God, Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary and his favourite Saints that broke the bounds of monastic walls and originated a personal relationship with deity; again this new found intimacy was to flourish amongst the people of the 'third order', as the Middle Ages progressed.

The 'Professional' Clerical Life of St. Anselm: "A Soul Contained in Slavery" and the Modest Benedictine

"Release my soul from this slavery," Anselm pleaded, as he reviewed his first five years as Archbishop of Canterbury.[487] To accede to the See of Canterbury would seem to be a prestigious appointment. For Anselm, however, it was a personal disaster. It took him away from the monastery at Bec in Normandy, from the rhythm of monastic life in which he flourished. It threw him into the world of William the Conqueror, *The*

[486] (Burnett 1992)
[487] (Southern 1990), p.228,note i

Bastard of Normandy, as he was know until history became more charitable. This young Duke of Normandy had made easy entry into Canterbury. The Danish raiders still plagued the East Coast of England and Canterbury Cathedral had been burned, with Archbishop Alphage murdered in 1011. Anselm, from his first accession to Canterbury, endured, and endured is the only way to describe how alien was his thinking to that of the Monarch and the ruling classes of England. In fact he had to endure two Norman Monarchs, one equally as bad as the last.[488]

The time of the early millennium was 'a period of great upheaval, of political and social change' in Europe.[489] 'The Papacy had to face perhaps the most difficult period of its history ... continuing antagonism between Rome and The Empire and the Princes of the Western world. It was a period when, in spite of the depravation of public morals noted everywhere, the supremacy of spiritual values started to engage, thanks to the reform movement coming from Bec';[490] there was an intense mental struggle against the earthly (Norman) kings.[491] In his defence of his faith and its authority, Anselm went into exile from England in the years, 1097-1100 and 1105-1107. "I do not fear exile nor poverty nor torture nor death, because my heart is ready to support all these troubles",[492] he wrote.

It was in this time of struggle in England that Anselm was to write his *Cur Deus homo* (completed in 1100). As he rested in the Abbey of Westminster in 1086, waiting to take up his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury, the weight of Bec had been taken off his hands. He was the guest of a former Bec monk, Gilbert Crispin, who had been brought to England by Lanfranc.[493] Aside from the tribulations of clerical life, there was a growing awareness within the clergy of serious questioning as to the validity of Christian claims; as Anselm wrote, "Many not only learned, but even

[488] (Anselm of Canterbury 1998) p.x Henry I on his accession was anxious to see Anselm return to England but he continued William's over-ruling of Papal power which again caused Anselm to leave the country, finally returning in 1106, a year before he died.
[489] (Coleman 1999) p.93
[490] Ibid p. 93
[491] Ibid p 121
[492] Ibid.p.121
[493] (Southern 1990) p.314f

illiterate men, who ask this question, require an answer".[494] As he was to write in his *Commendation of the work to Pope Urban II,* "No one deserves to be rebuked, if after becoming well-grounded in the faith, he has conceived a desire to exercise himself in the investigation of its logic."[495] Serious intellectual challenges came, as Southern says, from the secular schools and from the growing communities of Jews in Western Europe. There had even been a cluster of influential Christians who had converted to Judaism, the Bishop of Bari being the most prominent to fall.[496] This all became more poignant as Crispin had written, *Disputation with a Jew,* attempting to prove to the Jews, the necessity of the Incarnation.[497] Anselm himself had had to deal with the 'maverick logician' Roscelin of Compièrge and his challenge to *The Proslogion.* Nonetheless, Anselm's challenge to these assaults on Christianity was gladiatorial, albeit it was accomplished with the invaluable assistance of the monk Boso, whom he had summoned from Bec and with whom he conducted his 'Socratic' dialogue.

These were not happy years for Anselm. "Help me just and merciful God, whose light I seek, help me so that I may understand what I am saying,"[498] as he had written in his *Proslogion* and which continued to be his mantra. He had written much publically, in defence of his faith and its legitimacy, however critics of any age judge him. During those difficult years, he had played his part in the survival of his faith and as Southern remarks, in that survival 'there is the sign of a new and more hopeful age',[499] particularly for the Christian laity of Western Europe. It was the legacy of that defence, that the faithful of Leuven and Brussels were heirs to.

Whilst the public face of Anselm is historically important, in this context, what is equally relevant is that aspect of his life and work which emanated from his formative years and his rise to renown as Abbot at the Monastery at Bec. Newly founded in 1034, it adhered to, *The Rule of Benedict*. When Anselm arrived, the Abbot-founder was

[494] Ibid p. 197
[495] Ibid p.260
[496] Ibid p.119
[497] Ibid p.199
[498] (Anselm 1998) *Proslogion* 9, p.92
[499] (Southern 1990) p. 216

Herluin and the eminent, former secular lawyer, Lanfranc, its prior. The Italian Benedict of Nursia 480-543 came out of the solitude of eremitic monasticism to formulate a code of practice for cenobitic monasticism and is widely believed to be its founder in Western Europe. He felt himself to be, 'in solidarity with all humanity' and the need, 'to help them [those called to that path] to direct their steps towards the Infinite Love that alone can satisfy them'.[500] In the intervening years Benedict's Rule was honed into a monastic way of life which became the protector of the poor, tender of the sick, a centre of learning and scholarship, of horticulture and husbandry and the creative skills.

It is almost a travesty to consider the defining characteristics of the Benedictine Order separately as they were all integrated into one harmonious intent, albeit allowing for mortal frailties. In a life of *communism* they *worked,* they *loved,* and they *prayed.* And importantly each needs qualification. From the historical perspective of the late Middle Ages it is important to note that, The Rule of Benedict[501] was written originally for the 'laity'; men and women who desired to live and work in pursuit of 'harmony with the Gospels, in mutual interdependence with the ultimate goal of achieving closeness to The Absolute.[502] This has a pertinent resonance with the later medieval Devotio Moderna of the later Middle Ages. The original *Rules* had been written in low vernacular Latin, in line with the lay status of the communities, but they were eventually converted to clerical status by the Church, long before the time of Anselm. But, that was an imposition, not a part of 'The Rule'. The ethos of equality of status, mutual support and openness to all, remained the goal, regardless of whatever corrupting influences seeped in. The Abbot, the spiritual director must be "called by a title of Christ … *Abba,* Father". This paternal figure was "chosen for his virtuous life and wise teaching, even if he is last in order in his community".[503] "Though Abbot, he is a *fellow servant,* within the order, not presiding but orchestrating by fraternal relationship and co-operation". Rule 31:18 required that "No one may be upset or saddened in the household of God". Again, that same egalitarian sense of a mutually

[500] (Dreuille 2000) p.48
[501] The Rule to which adhered was that, allegedly found at the monastery of Monte Cristino by Charlemagne when it was being restored and on his instruction copied and distributed to all monastic orders
[502] (Benedict 1990) p,5
[503] Ibid Rule 64:12

supportive community was to be seen as the aspiration within the later medieval movements of lay piety.

Secondly, there is the duty of work, *ora et labor*, central to the community: "Truly they are monks, if they live by the work of their hands". Just as "no one should be upset or saddened, so too, "the brothers should serve one another … because through this service the reward of an increase in charity is obtained",[504] Work was the *communion* in which these orders of men lived. It was a meticulously ordered life but it did not demand debilitating asceticism. On the contrary, though the ethic of work was central to the culture of Benedictine life, Benedict himself realised, work was not possible without a sound, well fed body. There were two cooked meals a day, one with a little wine, six to eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. Physical work, the daily routine of *The Psalms* to be chanted, *Lectio Divina*, the Scriptures and the quality of 'silence' were harmonised to the seasons and the natural of rhythm of life. However it is the call to "labour with chaste love at the charity of the brotherhood"[505] that is an ancient commitment, not merely to ensure the self sufficiency of the monastery, but that it be regarded as a 'quest for a union with God, and manual work was for them an exercise of the *praktike*, that is the struggle against vices and a support for prayer'.[506] It is one which overcame the early Greco/Roman notion of the dishonour of physical labour. It was a leveller within a socially mixed order and it had been advocated by Anselm's posthumous mentor St. Augustine[507] as well as St. Benedict. Benedict cautioned, "Whenever you begin any good work, you must ask Christ with most urgent prayer, to bring it to conclusion".[508] It is no coincidence therefore, that when the laity of the Middle Ages sought to emulate the religious life within the growing urban areas of Northern Europe, not only the necessity, but also the sanctity of labour, was to be embraced.

[504] (Benedict 1990) Rule 48:8
[505] Ibid 72:8
[506] (Dreuille 2000) p.226
[507] Ibid p.234
[508] (Benedict 1990) The *Prologue*, Section Four

Anselm and the Fraternal *Love* within Koinonis is one of the most difficult aspects of the medieval 'mystical' writings, especially with the later women mystics and the often erotic nature of those writings, which gave generous copy to William James in his attack on Christian mysticism[509]: 'Love' was often wrapped in sexual connotations. It is with this in mind that Southern rejects the aspersions directed toward Anselm within his monastic life.[510] The love within a Benedictine community, as understood by St. Benedict was one of fraternal love. It was his ambition that the order should rest in such harmony that, 'All should be kind and tender-hearted to one another', Ephesians 4:32, and take up the Gospel challenge of St. John, with his new commandment John 15:12: 'Love one another as I have loved you'. "The Abbot was there to serve rather that preside, to hate the vices but to love the brethren, to strive to be more loved that feared" [511] The first Abbot Benedict had used the daily Psalms to quote Augustine's commentary on Ps 118, "As we progress in monastic observance and faith, our hearts are opened wide and, the way of God's commandments a vision of sweetness and love that is beyond words": Love added to degrees of spiritual progress, religious life and faith.[512] And from Psalm 33, he wrote, "What can be sweeter to us than the voice of The Lord as he invites us *dearest brothers*? See how in his loving mercy, The Lord points out to us the way of life ...This love announced by the prophets, surrounds and envelopes us and, even now, its presence is our reward". The *dearest brothers,* was Benedict's addition.

At its highest, altruistic perfection, the order was to strive toward loving, tolerant and caring relationships with all. "They should forestall one another in paying honour"[513] and "members [of the community] must blossom into fraternal love".[514] Koinonia was played out in all its definitions. For those whose life, often from childhood, progressed within the confines of the monastic community, it was inevitable that familial bonds of love would be formed, exceeding the demands of religious duty and, importantly, that those deep bonds of love should be extrapolated onto the God of

[509] (James 2002)
[510] (Southern 1990) p.38ff
[511] (Benedict 1990) Rule 64
[512] Ibid p.25
[513] Ibid Rule 8
[514] Ibid p. 359

their devotions. It is these relationships that feed the, often perplexing intensity of 'love' that threads its way through medieval writings and it is this multivalent love that is so tragically expressed by Rogier van der Weyden.

'Fides quaerens intellectum':[515] Anselm as the Prayerful Friend of God

'For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand,'[516] As McIntyre writes, we should never dismiss a man who prays as Anselm prayed ... who at times makes his theology a prayer.'[517] After fifteen years of 'silent thinking', Anselm set down the fruits of that silence and penned his *Monologion* (1075-76) and *Proslogion* (1077-78), which established his fame amongst his contemporaries. They would also offer the ontological proof that would eventually secure Anselm's place in the history of philosophy.[518] Contemporaneous with these two important texts were, Anselm's *Prayers and Meditation* (1070-75). It was these, along with the texts mentioned above, that brought him into the public domain, as he secured his legacy of ' contributing to the spiritual encounter with God';[519] he was serving the need not only of his brothers but those outside the monastic walls in their growing spiritual need. He was not a 'sermoniser'. His was the voice of the fellow pilgrim with his thoughts honed into the rhymed lyrical prose of the day.

Gemeinhardt believes that it is impossible to separate the philosophical Anselm from the man of prayer, anchored in the fraternal Benedictine community.[520] As he contends, 'The *Prayers and Meditations* are not simply devotional literature but reveal the theological agenda of their author, that is, the struggle to understand why man, who has been created in order to seek the face of God, has made himself unable to reach this goal – and how God is going to rescue him'. He quotes the late, Richard Southern's phrase,

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[515] (Anselm 1998), p, 87
[516] Ibid, *Proslogion*, Chapter I, p..87 This catchphrase was not take seriously by Anselm's contemporaries but was take up again the 13th and 14th centuries, but again more as an attention grasping phrase. Southern, p.134-5
[517] (Mcintyre 1954), p.3
[518] (Gemeinhardt 2010) p.58
[519] Ibid.p.59
[520] Ibid p.59

"Anselmian transformation" as referring to the new patterns of lay piety. By 'publishing' the prayers under his own name and advocating introspection as a way to understand the 'deplorable situation in which the sinner finds himself', he not only establishes a link between the monk and the layman but also between his philosophical thinking and Anselm the monk, the prior and subsequently Abbot, held within the ethos of Benedict.

Prayer was the labour of the Monks. It was their job to 'pray' on the Canonical Hours, with the entire Psalmody recited each week. To devote a life to God in the Benedictine manner, to be so wholly, body and spirit, intent on God there has to be a communion between the physical and that which cannot be defined – the mystical, the apophatic. In the context of mystical theology, Andrew Louth states that, 'Prayer was something done, rather than something thought about.'[521] It was the manner of prayer within this monastic life devoted to God, originating in the patristic period that made a special contribution to mystical theology; 'a life, above all devoted to prayer,' must inevitably seek to ascend to God.[522] Importantly, Louth points out how there was a mystical and an anti-mystical element to early monasticism, which was still present at Bec. There was the Platonic nurturing of the soul alongside the insistence that man is 'remote from God and in this world must live a life of repentance and ceaseless struggle against the powers of evil,'[523] manifesting itself in various forms of asceticism. There seems to be, within Anselm, a constant struggle to rationalise these two forces; harsh discipline toward the physical self and the guarded mind, as against the gentler mindful communion with the sacred, unfathomable and yet thoroughly familiar Christ. Benedicta Ward comments on how the tradition of 'prayerful meditation' and 'contemplative prayer' had their origins in Carolingian practice but without suggesting that Anselm used this as a precedent.[524] It was in the same way in which there was a natural 'mysticism' within monastic prayer and contemplation; complimentary and inter-dependant. As was often said, "Taste by reading, chew by understanding, swallow

[521] (Louth 1981), p. 98
[522] Ibid, p.98
[523] Ibid. p.98
[524] (Anselm 1973), p.42-3

by loving and rejoicing." [525] It was reminiscent, as Ward notes, of Origen when his prayers welled up spontaneously as he wrote his commentaries; 'akin to the medieval'.[526] Again, in the context of the Virgin Mary as explored in chapter two, Anselm combines his contemplation with prayer, in a very personal manner. Southern comments on Anselm that, in his prayerful contemplation, which included self-revelation and theological insight; 'he added the discipline of exact thought and the warmth of exuberant feeling to the religious impulses of his day.'[527]

So, justifiably, his *Monologion* and *Proslogion* are a form of prayer and should be considered within the body of his prayers and as part of his more tranquil earlier life. Within the walls of that tranquillity, he had time to engage in open dialogue with his monks. Talking was Anselm's 'life-blood;' Gundulf, Guilbert of Nugent, Eadmer and Gilbert Crispin, anyone who would listen and respond, breathed life into his soul and primed his mind for the Holy Spirit. This was to Lanfarnc anathema, contra to all precise authoritative texts and guidelines that guarded against error. Anselm bandied words around, tossed them hither and thither, left them to gather dust, re-found them and polished them to a sparkle. His openness, his expansive thinking, discarding Scripture and learned works, has a remarkably contemporary feel to it. Anselm, in his prologue to the *Monologion,* notes how 'my brethren,' requested that he should not disdain any ideas that were, 'down to earth' or even 'downright silly;'[528] in considering 'the divine essence and other related matters.'[529] He does, however, ask not to be regarded as an, 'arrogant modernizer'[530] by his readers. When eventually the work came into the public domain, there was nothing to match it. Stripped of authority it was, albeit deceptively sophisticated, a very personal *avant garde* meditation on God.

In considering Anselm's, advanced form of prayer (meditation), his 'essence-detecting, God-directed, introspection of the *Monologion* and *Proslogion',* Southern defines the one as, 'a recollection of past sins,' the second as a, ' recall of the soul's

[525] Ibid,p.44
[526] Ibid, p.44
[527] (Southern 1990), p.99
[528] (Anselm 1998), p.5
[529] Ibid, p.118
[530] Ibid, p.6

intuitive knowledge of real 'essences', without which there can be no intellectual approach to God;'[531] an important point when I come to consider Ruusbroec. In embarking on this complex regime, Anselm is faced with two difficulties. First, is to what extent can meditation (on divine matters), be held solely within the realm of reason? Secondly, how far may meditation be allowed to travel before it runs foul of the authoritative declarations of the Church?[532] The logical conclusion should be that the *Monologion* must either make faith unnecessary, (lapse into philosophy) or reveal some truths that are not accessible via 'authoritative statements of faith';[533] For Anselm, to not believe or even to waver in belief, was beyond his comprehension. As he wrote, almost simplistically, 'Do as your Godparents have promised on your behalf, believe': The enigmatic, *fides quaerem intellectum,* envelopes the whole conundrum.

Within the *Monologion*, there is the opportunity, for anyone willing and able, to follow Anselm's arguments, to ascend to the highest humanly attainable level of experience of God. But this was not achieved without a systematic laboured intent. As so often, there is the phased elevation, 'the rising up the ladder.' The first and pre-requisite condition is the obedience to the belief sworn by god-parents. The second is, given adherence to the godly life, the enquiry and 'reasoning' as carried out in the text; the willingness to address the basic tenets of Christian belief with mindful understanding and questioning; these stages could be conducted by anyone. It was however, only in the final stage of complete abandonment to God, (the 'supreme essence') that there were demanding conditions, only then achieved within seclusion from the worldly life, the abandonment of self that the monastery offered. Added to that is the strong council 'to love'.[534] It may be that *The Monologion* was but an Augustine inspired text on the 'qualities of God' but it can also be seen as a courageous text, set to liberate the individual from the impersonal routine of church practice, to offer the liberty to think creatively and with reason, in an exploration of the divine essence of Anselm's very personal God.

[531] (Southern 1990), p. 121-2
[532] Ibid, p.122
[533]Ibid, p.123
[534] Ibid, p. 124

‘Come now, insignificant man, / turn aside for a while from your daily employment, / escape for a moment from the tumult of your thoughts ... Say to God, / “I seek your face, / Lord, it is your face I seek”.[535] Anselm’s self-imposed task of answering, to himself, the thoughts he has raised in the *Monologion,* became a significant trial for him; according to Eadmer. They cost him his appetite and his sleep. They even caused him to neglect some of his monastic duties until one night at prayer in 1077, “The Grace of God shone on his heart”;[536] he had the inspiration as to how to formulate his *Proslogion*, his colloquy. He needed to, “try to prove by the things that are believed and preached about God – that he is eternal, unchangeable, omnipotent, incomprehensible, just, merciful and righteous.”[537]

St. Anselm was poised to reveal to himself what God was really like. Augustine was left behind. This was a solo flight: “Lord, it is thy face I seek”.[538] And with a child-like simplicity he asks, ‘But you are everywhere, so you must be here;’[539] ‘What shall your servant do?’[540] In the early part of his *Proslogion,* Anselm engages in prayerful contemplation as to how someone may set their mind aright in order, with faith and love, to understand what they believe. He conducts a lyrical preamble through, ‘withdrawal, self knowledge and compunction,’[541] Towards the end of the first chapter he admits, ‘I am not trying to make my way to your height/for my understanding is no way equal to that.’[542] And in conclusion he adds, one of his most well known statements, ‘I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, / but I believe so that I may understand.’ To this he adds the rider, ‘And what is more, / I believe that unless I do believe, I shall not understand.’[543] The understanding that Anselm, after protracted effort, arrived at, ‘proof that the essences of Goodness, Truth, Justice etc., which he had shown in the *Monologion* to be the necessary attributes of God,’[544] could be shown to dwell in one Being and that Being , ‘properly understood, cannot be thought of as non-

[535] Ibid, p 239
[536] (Southern 1990), p.116
[537] Ibid, p.116
[538] (Anselm 1973), p. 239. Chapter I, line 14
[539] Ibid, p. 240.Chapter I, line 20
[540] Ibid, Chapter I, line 33
[541] (Anselm 1973), p.79
[542] Proslogion, Line 150/51
[543] Ibid, Line,
[544] (Southern 1990), p. 128

existent.' As he wrote, 'we believe that you are that thing than which no greater can be thought.' [545] What has become known as Anselm's famous 'ontological argument' is the 'only general, non-technical philosophical argument discovered in the middle ages which has survived to excite the interest of philosophers,'[546] who would normally pass over the era. Having made the definitive statement, it was the nature of those qualities of God that Anselm then set out to explore, not using the language of the philosopher or systematic theologian but that same language he used to talk to those around him.

Contrasting the fool's disbelief with his own 'illumination', Anselm uses a double negation to emphasise the gift he has been given; 'If I did not want to believe that you existed, still I should not be able not to understand it;'[547] in order to deny God, the fool has to have some notion of what God is. Anselm continues as he asks, 'How can God be perceived, though he is not a body',[548] 'How is he omnipotent, though there are many things he cannot do',[549] and how can he be compassionate and yet beyond passion?[550] He scours his imagination for all the ambiguities that arise in the contemplation of God; his timelessness, the 'light inaccessible in which he dwells', in 'neither place nor time'. He gathers up all the apophatic negations he can muster. Finally he indulges in a little uncharacteristic and innocent speculation as to what awaits those who rise to the challenge, with a litany of benefits; 'Of the good that belongs to those who enjoy it, and how great it is.'[551] He continued, "If beauty delights you, the just shall shine as the sun", and amongst all the other delights ... If it is melody, there the choirs of angels sing together unceasingly before God.'[552] His is at once a profound, 'philosophical and theological argument ',[553] in defence of the existence of God and at the same time an intensely personal and animated devotional work.

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[545] *Proslogion,* Chapter II, line 160f Robert Southern, comments on the similarity to a phrase used by Seneca in his *Questiones Naturales,* a copy of which was held in the library at Bec. See, Southern, p. 129
[546] (Southern 1990), p. 128
[547] *Proslogion,* [547] Ibid, p. 240.Chapter I, line 20
Chapter 4, line 229f
[548] Ibid, Chapter 6, Title
[549] Ibid, Chapter 7, Title
[550] Ibid, Chapter 8, Title
[551] Ibid, Chapter 25, Title. p.263
[552] Ibid p.264
[553] (Anselm 1998), p. xiv

Anselm was, for all his shortcomings, widely regarded as a man who had a special relationship with God, one who may still be regarded in any personal struggle with one's own spirituality. He may not have been responsible for the growing sense of familiarity and affection with which Christ, the Holy Family and a litany of Saints as they were regarded in the coming Middle Ages, but, 'it could be said that the dialectic he fathered and the affective devotion he developed changed the whole atmosphere of Western spirituality for the rest of the Middle Ages and beyond.'[554] Within his work, the laity was drawn into the monastic world and monasticism flowed out to support the faithful. His prayers, so deceptively homely, sadly spawned a plethora of imitations which lapsed, as can so easily happen, into flaccid thinking and sentimentality; the originals were only extricated from the work of followers in the last century.[555]

The prayers that have been defined as definitively by Anselm, came from the tradition that had arisen during the previous two centuries amongst the lay people, particularly the aristocracy, in seeking prayers for personal devotion from the monastic orders.[556] Their intent was to emulate the manner in which the religious orders 'sanctified the whole day'. The core of such devotion was the *Psalter.* However, as we have seen from the prayers to Mary, Anselm broke the bounds of Scriptural constraints, to engage in a very personal dialogue with God. One of his most prestigious patrons was Princess Adalaide, daughter of William I, who lived with her own household near the Abbey of Bec as was Mathilda of Tuscany. Mathilda was mainly responsible for the distribution of his writings. As a preface to his *Prayers and Meditations,* he wrote to Mathilda, 'They are arranged so that by reading them the mind may be stirred up either to the love or fear of God...they should not be read cursorily or quickly, but little by little, with attentive and deep meditation.'[557] His *Prayer to God* expands 'The Lord's Prayer'. Anselm asks, 'Give me heart-piercing goodness and humility.' However the dominant focus is on Christ, even within his numerous prayers to the saints and to

[554] (Anselm 1973), p. 81
[555] Ibid, p.14
[556] Ibid.p.36
[557] Ibid, p.90

Mary.[558] They do so within the context of that eleventh century rise in popular attention to the life of Jesus and his Passion.

'Anselm's *Prayer to Christ,* is one of the great compositions in this tradition.'[559] 'Lord Jesus Christ', he begins. There is no fear or austerity of lord and servant. There is an unconstrained outpouring of loving passion to the suffering Christ. After acknowledging his own human frailty to the, 'gentle Lord', Anselm moves on to the Passion of Christ, re-enacted with powerful, lyrical empathy the detailed suffering. Why could he, Anselm, not have been there with 'my most merciful Lady', and 'with happy Joseph'? 'Let me be fed with grief /and let my tears be my drink; /comfort me with sorrows'.[560] The public intimacy with which Anselm addresses the Second Person of the Trinity, the dwelling on the minutiae of the Passion with its plea for communion with Jesus Christ, 'are not of the earlier *Vexilla Regis* or the *Christus Victor*.[561] The prayers of Anselm, above all else he wrote, foretell of what is to come. They are the stirrings of the widespread lay piety of medieval Northern Europe, of the important Beguine women, the Third Order of Franciscans and of the *Devotio Moderna* and *Imitatio Christi*; they are the infant 'soul' food of medieval mysticism and an under-painting to Rogier's dead Jesus Christ.

But sadly, all was not well within early medieval Benedictine monasticism, even within Anselm's time, as may be seen from the life of Lanfranc. As chief advisor to the conquering William I, his acquisitiveness lead him to be dubbed, "The Cheshire Cat of of the Norman Conquest",[562] Also, to justify William's violent annexation of England, 'he manipulated Canon Law, to define his violent conquest as an act of piety'.[563] From being, 'the highest order of Christian Society, in the new world (that was developing in those late first and early second millennial years), the Benedictines began to look

[558] Ibid, p.38f Benedicta Ward writes of how, during the Arian controversy when there was an over-emphasis on the Second Person of the Trinity. 'The Council of Carthage decreed tn 397 that prayers directed to Christ were not applicable in the Liturgy and so at the altar they were always directed to the Father. It was in private devotions that there arose a persistent tradition of prayers directly to Jesus Christ or through meditations on the saints. This flowered particularly throughout the middle ages.
[559] Ibid, p. 39
[560] Ibid, p.93
[561] Ibid, p. 59
[562] (Rex 2012) p.71
[563] Ibid p.72

compromised, less than perfect in every respect'.[564] Bernard of Clairvaux was to later comment on the order for, "their tortured preparation of food, aromatic wines, stylish clothes and lavishly built churches".[565] So it is that leaving behind the legacy of St. Anselm, there is a need to look to the later wave of monasticism, the mendicant orders and in particularly, The Franciscans, owing their being and success to St. Francis of Assisi and St. Bonaventure respectively.

On Leaving St. Anselm

In his introduction to his text on St. Anselm, Gregory Schufreider notes that in occupying the historical position between St. Augustine and St. Aquinas he is considered, in the modern world, in terms of what his thinking lead to, and that thinking is one that has been dominated by St. Aquinas.[566] As he argues, by reversing our thought processes and asking what was the thinking to which he was heir and what were the situations to which he responded during his life, we develop an alternative perspective, one that is more appropriate for the present context. 'There can be no doubt that Anselm is first and foremost successor to the legacy of monasticism, as well as to a certain mysticism that is characteristic of medieval thought.'[567] And Schufreider adds, 'certain thoughts make their best sense in relation not only to the historical situation but also to their topological location'.[568]

Firstly, it could be said that the importance of St. Anselm lies within the perspective of the wandering scholar who settled in the French Benedictine monastery of Bec, for the French influence is pertinent to Rogier van der Weyden and the Burgundian Court of the later Middle Ages. His early writings, the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, together with his *Prayers and Meditations,* are personal, 'intensely contemplational'. Those writings 'trade on what might be called the metaphysics of the monastery, as their philosophical theology is expressly designed to assist the monks in the practice of

[564] (Engen. 1986) p. 269
[565] (Constable 1976) p.41
[566] (Schufreider 1994) p.1
[567] Ibid p.1
[568] Ibid p.2

contemplation'[569] and as such, are idealistically Benedictine; the cenobitic monasticism of Benedict, with its origins in St. Pachomius (d.346).[570] His biographer, Eadmer's accounts of Anselm reflect the spirit of *koinonia* in his daily life, without which his writings cannot be fully appreciated. But it was not only the spiritual aspect of that monastic life but the balance with the mortal, practical life, cognisant of God's created world that was to be continuing thread up to the lay piety of the l400's, the piety that commissioned, created and valued, *The Descent from the Cross.*

"Many not only learned, but even illiterate men ... require an answer", Anselm had acknowledged in the commendation of his text, C*ur Deus Homo,* to Pope Urban II. In those words, he confirms his concern for the faith amongst the laity, particularly at a time when both the monastic orders and Christianity itself, were under threat from secular domination. Matthew Mills argues that there is evidence of affective piety in pre Norman England, centred on the crucified Christ and widely illustrated in the popular *Books of the Hours*,[571] books which would have been similarly available in Normandy, at a time when Anselm was writing his *Prayers and Meditations.* The status and authority Anselm gave to such personal piety endorsed the journey it was to make from the confines of the cloister to the wider world of everyday life. That thread of affective piety continued and developed, amongst the laity, up until the late 1400's; up until the Reformation.

Lastly, there is the importance of Anselm as the international figure he became, when The See of Canterbury was thrust upon him. Would he have written his *Cur Deus Homo,* had he remained within the sanctuary of Bec? Would he have, so forcefully, defended the Western position on the filoque at the Council of Bari, in 1098, when he so firmly rejected the Eastern understanding of the Trinity, so not only ending any hope of the imminent healing the Schism of 1054 but defining the western understanding of the Trinity? Would he have so determinedly defended papal authority had it not been so flagrantly challenged by the Norman Kings, nor risen to the challenge of nurturing his faith through such difficult circumstances?

[569] Ibid.p.3
[570] (de Dreuille, Mayeul 2000) p.37
[571] (Mills,Matthew 1916)

The legacy of St. Anselm did, nor does, reside solely within University or Monastic libraries. As Van notes, amongst all the recommended readings for the laity of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, 'Bernard and Anselm counted as fathers'.[572] With all the challenges his long life presented him, and for all the circumstantial interpretations of his work, he 'determinedly created his own particular image of God'.[573] Was it not one which had a particular resonance with the devout of Northern Europe, with the congregation of Leuven, Chapel of Our Lady Outside the Walls, and the ambitious young painter who created his own image of the Christ crucified?

St. Bonaventure, the Faithful Franciscan

The demands of both the secular and the religious cannot be more poignant than within the life and works of St. Bonaventure, b 1217. So frequently, within writings on him, the phenomenon of St. Francis is, 'cleaned up' to the point of dismissal,[574] but Francis cannot be legitimately excluded from his life and work. Despite his early *Sentences on Lombard,* at the University of Paris, marking him out as a man of academic excellence, life had another calling for him, when he was summoned by his Order of Franciscans, to take its charge. As a Franciscan and with this onerous responsibility thrust upon him, his writings had inevitably to embrace the phenomenon of Francis, to manage the various interpretations of that life and harness its impact on the wider Christian community. As an order, they were to play an outstandingly successful role in bringing Christianity to the un-churched poor and the growing urban communities, whom the official clergy had ignored. As Oakley wrote, 'Through their example, spiritual direction, popular preaching, and [the introduction of] The Third Order, which opened, even to lay people, a life of penitential dedication, the order made themselves a vital spiritual force everywhere in Europe, until well into the fourteenth

[572] (Van Engen,John 2008) p.227
[573] (Schufreider, Gregory 1994) p.300
[574] (Turner 2005) Turners essay on the twenty first century reading of religious texts within academia is relevant here

century' [575] Even later, prior to the Reformation and during a period of Church decay, they remained vital in the *affective piety* of the laity.[576] The fount of that influence was St. Francis firstly and then St. Bonaventure who managed the former's dramatic life and excesses into a comprehensible harmony, as harmonious as such contentious material could be, within the then contemporary academic thinking and the social realities and religious ambitions of the laity.

For the above reason, I will, within the corpus of Bonaventure's work, use his *Itinerarium in mentis Deum,* a 'meditation' on the vision of St. Francis and his reception of the stigmata, for four important reasons, in relation to Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross.* Firstly, there is his *Franciscan,* interpretation of Francis's mystical nature theology; how he embraced creation as a manifestation of the presence of God.[577] Although it may lead to charges of pantheism, it brought a greater appreciation of the wider world, to its own homocentricity. Secondly, there is the focus on the broken body of Christ as being central to any mental ascension to God, as in a *mystical ascent.* Thirdly, there is the question of the nature of God, his absolute incomprehensibility and how He may only be accessed as the pinnacle to any spiritual, mental ascent; his incircumscribable, unutterable darkness. And lastly there is the mysterious understanding of the composition of and working mode of God in Trinity; 'God the Father, the Son His Word and the Holy Spirit that is Love'. 'The stigmatization [of the body of Francis] ... is not only the inspiration for the *Itinerarium,* but also the model of the mystical union portrayed in the work':[578] Bonaventure's thinking changed what was a disconcertingly brutal self abnegation, into a working model for understanding what Anselm had asked, *Cur Deus homo?* It added to that, the bones of a practical course of engagement with Christ, with the promise of a more available, communion with God, in his impenetrable darkness. For this Pope Leo XIII titled Bonaventure, 'The Prince of Mystics'

[575] (Oakely 1988) p.181
[576] Ibid. p.181
[577] This is often confused with pantheism, but the enquiry into that is a long and different one.
[578] (Bonaventure 1993) p.42 note 11

'Praise be to you, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun.' *The Canticle of Brother Sun,* was written by Saint Francis of Assisi some ten months after he had received the stigmata on Mount Alverna. That he was painfully blind and suffering greatly with his self-induced infirmities while plagued by a troop of mice inhabiting his cell,[579] still resonates. From his frugal sickbed Francis embraced not only the *celestial* light of the Sun but reached out into the Cosmos and drew down *Sister Moon and the Stars,* as companion for *Mother Earth's* elements, *Water, Wind and Fire,* together with *various fruits with coloured flowers and Herbs;* a veritable ode of, 'gratitude, love and joy,' to a 'wholly other' *mysterium.* From a secular perspective, as G.K.Chesterton concluded, in his thesis on Francis, 'the coming of Francis was like the birth of a child in a dark house, and that child, 'brought a freshness to the world'.'[580] Francis brought down to earth the 'mystery' of the cosmos, as companion to his contemplation of its Creator. He was, 'A wandering fire, as if from nowhere, at which men more material, could light both touches and taper. He was the soul of medieval civilisation before it even found a body.'[581]

To consider Francis is to first accept his passionate, seemingly insane love of the Second Person of the Trinity, within that Trinity, and his relationship with the natural world. Neither, are as they have superficially come down to us. Francis's relationship with 'nature' was his accepting it not only for its beauty, but for its brutality; Brother Wolf and Brother Fire.[582] In contravention of Genesis, 1:28, Francis did not seek to, 'subdue' or have 'dominion.' His most important biographer, Bonaventure, recounts at length, the love Francis felt for the non-human world, particularly the Lamb: 'Oftimes he would buy back lambs that were taken to be killed, in remembrance of that most gentle Lamb who brooked to be brought unto slaughter for the redemption of sinners.' [583] 'When he bethought him, of the first beginning of all things, he was filled with yet more overflowing charity, and would call the dumb animals, however small, by the

[579] (Cousins 1981) p.81
[580] (Chesterton 2001) p.178
[581] Ibid.p.184
[582] (Ayres 1990) p. 245
[583] (Bonaventure 1904) *The Life of Francis of Assisi* Chapter VIII, section 6

names of brother and sister ... he recognised in them the same origin as in himself.'[584] From the many accounts, Francis is portrayed as having God-like power, for he 'conquered wild beasts, tamed woodland creatures and taught tame ones.'[585] But, 'In his overwhelming sense of unworthiness which progresses to a belief of his place in the Divine plan, his is not a cosy view of the natural world. The dark sense of his deep involvement with the natural world with its extremes and his obsessive asceticism drove him to "Sister Death" at the age of forty five.' There can be no platitudes for the presence of God in the fickle complexity of nature. Francis, 'for all his dark self abasement, did, in his journeying impress with his good works and his holiness', as Bonaventure endorsed. The prevailing sentiment regarding Francis, in the last paragraph of his biography of Francis, a biography which was his first text to set into some order that exceptional life: 'For the blind and the deaf, the dumb and the lame, the dropsical and the paralysed, the possessed and the leper, the shipwrecked and the captive, have found succour by his merits, and in all diseases, needs and perils he hath been an aid.'[586] And Bonaventure ends with the endorsement of his miraculous powers, 'in that many dead have been miraculously raised through him, there is made manifest unto the faithful the glorious working of the power of the Most High.'[587] The once in a civilisation, advent of Francis left a legacy, an empathy that has, to some small degree, has carried forward to our own, irrational over-rationalised secularism. Without thoughtful reason, he has come down to those whose modern paths he crosses, as a kind, wise and 'holy man,' a sentimental 'lover of animals', thereby denying the historical importance of his influence and the fact that Franciscan monasteries, with their varying interpretations of Francis, still exist globally.

This beneficent portrayal of Francis, can never however, gloss over the darkness of his life. Francis's call to asceticism drew him beyond merely the denial of sustenance and bodily comfort, but into what he saw as the centre of his relationship with God, into matching the suffering, broken body of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. This was, in the end, his sole intent. Believing what God was demanding of him, he

[584] Ibid Chapter VIII, section 6.
[585] Ibid. section 11.
[586] Ibid Chapter XV Paragraph 7
[587] (Bonaventure 1904) Chapter XV, section 9.

adopted a, 'foolishness ... a lack of self-concern and self-awareness necessary to feel God.'[588] He prayed to be given more. He persisted, until on Monte Alverna in September of 1224, [589] he was 'rewarded' with a Seraphic vision of Christ and the bestowal of His physical wounds on his own frail body. This, for Francis could be said to be the pinnacle of his life. As Dante wrote, 'he received from Christ the last seal which his members bore for two years.'[590] As he continued, 'He that had destined him so much good was pleased to take him up to the reward he had won by making himself lowly to his brothers' The physical toll of sustaining five open wounds, to his already damaged body, hastened his death. God had demanded of Francis and God had given. Francis had demanded of himself, a spiritual union with Christ, played out in the emulation of the broken body of Christ.

Praise to you, my Lord, with all your creatures;'[591] A Franciscan Prayer, the powerful text of Francis's *Canticle to the Sun,* was a text of 'nature mysticism' from which no Franciscan could escape. The deceptive simplicity of the verse belies the complexity of its genesis. St. Francis, 'experiences a union of himself with nature that is unique in Christian history, so much so that he has emerged as the classical example of a nature mystic among Christian saint.'[592] Cousins, considers Francis to be 'thoroughly confrontational'. 'There was always a clear demarcation between himself, in the phenomenal world, and his 'God as Creator and Lord.' This is a significant marker for understanding him and later Bonaventure's approach to creation. In Francis's encounter there is no fear, there is only love and joy. 'Feeling united through creatures, Francis moves through the external world to God, not through the depths of his soul;'[593] His is not the interior mental searching within the cloistered life. He gathered up, with his all-encompassing inclusiveness, specks of God's creation and there, at the centre of it all, is

[588] (Ayres 1990) p.250
[589] (McGinn 1998) p.61
[590] (Dante 1961) Canto XI verses 96-102
[591] Francis's *Canticle to Brother Son,* line 5
[592] (Cousins 1981) p. 5
[593] Ibid p. 76 Cousins quotes Rudolf Otto

Christ. 'Francis's devotion to Jesus of Nazareth, the individual, opened up a new perspective on the unique perspective of the person.'[594]

The, 'complex path' Francis walked toward, 'self understanding and subsequent abandonment of "self" to Christ, meant that he saw his way not in a withdrawal from creation, but in the world around him.[595] Aside from his empathetic charity toward the suffering human, he saw in his simplification that, 'the words of Christ can come alive, each animal receives equal status, each is addressed in simplicity, as brother and sister': a simplicity that must 'be lived.' 'This is not a statement of "cosmic democracy", it is an act of salvation, indicating, revealing and creating a way forward.' And so it is that, 'each animal, each part of creation, is of the same worth as Francis: all equally accorded a place in God's plan.'[596] And this is the truly innovative, liberating approach from Francis. But most importantly, Francis, his fellow man, the natural world and the greater cosmos are not God. It was the manner in which this relationship did not lie as a simplistic reflection of the munificence of God, but moved, with intuitive spirituality in Francis, and intellectually and metaphysically in Bonaventure, toward an innovative formulation of a 'Franciscanised, mystical tradition',[597] that was to make a substantial contribution to lay piety and its spiritual ambitions.

The unexpected escalation of the number of men seeking to follow in the steps of Francis,[598] together with dispute amongst these men as to their definition of poverty, and how best to follow Francis, caused much discomfort within the Curia. What were they to do with this growing band of brothers whose self abnegation reduced their worldly possessions to a rough brown habit and a chord, tied in the manner of the cross and the ambition to follow, physically and spiritually, in the steps of Francis? Francis's uncalculated spiritual intensity did not wear the clothes of dogma. It beheld and donned the mystical cloak of Christ, with an intense love to follow and to enter close. Without

[594] (Delio 1999), p. 228
[595] (Ayres 1990) p.251
[596] Ibid.p.251
[597] (Cousins 1981) p.93
[598] (Cullen 2005) p .6.By the time of the death of Francis there were calculated to be five thousand friars in France alone.

church or cloister, without books or education, they looked to the natural world and their fellow humans in worshiping God. Christ on the Cross was their book, their prayer was that taught in the Gospel, the Lord's Prayer, praise was through the visual world with its beauty and its pain and the object of their veneration, the Eucharist.[599]

Problematically, for Church authorities, Francis had over-stepped the accepted order, in his last instructions to the brothers. *The Testament* he left them was, to be read simply [rather than being subjected to theological analysis] and maintained without glosses.[600] This authoritarianism from, even a potential saint, was unacceptable to Rome. Pope Gregory IX refuted the authority of Francis in his papal bull, *Quo elongati* of 1230.[601] This distressed the Spiritualists, who would follow Francis, verbatim. Others, more pragmatic, realised that such an intensely motivated band of men needed management. A man of high calibre was required, so in their wisdom, the brothers called on their most illustrious man, and invited, or maybe charged Bonaventure to accept the role of Minister of the *Friars Minor.* So successfully did he engage with his brief that he became known as The Second Founder of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor.[602]

Within 'Franciscanism', Bonaventure saw and was able to formalise and expound the revolutionary notions bequeathed him. Not only through his status within the new University of Paris but also through his own avowed religious life, inspired by Francis, Bonaventure sought to control, to some extent, the bush fire of wild liberating force that raged. The circumstances of the day, together with his perceptive management, had far reaching consequences for one of the most successful medicant religious orders of the Middle Ages and for the gathering urban communities; 'effective pastoral care' in the years 1179-1215.[603] This translated into a new manner of communication, of presentation by the clergy and comprehension by the people. Bernard McGinn summarises the changes under three headings, the relationship between the world and

[599]Father Fergus McEveley OFM: in conversation. 2016
[600] (McGinn 1998) p. 71-2
[601] Ibid.p.72
[602] (McGinn 1998) p. 74
[603] (McGinn 1998) p. 9ff: McGinn in tracing the origins of the formal introduction of negative theology within pastoral care, cites the efforts of Pope Innocent III and Pope Alexander III. Their efforts were concerned with the infiltration of heretical ideas into Christianity from Islam.

the cloister so that a deeper personal aspiration to engage with God was not confined within religious walls, the inclusiveness of gender in this effort, allowing the many women mystics to flourish and the language created to accommodate the new sensitivities to the spiritual.[604] And this manner of communication was retained and developed up until the early fifteenth century when Rogier finalised his masterwork, which Eris Auerbach refers to as, the *sermo humilis.*[605] Despite the notoriously difficult to classify, vernacular theology, there was a unifying sense of purpose between the social classes; 'an entirely new kind of sublimity, in which the everyday and the low were included, not excluded, so that, in style as in content, it directly connected the lowest with the highest.[606]

It is difficult to accept the intensity of the influence Francis had on this eminent scholar of the secular university of Paris, a man of renowned intellect. But two years into his appointment as leader of the order, in 1259, he travelled to Italy and climbed Mount Alverna, as Francis had done. He went to where Francis had beheld the six winged Seraph, [the highest ranking of the angelic choir] from whom he had received the stigmata. 'Seeking a place of quiet and desiring to find there peace of spirit,'[607] Bonaventure set out to record his visit to Alverna. His memories are documented in the Prologue to his, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* . He had retired there on the anniversary of the death of Francis, 'to satisfy the yearning of my soul for peace.'[608] He recalls how Francis had been visited by a vision of a 'six winged seraph in the form of the Crucified.' This vision, as a culmination of the life Francis had lived, inspired Bonaventure to consider it as a means of spiritual ascent, one achieved though the pre-requisite of a Godly life and contemplation; a means of communicating to the wider Christian community the true theological significance of the life of Francis. For him the Seraph signified, 'six progressive illuminations by which the soul is disposed, as by certain grades or steps, to pass over to peace through the ecstatic transports of Christian

[604] Ibid.p.12
[605] (McGinn 1998) p. 19
[606] Ibid. p.19
[607] (Cousins 1981) p. 91
[608] (Bonaventure 1993) p. 1 Paragraph 2

wisdom.'[609] He suddenly knew how to employ the experience of Francis, to translate, the 'visible into the invisible;' to translate the brutal asceticism into meaningful 'love and charity', for the wider Christian community.

The Italian visit to Alvera could be said to be the junction between Bonaventure's purely academically based writings and those which followed his appointment as Minister of the Friars Minor. However, his mind had been primed for the thinking he displayed in the *Itinerarium*, by his major work the *Breveloquium*, completed in 1257. As a brief, but important aside, that will assume greater relevance with the consideration of Ruusbroec, the *Breveloquium* 'reflects the neo-platonic framework of *exitus* [a going out] and *reditus* [a return] according to which all things emanate from the ultimate good over the course of time and return to their source in the fullness of time'.[610]

Two Different Mystical Thinkers: The Canticle to the Brother Sun and Itinerarium Mentis in Deum

The definition of mysticism and the mystic rely much on context. To refer to Francis as a mystic in the same breath as attributing the title to Bonaventure is to court confusion; one arises with an untutored spontaneity, blazing with emotion, the other from the cold-eyed world of the academic, albeit one who understood the excesses of Francis. In the one there is a question of states of consciousness, in the other a call to academic philosophy and theology, albeit combined with a deep faith, a creative mind and a generous sense of humanity. There needs to be the caveat here that there was an artistry within Bonaventure, a deep love of and sensitivity toward his fellow human, that tempered his academic theology. So often his words stray from the strictures of the university and speak with a passionate tenderness. In this manner, much was falsely attributed to hum, such as the widely read *Meditations on the Life of Christ,*[611] still

[609] Ibid.p.1
[610] (Bonaventure 2005) p.xliii
[611] (*Meditatons on the Life of Christ.*) 'This highly popular text was at once popularly named as, 'a life of Christ, a biography of the Blessed Virgin, the fifth gospel, the last of the apocrypha, one of the

without a confirmed author. Significantly, this was still so in the 1420s and such a conviction to authorship says much of how Bonaventure was perceived and remembered: if he did not write such *Meditations*, then they were written by the man the medieval world believed him to be. Having had no recorded ecstatic experiences, any 'experience' was of a highly intellectual nature; he is classified as a 'speculative mystic.'[612] This analysis, however, fails to acknowledge the restrained passion in his work. He was moved by the fidelity and wild excesses of the untutored Francis and fate compelled him to set about applying these feeling for the pastoral needs of his Order and the Paris intellectuals.

Considering both St. Francis and Bonaventure, at this distance in time, is inevitably beset with problems. How does one navigate a course from this extra-ordinary life of Francis with its intense reciprocity toward the natural world and fellow man and his ultimate encounter with the six winged Seraph, in the form of the crucified Christ that will pay heed to the still deep waters of Bonaventure's corpus of theology, while negotiating the rapids of potential misinterpretation of Francis? The problem is compounded by the fact that this is only but a brief encounter with both great men.

Bonaventure may have, 'grasped the metaphysical implication of Francis's Christocentric spirituality', but his references were not taken from Plato or Aristotle but from Augustine and the Pseudo-Dionysius,'[613] filtered through the minds of the Victorines and his teacher Alexander of Halles. The moment of enlightenment for Bonaventure came when he had ascended Mount Alverna. It was then that he realised how to translate into philosophical terms, the significance of Francis's gift from God. As Zachary Hayes explains, Bonaventure, by concentrating on the theology of the Word, as in the vision of Francis, uses 'the principle of universal intelligibility.'[614] He used metaphysics to 'unite all of finite reality to one first principle who is origin, exemplar and final end'; one divine essence. 'For Bonaventure, the exemplar is Jesus Christ and only in light of exemplarity is the deepest nature of created reality unlocked

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masterpieces of Franciscan literature, a summary of medieval spirituality, a religious handbook of contemplation , a manual of Christian iconography, one of the chief sources of the mystery plays.'

[612] (Cousins 1981) p.79

[613] Ibid, p.229

[614](Hayes 1978), p. 82

for the philosopher; that divine ideas are the source of finite reality'.[615] That may well be, but in the current context Bonaventure's pilgrimage to Alverna was driven by his new responsibility for a disparate body of men, and women, who had thronged to follow Francis. Had he not been given this responsibility would he have undertaken the journey and would he have engaged so intensely with Francis? Boehner writes that Bonaventuree's *Itinerarium* was written for the intellectual Franciscan,[616] but while the text, in his exquisite Latin, speaks to the philosopher, it communicates in often modest language, to the less sophisticated, instinctive follower of Francis.

Part of that dimension, is surely, the emphasis on the mortal world, the beautiful, ugly, loving and brutal world. Thus, the full weight of Creation is a part of the spiritual ascent he plans. Bonaventure takes Francis's sight of God in the created world and elaborates. Included in these reflections are aesthetic experience, memory, the gift of will and empathy. He unites, 'the nature mysticism of Francis with the soul mysticism of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux; the spontaneous mysticism of Francis with the speculative mysticism of the Pseudo-Dionysius; the cataphatic mysticism of *The Divine Names* of the Pseudo-Dionysius with the apophatic mysticism of his Mystical Theology.'[617] As Hugh St. Victor, a significant figure in Bonaventure's thinking, wrote, "It is impossible to represent the invisible except by means of things visible."[618] As in the first steps of Francis and with Bonaventure, the initial stages of any ascent are around us, to be beheld and dwelt upon. These first stages of approaching a communion with God, one beginning with the corporeal realities of the mortal world prevailed within the devout communities of Northern Europe, not least due to the profoundly visual nature of Franciscan spirituality.

Nature was seen as a book in which were written the *simulacra* of its invisible author,[619] an author who otherwise would remain unknown to us. However, 'the author

[615] (Delio 1999) p.229
[616] (Bonaventure 2002) p.15
[617] Ibid 93 The Pseudo-Dionysius referred to in this reference is the same Denys the Areopagyte referred to earlier.
[618] (Turner 1998) p.104
[619] Ibid p.105 Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1142) His spiritual writings were to guide the soul in its search for God. He also had his own guidance for such an ascendance, his *Scala Caeli.* Turner claims that Bonaventure was influenced by the language he had used, p.104

is not present within these simulacra nor do they give more than signposts for understanding this *theologia mundane'.*[620] "Nature can show things but it can give no light. Through its beauty and form it can speak of its creator, but it cannot impart any understanding of the truth into men's hearts;"[621] the quotation, Turner uses (Jn,10) to emphasise the belief that it was Jesus who was needed to restore 'light', understanding, to the physical sight of the world. There is no automatic 'rite of passage' from awareness and appreciation of the natural world to an understanding of or communion with God as Creator. There may be 'vestiges of the divine' within the human soul as there are vestiges of the divine within the greater natural world but only through grace and diligent effort the individual may ascend; we may see, with the 'eye of contemplation,' those things which are '*supra nos.'*[622]

The dilemma arises how man, sitting disconsolately at the base of the ladder, *Jacobs Ladder,* with 'Christ who is our ladder,'[623] attempt to ascend? How does lowly man marry the deficiencies of language and abandonment of rational intellect and enter into, the 'dazzling darkness' of apophaticism? Bonaventure advises, 'our first step ... [is] setting the whole visible world before us a mirror through which we may pass over to God, our Supreme Creator.'[624] For Bonaventure, the key to the rest of the journey is within Christ, the broken, crucified Christ in whom, 'is concentrated all our language about God',[625] in all its confusion. As Turner writes, 'In Christ is found the *transitus* from affirmation to negation, from the work of the six days of creation to the silence and the rest of the seventh'.[626] As the journey proceeds it becomes more complex as it moves from the visual mortal world to that which is, 'shrouded in superluminous darkness of a silence that teaches secretly in a most dark manner that is above all manifestation and resplendent above all splendour'.[627]

[620] Ibid p.105
[621] Ibid p.106
[622] Ibid p.108
[623] (Bonaventure 1993) p.6 Chapter 1,3
[624] Ibid p.8 Chapter 1,9
[625] (Turner 1998) p.130 referencing *Itinerarium* 6,7
[626] Ibid p.102
[627](Bonaventure 2002) p. 39 7,5

In Bonaventure's unique document, that is the *Itinerarium,* I will not explore, in this highly edited *resumé,* the question of Bonaventure's references to the pagan philosophy of Plotinus nor his historical use of the 'model of heirarchies. I will look briefly at the argument Bonaventure followed, and cite where he firmly sets out the necessity of appreciating the earthly Creation of God at the beginning of any *ascent;* how it is that the 'door' to the journey of ascent, how it is the incarnate Christ, who gives us access to the Father and acts as the bridge between the mortal and the eternal life. And lastly, consider how Bonaventure offered an extended understanding of that 'crucified Christ' within the context of the Trinity: the Trinity of The Good, with Son and Holy Spirit, whose presence was his ultimate goal.

Bonaventure, after setting his agenda in the Prologue, set out his thinking in seven chapters. He requests that each one 'should be meditated upon in great deliberation'.[628]'The world is itself a ladder for ascending to God'.[629] Bonaventure begins, in his first stage, by insisting that we must pray, because, 'nothing is accomplished unless it is accompanied by divine aid":[630] 'By praying ... one is enlightened about the knowledge of the stages in the ascension to God'. Any journey must begin in the place we know, surrounded by that to which we can relate. Equipped with the external human body and its environment, the journey has to proceed from this place to the inward Spirit and then look to the Mind, to take it further. From the first prerequisite of 'living holily', our first step is set within that visible world we inhabit, 'set before us as a mirror though which we may pass over to God, the Supreme Creator'.[631] 'The supreme power, wisdom and the goodness of the Creator shine forth in created things in so far as the bodily senses inform the interior senses'[632] First is to appreciate the 'immense power, wisdom and goodness of the Creator'.[633] Then, the pilgrim must call on faith to confirm that, 'the world was fashioned by the Word of God'.[634] Lastly, having considered the Creator and His Creation, those intent on

[628] (Bonaventure 1993) p.3 Prologue 5
[629] (Bonaventure 1993) p. 5 1,2
[630] Ibid p.5 1,1
[631] Ibid p.8 1,9
[632] Ibid p.8 I,10
[633] Ibid p.8 1,11
[634] Ibid p.8 1,12 Bonaventure is quoting Hebrews 11:3

considering God, realise that, 'some things are changeless and incorruptible, that is, supercelestial things'.[635] Bonaventure uses Francis's relationship with the natural world, embraces his 'nature theology' within that which He created.

Inspirational though the created world may be in initiating our thoughts of ascent to God, we need divine assistance. In chapter four of the *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure considered the, 'presence of God,' in the soul. However, like a physical fall, the disabled, human soul needs assistance to rise[636], to ascend via a metaphorical ladder. 'Truth, [God], taking on human form became a ladder restoring the first ladder broken in Adam.[637] Bonaventure insisted that for all our appreciation of 'nature' or our learning, we cannot enter into, delight in the Lord' except through the person of Christ; *I am the door*, John 10:9.[638] Christ 'is like the *Tree of life in the midst of Paradise'.*[639] 'Christ is the meeting point of all our language about God. But, 'Christ is also the point of juncture of the cataphatic with the apophatic. For, if Christ is, on the one hand the perfect image of God, he is, on the other, the only access to the unknowability of God'.[640] This being so, Bonaventure emphasises that it is [importantly in this context] the *transitus*, the point of cross over that is, 'the broken, crucified Christ'.[641]At a time when words fail, when intellect is stretched beyond facility and has to be abandoned, we can move on only to a "voluntarism of a mysticism of love,'[642] as described by Bonaventure.

In order to progress any ambition of spiritual ascent, Bonaventure had then to elaborate on the Trinitarian nature of that, 'broken, crucified Christ': 'The Blessed Trinity – Father, Word and Love, three persons coeternal, coequal, and consubstantial: so that each one is in each of the others, though one is not the other, but all three are one God".[643] However, it is necessary not to lose sight of the original inspiration for Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, the wild, untutored Francis. As Calisi comments, 'Francis

[635] Ibid p.9 1,13
[636] Ibid p.5 1,1
[637] (Bonaventure 1993) p.23 4,2
[638] John 10:9
[639] (Bonaventure 1993) p.23 4,2
[640] (Turner 1998) p. 132
[641] Ibid p.132
[642] Ibid 132
[643] (Bonaventure 1993) p.20 3:5

had a deep and abiding consciousness of God in his life and this experience of God was tri-personal'.[644] He enacted this as he prayed, 'to God the Father, through the Son whom he emulated with every breath, in the power of the Holy Spirit who inspired and lead him'.[645] Through Bonaventure, 'The Christo-centric life that Francis had lived was translated into the *persona media* within the Trinity, between the Trinity and creation, and in the history of salvation'.[646]

The challenge for the medieval Christian was how, within the life lived in love and charity and diligent attention to Scripture, but restrained by the strictures of mortality, could one aspire to approach this transcendent Good. Bonaventure had identified the 'ladder,' 'the door' to the ascent, as the crucified Christ. How then does the soul, in its fragility, ascend into the presence of the immutable, transcendent God as Trinity? How, through contemplation, does it experience the refreshment that comes from 'tasting God'? How, like the Israelites, when "They beheld God and they ate and were refreshed".[647]

Bonaventure sought to emulate the union with the unfathomable God the Father in Trinity with that which Francis attained on seeing the Seraph and on receiving the wounds of Christ. To move from an understanding of the centrality of the crucified Christ, to the apophaticism of Bonaventure's last two stages of the journey, his understanding of the Trinity is crucial. Conscious understanding must be left behind, albeit that there remains within the soul and the quieted mind, that which had been internalised. It is not stated by Bonaventure, but it is as though all memory of experience, reason and knowledge must be left behind, yet remain discreetly in place. We do not discard the lower rungs of the ladder, the metaphorical ladder of our potential spiritual ascent, but pull them up with us. Sense moves from controlled, imagined thoughts and images to the autonomic. The mind and the soul must coalesce and move to a neutral position from where they are open to receive the grace of God. For it is

[644] (Calisi 2008) p.62
[645] Ibid p.62
[646]Ibid p.64
[647] Ibid p.220

important to stress that, whereas a prerequisite for embarking on this spiritual journey is the overwhelming love of the human Christ crucified, this is but a *transitus,* a staging post as Turner describes,[648] toward a full understanding and reception of God in Trinity. The sense of divine love takes over leaving the intellect behind but it is a love that has its origins in the mortal world.

For Bonaventure, his dialogue, that seeks at once to elaborate with words, that which is beyond description. The 'mystical' union of the Trinity moves the pilgrim into a state of cataphatic/ apophaticism. From his *Itinerarium,* 'If you are able to behold with the eye of your mind ... you can see through the utmost communicability of the Good, there must exist a Trinity ... The three Persons must have supreme communicability... supreme consubstantiality...supreme coequality and hence supreme coeternity'.[649]

On reaching the end of the journey of the ascent, the sixth step,

> "we have come to the point of beholding, in the first and highest principle and the Mediator of God and men, Jesus Christ ... it (the mind) rises on high and passes beyond not light but the wholly flaming fire which will bear you aloft to God ... Let us then die and pass over into darkness ... let us pass over with the crucified Christ from this world to the Father".[650]

The journey had gone from God's created Universe, the Incarnate Christ, the crucified Christ, to God as Trinity. The journey, begun in the everyday physical world, had moved to be, of the mind; one of progressive contemplation and evolving understanding of our lowly place within cosmic creation, but a journey conducted, by Bonaventure, as an assertion as to our potential for such a divine ascension.

[648] (Turner 1998), p. 132
[649] (Bonaventure 1993),p.34
[650] Ibid p.30 7:1

The Tree of Life in the Midst of Paradise[651]*:* **Bonaventure's *Lignum Vitae***

Whereas there was a growing literacy amongst the laity, it was not every soul that could unscramble the fine points of Bonaventure's *Itinerarium,* but then despite its erudition, it was accessible on multiple levels with its lyrical outbursts. The Seraphic Doctor demonstrated his social awareness in his arboreal text as he concentrated on the earthly physical life of Christ. As Ewart Cousins declared, it was the *Lignum Vitae* that 'energised' the *Itinerarium* and this document is important in emphasising the inclusiveness of Bonaventure's mind-set.

Diagrammatic presentations of complex ideas as 'flow charts, are not a modern invention. They were often used, very creatively, during the Middle Ages as was 'picturesque language' for the 'emotional and moral internalisation of material'.[652] Bonaventure used the events in the life of Christ, to prompt meditations. Artists quickly responded with elaborate charts, often elaborating the original text. As Carruthers remarks, '... they were not prescriptive but open ended';[653] they were to be used for 'creative' contemplation' as an 'invitation to elaborate and recompose'.[654] This form of 'visual mnemonics' was to be widely used by the Franciscans who, 'developed several mystical images and legends of and about Christ's cross which might bring them, the viewer, closer in spirit to the facts and language of Christ's redeeming death.'[655]

Bonaventure's text *Lignum Vitae,* references 'the tree of life' with its 'twelve kinds of fruits, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.', Revelation 22:2. So is set out in an orderly manner the events in the life of Christ. As Hollis remarked, 'the diagram, (created textually by Bonaventure), is an eponymous tract by Bonaventure. [656] The aim is to offer to the spiritual aspirant, food for contemplation, as part of a spiritual ascent. It was taken up almost immediately by artists as diagrams, aided undoubtedly by Bonaventure's lyrical language: In his Prologue, he promises that he will, "gather a bundle of myrrh from the forest of the holy

[651]Ibid p.23 Chapter Four, Verse 2 Bonaventure is quoting from 1 Timothy 1:5
[652] (Bonaventure) p. 1
[653](Carruthers 1990) p. 123
[654] Ibid p.123
[655] (Hollis, Mary 2014 p.3
[656] (Bonaventure) p. 1

Gospel, which treats at length the life, passion and glorification of Christ to cultivate devotion and to foster piety".[657]

"Within an age of often brutal gratuitous violence, an age that was characterised by its 'violent pathos' and 'the extreme excitability of the medieval soul,'[658] speech of the detailed brutality of the crucifixion was embraced. The impact of Francis's stigmata aside from being seen as a profound mark of God's favour, aroused a greater awareness of the physicality of the original act, an empathy played out in religious devotion, meditative talk and the visual arts. In receiving the marks of Christ, Francis had, 'reached the summit of gospel perfection.'[659] In doing so he became a model for others to follow. Bonaventure, in the manner of the era, spoke with matching emotive language, in his *Lignum Vitae.* He extolled those who aspire to discipleship to, "carry continuously, both in his soul and in his flesh, the cross of Christ, until he can truly feel it himself." The ultimate was to be as Paul wrote, "With Christ I am nailed to the cross."

'The stigmatization (of St. Francis's body) ... was not only the inspiration for the *Itinerarium,* but also the model of the mystical union portrayed in the text.'[660] The *Lignum Vitae,* was a contribution toward that union. It offered fodder for the journey, foci for meditations, drawn from the mortal life of Christ. In this writing, Bonaventure embraced the mood of the age but also gave it a reasoned projection into the future. His thinking had come from a new religious order, one that did not confine itself to the fabric of monastery. Its foray into the wider community may have spread the Gospel and the 'mystery' of Francis, but it also generated a considerable hunger for spiritual satisfaction amongst the laity, the religious drawn to Francis, as well as challenging the theological *intelligentsia.*

[657] (Bonaventure) p. 2
[658] (Huizinga 2001),p. 15 & 19
[659] (Dreyer 2001), p.229
[660] (Bonaventure 1993) p.42, note 11

A Last word on Bonaventure, who "excelled in the Sacred Science of Theology"[661]

To understand Bonaventure, is to acknowledge the anomalies that existed within his life and the monastic movement he lead, together with the particular social circumstances of his era. Like Anselm before him, he had a "wonderful amiability":[662] "it seemed as though Adam had never sinned in him" declared Alexander of Hales.[663] But that nature was taxed to the limit by the demands made upon him. As noted earlier, his fate had been sealed, almost at birth, as he recounted himself, "I was snatched from the jaws of death ... owing to a vow my mother made to the Blessed Father Francis".[664]

The first anomaly centres round Father Francis and his avowed intention of returning to the first mission of Christ with his selection of untutored men. In his Rule he had decreed, "Let those who are unlearned, not seek to learn" and yet only twelve years after the death of Francis, Bonaventure entered the order and was educationally prepared for admittance to the prestigious University of Paris in 1242,[665] to study under Alexander of Hales and take up the Chair of Theology in 1248. The vision of Francis had soon broken its modest bounds, but given the response to his mission, it was unlikely that such a body of men could remain attractive only to lowly men or remain ungoverned by the unlettered. Had not the same occurred with the infant Church as it grew and created its own complex problems?

The vow of poverty is the second anomaly surrounding the infant order. From the ideal of utter destitution as lived by the first brothers, with not even a Breviary to their name,[666] when Bonaventure arrived in Paris in 1442 aristocratic benefactors had enabled a large monastery and a substantial church to be built in the city.[667] So successful had the Order become that,

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[661] (Costello, Laurence 1911) p.121 A hundred years after his death, Pope Sixtus V together with the Cardinals, declared Bonaventure to be included amongst the Doctors of the Church along with Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and Gregory.
[662] Ibid p 111
[663] Ibid.p.11
[664] Ibid p.4 "Legenda Minor St. Francisci, Prologue No.3"
[665] (Costello, Laurence 1911) p.7
[666] In Conversation with Father Fergus McEnevey OFM, Rosnowlagh Friary, 2016
[667] (Costello 1911 p.8

> ‘Their professors were the most brilliant in the University; their lecture halls the best appointed; their audiences the most enthusiastic. They enjoyed the favour of the Pope and the King, both of whom conferred many privileges on them. They possessed neither money nor lands, yet they stood in need of nothing. They had renounced the pomp and glory of the world and yet the world ran eagerly after them. Their preaching attracted large crowds and their confessionals were thronged.’[668]

But, even so early, there were many affronted by the ‘able bodied beggars’ and the contradictions in their lifestyle. From the secular professors there was verbal aggression, sparking physical violence within the university. Bonaventure attempted a resolution with his writings on *Evangelical Perfection,* but matters became seriously out of control in 1254. As when Anselm was appointed to Canterbury, Bonaventure was presented with a life change not of his choosing when he was elected to be Minister General of the Order of Franciscan Minors, in 1257.

“By means of Jesus Christ, the Way, the Door, the Ladder, shall this transition [this ascent toward God] be affected.” [669] This was how Bonaventure, through Francis saw the route every Christian should take. In doing so he engaged the minds of many, to rationalise the extremes of Francis. Costello concludes that it is not the biographical details of Bonaventure’s life that defined him, the practicalities, but his texts; ‘in the depth and clearness of his dogmatic teachings, but especially in the outpourings of his Seraphic soul in his devotional works’.[670] However, in a secular world, I would submit that to understand the context of his life, puts his work into a more comprehensible focus. It makes more understandable the wholeness of his thinking and confirms that his *Itinerarium* cannot be abstracted from the circumstances that initiated it.

As has been touched on, ‘Beginning in the late 11th Century and continuing through the thirteenth, widespread economic and cultural changes, together with a revival in spiritual intensity and widespread concern for religious forms, transformed dominant

[668] Ibid p.18
[669] (James 2012) *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum,* p.70
[670] Ibid.p.122

structures in Western society'.[671] The old feudal system, with serfdom a basic economic structure, was breaking down[672] and there was the beginnings of social mobility and a possible change in status - an urban class of free persons. For these people, it was mainly the Franciscan friars who, 'brought the new more personal and emotional piety and the simple religious devotions that went along with it into the homes of the comparatively un-churched urban masses of Europe', in doing they were to, 'make themselves felt as a vital spiritual force everywhere in Europe well into the fourteenth century'.[673] It was these early Franciscans for whom Bonaventure was Minister. But, how was it possible to contain within one set of ideals, the lowliest of men with those advantaged in health, wealth and education? How was it possible to organise such a disparate band of men, spanning the entire social order, into a cohesive movement that could contribute to the spiritual advancement of a wider society? This was the challenge Bonaventure was pressed to accept and one which must surely have influence the tone of his work. There were many noted academic Franciscan theologians, but it was Bonaventure who seemed to have sensed most wholly the need to embrace all souls within the Christian culture, to learn from the sensibilities of the untutored – a dilemma that still taxes the Catholic Church and its current Pope.

In the 'Context of the Theology of Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross',* Bonaventure is key to answering the call of spiritual neediness during his lifetime and the manner in which piety and mystical understanding developed up to the end of the fifteenth century, in what could be defined as a religious emancipation for the general populace; he harmonised the Scriptural life of Christ with the mystical, the unknowableness of The Good, on a spectrum of intellectual levels. He was responsible for one haven for spiritual fulfilment and it can be argued that much of his thinking laid the foundations for the wider lay piety of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, particularly in Northern Europe.[674]

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[671] (Porter, Jean 2001) p 275
[672] Ibid note 6
[673] (Oakley, Francis 1988) p. 181
[674] (Engen, John van 2008) p.271 Translations of Bonaventure's texts into Middle Dutch began around the1360's

Amongst the applause of the Italians for the *colore* and *ingegno* seen in the work of the two most eminent Flemish painters, Rogier van der Weyden and Jan van Eyck, there was in particular great praise from Ciriaco for Rogier in his interpretation of the dead Christ in *The Descent from the Cross;*[675] 'This is the most difficult thing of all to do, for to represent the limbs of a body entirely at rest (without life) is ... the sign of an excellent artist.' Roger's was an innovative, graphic description of the dead Christ and, as with Bonaventure, the figure of the crucified Christ was central to his expression.

However, over a hundred and fifty years had elapsed since the death of Bonaventure in 1272, when the germ of Rogier's idea for the work was first breathing life. Given that in the intervening years lay piety had changed within Europe, how much of the Bonaventure's legacy made its way into the work? Referring this work, Gilson states that, 'the totality of the system [Bonaventure's rationalisation of Francis] means so much more than the mere notion of fragments ... You can either see the general economy of his doctrine in its totality, or see none of it.'[676] This is a difficult statement, difficult to substantiate but it could be fair to say that Bonaventure, in line with Pope Leo XIII's acclaim, was truly 'the Prince of mystical theology'. The turn his life took, in demanding that he thought through the complex life and faith of Francis, adjusting it toward a more practical strategy for the faithful, meant that he could not remain wholly within the Scholastic systems of Paris. He was forced, by circumstance, to embrace that which had no credibility within the laws of nature and yet nature had to be called on as the starting point for understanding the 'impossible'. Where was there to go, but into the realms of abstract thought, into the 'mystical'? Therefore it could be said that he, unwittingly through Francis, set the official stage for the 'mystical thinking,' that was to run up to and beyond Rogier and his *Descent.*

Bonaventure's starting point for an *Ascent to God*, beginning as it did with the whole complexity of the physical world created, ex nihilo, gave a gravity and divinity to creation, one that had to be respected. It was not merely the natural world un-abused by man but the miracle of man himself and the ingenuity of his attempts at creation from raw materials. The profound intensity of Roger's description of flesh and fabric, of

[675] (Nurrall 2004),p.38
[676] (Gilson 1965),p.426

the ‘nature’ of man entrapped by his emotions and his faltering relationship with God, the ‘human’ attempt to reproduce the ‘broken body of Christ’, in the mind’s eye and as a physical image is a prayer in itself and has to have some of its genesis in the twin lives of Francis and Bonaventure. For it is from this intense concentration that the humble Christian may move toward that which is without description. For it is, ‘With Christ crucified, let us pass out of this world to the Father,’[677] and it is to us that Roger presents that very Christ crucified. Importantly, however, despite remaining central, remaining the ‘door’ to accessing an advanced contemplation of God, the brutal brokenness of Christ had become attenuated with Rogier. The wounds are, almost, only symbols of the original brutal act. The emotional pain vacillates between that of the Divine and the human. In order to explore this shift, it is to the local, Brussels man, Jan van Ruusbroec, that I will turn, to see how that spiritual emancipation played out, up to the 1430s in the Lowlands of Northern Europe; that ambition of, ‘transcending yourself and all things [and] ascend to the super-essential gleam of the divine darkness by an incommensurable and absolute transport of a pure mind.’ [678]

The ‘Blessed’ Curate of St. Gudula’s

Just as the work of *The Primatives* seems to be encapsulated and stand outside the main-stream of western art, so too does the religious life and thinking of the laity and semi-religious of Northern Europe in the mid to late Middle Ages. This is particularly so by the time Jan van Ruusbroec, born 1203, became a curate at the collegiate church of St Gudula in Brussels in 1317. He was to serve there for twenty six years, until he sought a more cloistered environment in the Zonein Forest in the Groenendaal valley,[679]outside the city of Brussels.

Educated, but not in the manner of Anselm and Bonaventure, he never produced ‘academic’ works but, like them, his writings were a response to the era in which he lived; ‘major political, economic, cultural and religious changes, which are important

[677] (Bonaventure 1993) p.39
[678] (Bonaventure 1993),p.39 7,5
[679] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p.7

for a proper understanding of his thought.'[680] Important here is the manner in which his writing has been considered in the intervening years. His texts, being, 'as of the most profound Middle Dutch literature has left us',[681] have tended to be isolated from their historically accurate social significance, that of its significance for the laity.

> 'Certainly in the thirteenth century after the friars had come to the towns, religious culture and mysticism were no longer the prerogative of the monastic elite that saw the cloister as a model of the heavenly Jerusalem. But the laity and the secular clergy were certainly not in last place in contributing to the changing shape of late medieval mysticism.'[682]

Within the current context of looking at the religious provenance of Rogier's masterwork there are four reasons why Ruusbroec is important. Firstly, there is his attention to the spiritual needs of the laity, addressed initially to the very devout but which rapidly escaping those bounds. His works were taken up by the general laity and translated into Latin during his lifetime; all his work was actively promoted by the Carthusians of Brussels,[683] with their recorded contacts with Rogier van der Weyden in later years. Secondly, there is the creative use of vernacular language with which he chose to engage with those lay people: It enabled an expressive creativity not possible in the Latin, an expressivity that was seen in late Gothic art. Thirdly, there is what is hailed as his Neoplatonism, which has been so strongly endorsed in recent years by scholars of Ruusbroec,[684] And lastly, there is his Trinitarianism, which in all its complexities 'is reminiscent of that of St. Bonaventure' [685] and is relevant to the focus on the crucified Christ in art and spiritual contemplation.

Medieval Western art, with the doctrinal freedom it had for the visual image, produced a plethora of mediocre, even outrageous religious images, in amongst those which were masterworks. However, *critically*, there was within that plethora of intellectual freedom and varying ability, a number of artists who came to the fore at the

[680] Ibid p.20
[681] (Warnar, Geert 1999) p.366
[682] Ibid p.367
[683] (Ruusbroec, John 1985) Introduction p.33
[684] Bernard McGinn, Denys Turner, Rik van Nieuwenhove and Lieve Uyttenhaove to name but a few.
[685] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p.50

end of the Fourteenth Century, artists who produced works of perceived perfection that were applauded internationally. The image produced by one of those Lowland painters of the 15th century, Roger van der Weyden, was one, applauded not solely for its artistic facility. It was, as I have tried to show, an eloquent expression of late medieval Christianity. To have had the power it did, and to a considerable extent has lost, is surely a testament to the contemporary fluency both painter and commissioners had in their religious language. That is not to suggest that they had detailed academic knowledge of Anselm, Bonaventure or Ruusbroec, but that they were widely read in spiritual literature and had a 'sense' of the thread of that thinking. Van Engen testifies to the fact The Devout, were enthusiastic 'compilers, excerpting from writers and models they esteemed'[686] The bounty of their diligence that remains, testifies to their wide religious knowledge and appreciation of which Gerhart Zerbolt (d.1398) wrote, 'the laypeople often understood better than learned masters'[687]

Rogier's *Descent from the Cross,* however, *w*ith its deceptively explicit countenance, surpassed the written word in giving insight into that which lay beyond reasoned, and unreasoned, comprehension: where all the impotent locutions of negative words were silenced, as within the grieving passion of an image of the dead Christ and those who, in life had loved Him. Subjectively, I want to know how, theologically, that came to be.

"Ruusbroec the Admirable"[688]

For those who cast their eyes with serious enquiry to the night sky, there are planets that seem to disappear; *plantes aesteres.* From shining brightly, they deviate from their orbital inclination and move outside their zodiacal band, with Pluto being the most widely wandering of these planets.[689] From shining brightly in the religious world of the fourteenth century of Northern Europe and contributing so substantially to its mystical

[686] (Engen, 2008) p. 81
[687] Ibid.p.98
[688] (Ruusbroec 1985) p. xvii
[689] Pluto has scientifically been downgraded from its status of planet but retains is old title in history and culture.

theological thinking and the rise of Devotio Moderna, Jan van Ruusbroec's legacy was swept aside by Reformation. Beginning in the early twentieth century, it was only at its close that he was to be truly reinstated as, 'the most articulate Trinitarian mystic of the Western Church'.[690]

Since the death of Bonaventure in 1274, the initial vigour and purity of the medicant orders had changed. The century into which Jan van Ruusbroec matured was not to be a happy one, as was considered in chapter one. Natural and man-made disasters together with the 'Babylonian Captivity', an illiterate and untrained clergy, the growing acquisitiveness of the monastic orders and a creeping materialism, lead to a spiritual vacuum.[691] Vacuums, however, are innately unstable and into this one imploded a conglomeration of lateral thinkers.[692] The most contentious, for the church, was the 'The Brethren of Free Spirit' which was 'as much a state of mind as settled doctrine'.[693] In amongst the complexity of divergent opinion, there arose disparate groups and itinerant preachers, with their own innovative interpretation of Christianity. Add to that the legacy of German Mysticism and there is a swirling brew of, often heterodox, ideas and practice. The Church felt threatened so that many lay mystics were persecuted and newly formed orders were often condemned. These were dangerous time to be espousing new religious thinking.[694]

One breeding ground for much heresy, occasionally rightly, was perceived to be the Beguine houses with their semi-religious women. Ruusbroec was seventeen when Margaret Porete was burned at the stake in Paris for heresy, in 1310. Her treatise, *The Mirror of Simple Souls,* with its dialogue between Love and Reason, posed what were clearly inflammatory ideas. However, Leff maintains that she was not inciting libertine practice,[695] though she did write that "This daughter of Zion has no desire for Masses or sermons, for fasting or prayers." Such religious creativity abounded. So when the young Ruusbroec moved from his modest enough education to enter the priesthood and was

[690] Ibid p. xi
[691] (Ruusbroec 1985) p.4
[692] (Ruusbroec 1985) p.5
[693] Ibid p 5 Gordon Leff and his *Heresy of the Middle Ages* is being quoted here.
[694] (Warnar, Geert 1999) p.372
[695]Ibid p 6, note 13 Leff notes that Porete is not inciting libertine practice in her argument but that it was the book's quietistic tendencies that made it suspect.

assigned to St. Gudula's, these were some of the pastoral challenges confronting this secular priest. Correctly, writers concur that he cannot truly be considered outside the environment he inhabited, that into which the Rhineland mysticism had flowed. It was one which sought to enhance doctrine with a supportive encouragement that offered a more meaningful spiritual life to the wider population and it offered the enrichment of a strongly Christocentric mysticism.[696] There was the added dimension, for Ruusbroec, that his own mother had relinquished his care, to enter a Beguinage.

Living to the age of 88yrs, Ruusbroec may have died over sixty years before Rogier sat in his workshop, planning his *Descent*, but echoes of this, very local, holy man must still have reverberated in the environs of Brussels. Aside from the records of Rogier's donations to the local Brussels Beguinage he was acknowledged to be a religious man. As such, he would have been taxed to avoid the influence of Jan van Ruusbroec. It would seem impossible to exclude such an important contemporary influence on the religious thinking of urban late medieval Brabant and Flanders and on its local artistic production. That aside, what were the influences that in turn had prevailed upon the young Ruusbroec, with his modest, though obviously adequate education?

The influences that shaped Ruusbroec are listed as, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, of Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistersians as well as the Victorines and importantly Meister Eckhart.[697] [698]In this economical search for the theological genesis of Rogier's work, it is Eckhart, an erudite communicator of Christian mysticism, who seems to stand out. There is the same use of vernacular language, the challenge to the tyranny of church practice in favour a good life lived 'in God', and the tutelage for an egalitarian and a very personal spiritual ascent to God

Meister Eckhart, entitled, 'the man from whom God hid nothing',[699] Echart von Hochheim (1260-1327) of Thuringia in Germany, was another terrestrial star, a theologian of repute whose light was suddenly dimmed by the scandal of heresy; he

[696] (Nieuwenhove 2000) p. 14
[697] Ibid. p.1
[698] Warnar, Geert 1999) p. 381 He emphasises appeal of Eckhart to the laity and to what extent his work was copied.
[699] (McGinn 2001) This is the title of McGinn's treatise on Meister Eckhart.

died unexpectedly before papal inquisitors could pronounce judgement on his teachings. Eckhart's star moved out of orbit following his inquisition and sudden death, though his vernacular works were widely read into the late middle ages. [700] The nineteenth century Romanics rediscovered him, but it was the later 20th century that began to truly understand the importance of his work.

Those who seek to follow the path of mystical theology through the middle ages must, of necessity, pause for a moment at least, to acknowledge the legacy of this man as a, 'highly trained philosopher and theologian, but also a preacher, a poet and a punster'[701] He was all these, he was an artist, who broke the straight-jacket of his own academic prowess and with flourish, 'cultivated rhetorical effects, bold paradoxes and unusual metaphors, neologisms and wordplay to stir his readers and hears from their intellectual and moral slumber.'[702]

For Eckhart, 'the soul at its highest point touches God.' In his highly creative interpretation of this statement, Denys Turner suggests, 'Eckhart's sources for his own version of this are ... within the common medieval-Augustinian tradition of divine illumination and Dionysian hierarchy.'[703] In considering this growing expression of apophatic theology throughout the Middle Ages of Northern Europe, Turner suggests that there was much to connect the tragic Marguerite Porete, with Eckhart. Both worked, albeit creatively, within the 'traditions of apophatic mystical theology.' Theirs was a 'heady mix of mysticism and metaphysics.'[704] Marguerite's *Mirror of the Simple Souls* and particularly, Eckhart's sermons in the vernacular offered, 'a daring, thoroughly original and often startlingly paradoxical transposition of the dialectics of apophatic theology onto the sphere of ascetical practice, a transposition productive of what may be called, an "apophatic anthropology". Universally, for those embracing such teaching, there was a journey to be made, as Bonavernture had advocated, to arrive at the 'highest point' and that journey required the cataphatic, the God-given created

[700] (McGinn 2001) p.1
[701] (Eckhart 1981) p.24: Introduction by Bernard McGinn.
[702] Ibid. p. 24
[703] (Turner 1998) p.142.Denys Turner defines his essay as being the retrieval of the medieval apophatic mysticism.
[704] (Turner 1998) p.139

world and the medium of sight and words to lead the Christian pilgrim to the point where the, "mysteries of God's word lie, simple, absolute, unchangeable, in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence".'[705]

Whereas his inquisitors were to claim that Eckhart had retracted his statements, he is recorded as commenting that the only thing for which he felt sorrow was that he had been misunderstood. Authors testify to the difficulty of understanding and translating the spirit of his work, particularly into the Latin demanded by the church. His prowess was, however, his ability to communicate to the laity his own sense of God, which he conducted in his creative High Middle German. To endeavour to translate the thoughts from his Latin texts into sermons, the language became, 'a bearer of meaning, rather than meaning itself.'[706] He mimicked the poetic method, wrote Davies, which would have left him open to misinterpretation, particularly from a Curia ever watchful of its dogma. Scholars may question how a man of such high academic standing could lay himself open to such charges, but in trying to engage with a commentary which is apophatic, we are considering, by definition, a subject which defies absolute accuracy of language.

Because of the way in which Eckhart's teaching was taken up by Ruusbroec, it is important to acknowledge the point made by McGinn. 'Eckhart's Christology was out of step with his times.'[707] That which came from Anselm, St. Francis, and so from Bonaventure, had little place for him, even though the multi-layered understanding of *Imitatio Christi* remained part of the fabric of later medieval Christian life; his was a "functional Christology"[708] Key to that is his, 'metaphysics of flow'[709] This *exitus-reditus* can be said to have originated in the neoplatonism of Western thought; McGinn, cites Eckhart's preaching on Ecclesiastes 1:7,[710] with the river returning to its source. Rik van Nieuwenhove writes that, 'Meister Eckhart is the first major author who applies the structure of *exitus-reditus* to the immanent Trinity', with the rider as to the

[705] Ibid p.21 Turner is quoting a prayer of Denis the Aeropagite.
[706] (Davies 1998) p.180f
[707] (McGinn 2001) p.114f
[708] Ibid p. 116
[709] Ibid.p.71
[710] Ibid p.72

complexity of his writings.[711] Eckhart is important in this context, if only for this reason.

"That there is something in the soul that is uncreated and not capable of creation; if the whole soul were such, it would be uncreated and not capable of creation and this is the intellect",[712] provoked Eckhart's inquisitors, a similar sentiment to Ruusbroec's.[713] Eckhart wrote, "sometimes I have spoken of a light that is uncreated and not capable of creation and that is in the soul ... this same light comprehends God without a medium, uncovered, naked, as he is himself."[714] That 'light of the soul' was profoundly central to the apophatic theology of Eckhart, when it was so suddenly dimmed. His star moved out of orbit at his demise; but it never became extinct. It continued to influence and shape, the new thinking that was emerging.

Jan van Ruusbroec – that Very Local Mystic

'The mystics of this era (the fourteenth century) were not revolutionaries or even critics of church structures as such; they were, "independents" (beguines, poets philosophers, hermits and anchoresses.' [715] They were also often secular clergy, who were imaginatively creative in their thinking. Jan van Ruusbroec was one of those creative thinkers. In his comprehensive work on *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism,* McGinn opens his research with the chapter titled, *Ruusbroec's Dynamic Trinitarian Mysticism* and comments on his, 'skill as a master of Dutch prose,'[716] and the originality of his mystical teaching. Rik van Nieuwenhove endorses that dynamism when he writes, 'Ruusbroec's mystical theology is deeply Trinitarian. This Trinitarian theology is highly original and extremely dynamic, containing moments of activity, return and

[711] (Nieuwenhove 2000) p.173
[712] (Turner 1998) p.140
[713] (Ruusbroec 1985) p.145f
[714] Ibid p. 140
[715] (McGinn 2012) p.493
[716] Ibid p.5

fruition or rest'[717] He, almost inadvertently, played an important role in the development of mysticism in the Low Countries, so much did his work appear to fill a need within those Christian communities. An endorsement of its value was that his innovative thinking spread abroad and his work widely translated during his lifetime.

Here is possibly the best moment to comment on Gregory of Palamas, born in1296, only three years after Ruusbroec. Lieve Uyttenhove has made an important initial comment on the similarities of thought between Ruusbroec and Palamas. 'It is an extraordinary fact that the life and thought of Palamas and Ruusbroec – who were probably never acquainted with one another – nevertheless exhibited a number of similarities'.[718] The writings from both attempted to bridge the gap between mysticism and theology[719] As Uyttenhove writes, 'In spite of the differences between East and west, it is worthy of note that western mystical theology flourished in the fourteenth century with the works of Ruusbroec to such a degree that it equalled the eastern mystical tradition'.[720] However the parallels are complex as the context and outcome of each man's thinking are significantly different and outside this enquiry,

In terms of a deeper understanding of the central motif of Rogier's work, and the limitations of this research it is, I believe, that Trinitarian Christology brought to a practical mode of understanding by Ruusbroec, is significant in understanding those contemporary sensitivities to the life and death of Christ, that are key to the image in question. But equally important, is where Ruusbroec was in historical time and place, how he with his particular talents and sensitivities, used his vocation as parish priest, to work through his own faith and, in the more expressive vernacular language of Middle Dutch, communicate those discoveries. The Church was ailing, society was moving from being agrarian and feudal to one of infant capitalism. A new perspective was needed. Ruusbroec was not a 'professional' theological thinker; rather his focus was grounded in his pastoral calling, those in his care, his religious associates and the spiritual dangers to which they were exposed.

[717] (Nieuwenhove 2000) p.8
[718] (Uyttenhove, Lieve 2012)p. 2
[719] Ibid p.3
[720] Ibid.p.3

Given the clerical mores of the time, it is remarkable that Ruusbroec could write his most important work while a secular priest.[721] His thinking eventually found literary form in the publication of his important second work, *Die Geestlelike Brulocht* (The Spiritual Espousals) of 1340: believed to be, 'one of the greatest works of Christian mysticism'.[722] For his religious friends he wrote how the Christian could and should endeavour to work their way towards a deeper and more practical communion with God. The text, divided into three books, is the personal spiritual ascent Ruusbroec envisaged. It began with 'the active life', where the Christian, already leading what is believed to be a Godly life, is falling short in terms of personal effectiveness and understanding of a truly holy relationship with God. In the second phase he begins to lead the believer into a greater understanding of the relationship between God and the human soul, to awaken in the participating individual the desire to engage more vibrantly with God. His third phase describes the ultimate union of God with the human soul.[723] 'He insists that it is the power of 'love' that enables us to enter into the inner life of the eternal interactions of the three who are one.'[724] McGinn quotes the opening passage from the *Espousals,* to confirm Ruusbroec's 'dynamic Trinitarian mysticism':

> "Every lover is one with God and at rest and God-like in the activity of love; for God, in his sublime nature of which we bear a likeness, dwells with enjoyment, in eternal rest, with respect to the essential oneness, and with the working, in eternal activity, with respect to threeness; and each is the perfection of the other, for rest resides in oneness and activity in threeness. And therefore, if a person is to relish God, he must love; he must 'love' and if he is willing to love, then he can taste".[725]

Though charged with frequent repetition, not infrequent obscurity and at times confusion, Ruusbroec may surely be forgiven these shortcomings, in his creative and

[721] (Warnar 1999) p.379-80 Inventories of St. Gudula's show that it was 'affected by many of the corruptions that gave medieval clergy a bad reputation', against which Ruusbroec was perennially vocal.
[722] (McGinn 2012) p.6
[723] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p.23
[724] (McGinn.2013) p.8
[725] Ibid p. 8

solitary piercing of those matters in which church dogma fell short. His work, as with many Northern European mystical texts, is of the era and can make perplexing reading for the modern scholar. Within his sixth, extremely popular work *Van den Geesteliken Tabernake,* Ruusbroec uses the biblical account of Moses building the tabernacle in the desert, as a rich allegory of the transformation of the soul, to illustrate 'the transformation of the Christian believer in response to the grace of Christ.'[726] Ruusbroec declares, 'I am going to teach us how each rational person shall make a spiritual tabernacle for God in which he shall eternally dwell.'[727] His world was the environs of Brussels from where he seldom strayed. He was a very 'local' theologian.

It would be easy to discount Ruusbroec as a non-academic parochial cleric but his uninhibited searching for a more accessible and profound relationship with God has and continues to resonate with eminent modern scholars. This has been done largely within the context of challenging the 'experiential' notions of mysticism from William James in the early twentieth century and from an exploration of the 'influence of Neoplatonism on Christian spirituality'[728] in the context of Western medieval mystical theology. In the introduction to his book, *Jan van Ruusbroec,* Rik van Nieuwenhove remarks that, 'It is only in recent decades, as our understanding of Neoplatonic dialectics has grown, that we have been in a position to understand their works (the mystical writings of Northern Europe), in the proper context'.[729] References to Neoplatonism litter texts concerning the mid and late Middle Ages, both in theology and the arts, often without adequate elaboration. Uyttenhove questions this emphasis and its assumptions.[730] The manner in which Plotinus (204-270), in response to the growing influence of Christianity, sought to revive the great days of Plato and lay the treasures of Greek thought alongside that of the new religion, says as much of the threat, intellectually and culturally, that was felt within pagan communities as it does about aspirations of his latter-day Greek prowess.

[726] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p,24
[727] (McGinn 2012) p.497 n.14
[728] (Turner 1995) p.1
[729] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p.3
[730] (Uyttenhove 2012) p.65-69

Although it was the Gnostics that provoked Plotinus, he was challenged by what was perceived, in those early days, to be a rival philosophy.

The late Evelyn Underhill, as early as 1919, wrote widely on mysticism and her small text on Plotinus is interesting. In the Eneads, she writes that Plotinus presents the Divine in a unique triune, in descending order: The *One*, perfection, having nothing, seeking nothing, needing nothing, yet it overflows creatively the source of being.[731] We read of, 'The *Nous* or Spirit with intelligence, wisdom, poetic intuition, the "Father and Companion" of the soul.[732] There is the, 'emitted Soul or Life, the vital essence of the world, which aspires to communion with the Spirit above, while also engaged with the physical world beneath'.[733] As Ince contests, the struggle between pagan philosophy, as seen in Plotinus, and the young Christianity, was in many ways a struggle about similar issues that generated a, 'sober mysticism,' This was one that sought detachment from the world, an inwardness that aspired to a communion with God as the highest Good; a beneficent idealism.[734] Interestingly, Ince makes the point that by the time that Plotinus was establishing his, 'Neoplatonism', the Greek texts had already been plundered; 'most of the ideas which the church is said to have borrowed from neoplatonism, are to be found already in the Gospel of John'.[735]

Bernard McGinn, Rik van Nieuwenhove and Denys Turner, make a determined stance for the influence of Neoplatonism on the mystical theology of the Middle Ages, the language and the sentiments, and in particular in relation to Jan van Ruusbroec, a key writer. But there are other opinions. In her thesis on Ruusbroec, Lieve Uyttenhove makes a strong stance in for moderating the influence, at least in detail.[736] The term Neoplatonism, may be a 'general term' to refer to the thinking that came out of Alexandria from the 3rd to the 4th centuries, which was dominated by Plotinus[737] but it seems to have become a shorthand for expressing a general attention to the non-physical

[731] (Underhill 1919) p. 121 Underhill was a contemporary of William James who made great copy of deriding Christian mystical thinking and practice.
[732] Ibid. p.121-2
[733] Ibid.p.123
[734] (Ince 1900) p.330
[735] Ibid.p.329
[736] (Uyttenhove 2012) p.114ff and p.312-3
[737] (Uyttenhove 2012) p.114 n.54

nature of man and his relationship with 'the Good'. Although predominantly Greek, these expressions were garnered from international sources with their own expressions of the spiritual, she contests. What has come down to us is the 'spirit' of these ancient writers, read and through the minds of inspired thinkers, translated into texts that were relevant for their particular day, when struggling to define God. The ancient texts were the seed crystals that caused to be precipitated out from the medieval, super-saturated solutions of thoughts about God's, glittering planes of insight that continued to shine into a 'the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.'[738]

In Ruusbroec's Trinity, 'The Father ceaselessly sees all things anew in the birth of the Son, so too are all things loved anew by the Father and the Son in the flowing forth of the Holy Spirit'.[739] The perspective from which we must read his writings, is that of God's love for every human person, their sole desire being to contemplate God and be one with God in love ... his reflections on the life of the Triune God constitute the central point of his mystical writing,'[740] texts that contributed significantly to lay piety.

What then are the basic notions of Ruusbroec's Triune God? Though acknowledged as not being original, as Nieuwenhove explains, Ruusbroec makes a distinction between the two natures of God: 'the divine nature as the fruitful source of the divinity and the divine essence or being',[741] the *essence* of God associated with 'idleness' and 'rest'. [742] The 'natural' world is a part of the 'activity' of the Trinity: 'the generation of the Son [from the Father] and the procession of the Spirit', the *energies*. The holistic God of the three divine Persons is one of union. But these two natures constantly work in unison, constantly shifting between the *energies* and the *essence* with this movement termed, not strictly by Ruusbroec, as *regiratio.*[743] This is in preparation for Ruusbroec's reasoning that this division of understanding God in two ways enables an understanding of the working relationship of God, in love, with the human. However these are only

[738] Ibid p. 21 Turner is quoting Denys the Areopagyte's opening prayer to his *Mystical Theology*
[739] (Ruusbroec 1981) p. 152 *Spiritual Espousals* Book Three, part four.
[740](Uyttenhove 2007) p.73
[741](Nieuwenhove 2000) p.177
[742] Ibid p.177
[743] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p.50

flawed human words to describe, what is not actually a division of, but twin aspects of the One God, constantly present.

Nieuwenhove brings clarity to Ruusbroec's 'dynamic' conception of the Trinity, firstly by offering a quotation and interpreting it.

> "God is every being's supper-essense. His Godhead is a fathomless whirlpool; whoever enters it loses himself in it. God is one in nature, threeness in Persons. Threeness is eternally remaining in oneness of nature and oneness in nature of threeness of personhood. Thus nature is living and fruitful in eternity. The being/essence of God is idle, eternal beginning and end, and a living subsistence of everything created".

The life lived, as Ruusbroec perceives it for his readers, is a 'common life', 'a life of enjoyment and activity, just as the Trinity itself is both activity in the Persons and enjoyment in their mutual interpenetration or *perichoresis',*[744] a key concept for the interpretation of Ruusbroec's work that was to follow. Important, in Ruusbroec's thinking, is his declaration that, " From the mutual contemplation of the Father and Son, flows an eternal pleasure, the Holy Spirit, the Third Person who flows forth from the other two. For He is one will and one love to both of them, eternally flowing out of them and flowing back in to the nature of the divinity".[745] Therefore, "Out of the oneness (in God as resting essence) there is the birth-giving and flowing-back (of the three Persons in their active energies)".[746] Uyttenhove draws attention to the difficulties of translating Ruusbroec's understanding, into an accurate and meaningful definition of the Trinity. She concludes that, 'We are to imagine the divided and distinct persons as a mutual active live life between the Father and Son, who are ceaselessly directed to and embrace one another in one love or one Holy Spirit, flowing from and being one bond of both'.[747] Additionally, "there is mutual knowledge and love, flux and reflux between the Father and the Son by means of the Holy Spirit, who is the love of them both".[748] So

[744] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p177
[745] Ibid p.177
[746] (Uyttenhove 2007) p.410
[747] Ibid p. 410
[748] Ibid.p.410

it is, that she summarises Ruusbroec's Trinity as 'grounding Christian mystical life: he asserts that mystics, sharing in the active love life of the Trinity and being one in their enjoyable union, are one life or one reality of love with God'.[749]

The Key Aspects of Ruusbroec in Relation to the Laity

It is inordinately difficult to condense the writings and convey the importance of Jan van Ruusbroec for the lay piety of the late Middle Ages of Northern Europe within in this limited context. Bernard McGinn has offered a précis of the key elements of the ideas Ruusbroec promoted as he strove, in his *Spiritual Espousals*, to transmit to his readers, the key elements of his appreciation of Christian mysticism in that corner of Northern Europe in the fourteenth century and how those of diverse backgrounds and ability and fortune could, apart from the strictures of church, attain a closeness to God their creator; It is important that the text was written, not in his monastic years but, as a parish priest. McGinn defines four key aspects of his teaching; love and knowledge, sensing God's actions, deifying union and the Common Life. [750]

With *love and knowledge*, 'The contemplative (aspiring mystical) individual is invited by Ruusbroec to understand the deepest core of his or her experience, not as undifferentiated experience, but as fathomless love'.[751] The word 'love' can be a contentious, polysemous word depending on context, where literal extravagance can be misinterpreted. With Ruusbroec, it is further complicated by the fact that he was heavily influenced by the woman, believed to be head of a Beguinage, Hadawijch of Antwerp.[752] She had died in 1248, forty five years before Ruusbroec was born; the fact that she was still read seriously, is some measure of the status of her writing and her influence.

[749] (Uyttenhove 2007) p.422
[750] (McGinn 2012) p.47-61
[751] (Uttenhove 2012) p. viii Quoted from Rob Faesen S.J. in his preface to the work on Ruusbroec by Lieve Uttenhove.
[752] (McGinn 2012) p.5

However here, it is the manner in which Hadewijch expresses 'love', which is so important for understanding some of Ruusbroec's texts. From the standard of her literacy, it is assumed that she wealthy and so conversant with the verbal excesses of 'courtly love. Added to that, there was the violence of St. Francis's love of God; she was his contemporary. 'Hadewijch's literary mastery surpasses that of any other medieval woman mystic, not least because of the variety of genres in which she expressed her message'.[753] The love she expressed, for God, was both violent and erotic, but she seemingly spoke to an empathetic audience. The word *mine* is key to her expression her expression of the mystical love of God: *Minne,* the lofty term for love that in its voracious consumption defies rational description. "The power which I come to know in the nature of *minne/*Throws my mind into bewilderment:/The thing has no form, no manner, no outward appearance./ Yet it can be tasted as something actual:/ It is the substance of my joy,[754] 'Ruusbroec followed Hadewijch in insisting that the overwhelming power of the madness or "storm of love" pushes beyond all knowing, in order to release the soul into the deepest union with the triune God".[755] And from his *Spieghel,*

> "Love without measure, which is God himself, reigns in the purity of our spirit, like a glow of burning coals. It gives out flashing, burning sparks that touch and spark off in burning force ... we fight against the tremendous love of God, which wants to burn up all loving spirits and devour them in its Selfhood";[756]

strange talk indeed for the majority of ardent Christians struggling with the trials of mortality.

Within the context of knowing God and 'love' *per se* there was the religious visual imagery and the vagaries of the mortal world. There is the difference between the physical image of lived reality, the bounty of art and artefacts and the image in the mind's eye; all three are inexorable bound together. It is only through the experience of love, with its imagined recollections, that we can begin to have experience of 'love'.

[753] (McGinn 1998) p.200
[754] Ibid p.202
[755] (McGinn 2012) p.47
[756] Ibid p. 50

Religious imagery references that love and provides foci for its contemplation. The two were inexorably combined. 'In his text, *The Seven Enclosures,* Ruusbroec summarizes the need for freeing oneself of [these] created images'[757]: "If you want to practice and possess love and holiness to the highest degree, you must strip your faculty of the understanding of all images (not merely those of God), and through faith raise above reason."[758] This was because we may reach, "our empty state of bare unimagedness that is our unity of spirit".[759] However, as Ruusbroec realised, if he is to maintain the inward and outward flow, which is critical to his understanding of God, then the presence as well as the absence of image must be accepted. "If he possesses God with affection, a person will be freed of images inside, since God is spirit and no one can make a proper image of him". Bonaventure had invoked images of the seen mortal world as an initial stage to a communion with God in his *Itinerarium.* For Ruusbroec, in practice, a person should concentrate on good images, such as the Passion of Lord and all things that may rouse him to higher devotion".[760]

The 'love' that Ruusbroec espouses is multidimensional, and quite alien to the modern mind-set with its intensity, reflecting Hadewijch and Porete. It ultimately, goes beyond any kind of human understanding. At its highest point, it is "Where intellect remains outside, there longing and love go in".[761] It transcends any reasoning or earthly reality: "our reasoning stands open-eyed in the dark, that is in the unfathomable unknowing".[762] Anything we know is valueless, so that the highest form of knowing is that of being without knowledge; it is "learned ignorance"[763] and that applies to any concept of 'love' between the mortal and the Christian God.

Practically, Nieuwenhove explains the gist of this love, 'Participating in the Trinity, made possible by grace, means to know and love God the way he knows and loves himself. The contemplative life consist in "nothing other than contemplating and gazing

[757] Ibid.p.49
[758] Ibid p. 48
[759] Ibid p. 48 From Ruusbroec's *Speighel* 1889-93
[760] Ibid p. From Ruusbroec's *Steen* 42-46
[761] (McGinn 2012) p.49 Taken from Ruusbroec's *Brulochta* 1005-6
[762] Ibid p. 51 *Steen 621*
[763] Ibid. p 49 *Steen* 80-81

and cleaving to God in denuded love, savouring and enjoying and melting in love – and always remaining in this".[764]

For Ruusbroec to write as he did and his reader to comprehend, they clearly had a profound 'sense of God'. The 'inner experience' associated with mystical theology, varies wildly between persons and challenges the imagination to contain it in words. An 'inner experience' may be defined as, 'perception [that] takes place in the absence of observable external sensations or testable stimuli'.[765] The dilemma was how to capture the fusion of 'feeling and knowing'; '*amor ipse intellectus est'.*[766]

McGinn, relates, how in the early Middle Ages, the bodily senses were differentiated and secondary to those of the mind. As the years progressed, and particularly during the time of Bernard of Claivaux, they became more closely connected, when with Hadewijch, 'all distinction between inner and outer bodily senses vanishes and the encounter with God is described in a directly somatic way'.[767] McGinn adds that, 'these went way beyond what can be described as 'normal' sensations. They were often wildly uncontrolled, could be physically violent in nature or alluding to eroticism; the sense of 'taste' and 'touch' were favourite euphemisms for describing that 'sense of God'. Just as Bonaventure had to manage the excesses of St. Francis, the strong physical and emotional senses had yet to learn a gentler co-habitation. Similarly, the same was to happen, to a certain extent, with Ruusbroec.

A favourite term Ruusbroec used to speak of being graced with a sense of God, was that of "touch" and at the time quite innovative.[768] "Touch is a grace, not something we possess by nature; it is passively received by both the faculty of love and the enlightened reason moving them to deeper knowing and loving of God". [769] Without

[764] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p.167 *Sloten* 690
[765] (McGinn 2001) p.156
[766] Ibid p. 156
[767] (McGinn 2012) p.51
[768] Ibid p.52
[769] Ibid p.52 From *Brulocht* b 1462-1527

having this 'sense' the aspiring Christian, despite a righteous life, would not be able to proceed toward any mystical appreciation of God; it was a pre-requisite.

Despite Ruusbroec's influence continuing into the fifteen century, society became more sophisticated. As I noted in Chapter One, in the years before and during Rogier's apprenticeship, within painting and sculpture there was a move to express this 'sense' of being 'touched by God' as part of an attempt to include the subtler expressions of the emotional within the body physical. It is at this point that Ruusbroec's 'dynamic' Trinitarian understanding becomes so important: "When the Spirit of Our Lord touches a humble heart, He gives His grace, and demands likeness in virtues and, above all virtues, unity with Him in love". Ruusbroec argues that for those whose lives have been directed toward and aspire to a unity with God, they stand at the beginning of the contemplative life, the most demanding final stage of a spiritual ascent. Having gained a 'sense' of God, they may then move, at this phase in the mystical life, to a unification with the 'fruitful nature of God', which is always working in three-ness of Persons, and brings to completion all good things unity of His Spirit". [770]

Ruusbroec may have been clear in his own mind as to his understanding of the Trinity, but it was another to set that before, even an inward looking few, caught up with his thinking, let alone for a working population, as it was by the end of the century. For, as McGinn reminds, 'he was a proponent of the *vernacular* theology of the Middle Ages.[771] 'He was writing for a varied audience and anxious to correct errors as to how to 'attain' God', one which included The Brethren of the Free Spirit. With the appropriation of the ancient, *regiratio,* Ruusbroec moved on, in parallel, at once establishing a more speculative mystical theology which was intended to enhance the contemporary understanding of the Christian God and at the same time seeking to set out paths of spiritual guidance for the laity. The overworked analyses of his texts, abstracted from their context, have caused to be lost their original intimacy and sense of personal mission. The texts are held within and reflect the cultural dimensions of the age. They speak of angelology, cosmology, with hierarchies defined in order to describe states of the human soul's being and the manner in which it can be brought back to and

[770] Ibid.p.254
[771] (McGinn 2012) p. 498 note 19

held in God. He uses the contemporary fascination with astrology to grasp the hearer's attention when, in *The Spiritual Espousals,* he likens Christ's coming to, 'the sun in the sign of Gemini' and lyrically compares it to, 'the joys of an earthly spring'.[772] He carefully explains that, the three higher facilities of the soul, memory (mind), intellect and will, reflect the three Persons of the Trinity. As we have been created in the image of the Trinity, we thus show the same characteristic rhythms of *regiratio:*

> "All rational creatures, angels and human beings, whom God made in his likeness in Grace and Glory, flow back because of this very likeness, into the unity of their mind and have a natural inclination toward and an enjoyable immersion with recollected faculties, in God's supra-being, as in their own ground".[773]

Having made the rigorous spiritual journey, which in reality few would attain, they would in the final stages, be blessed with a separate enlightenment from each of the Persons of the Trinity. [774] "From the Father, the memory of the mind, the Son enlightens our intellect (to aid the ability of contemplation) and the Spirit inflames our will and introduces us to the *Common Life,* a life in which there is both fruition and activity, mirroring the out-flowing and in-flowing of Divine love"; a *regiratio.* The aim is to abandon self-fulfilment in an 'annihilation of selfhood', to purify our self-centredness and mould our human nature to that of the intra-Trinitarian life. Ruusbroec is paternalistic, he is coaxing of his fellow Christians along a path towards God's promise of eternity and tempting of the possibility of a *Union with God's Fruitful Nature.* There is the possibility of, 'Through an eternal act of gazing accomplished by means of the inborn light, they are transformed and become on with the same light with which they see and which they see'.[775]

[772](Ruusbroec 1985) p. 81
[773] Ibid p.20
[774] Ibid p.21
[775] (Ruusbroec 1985) p.150 From Book Three of the *Spiritual Espousals*

'The Common Life', "Participating in God's Active and Enjoyable Love",[776], as interpreted in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries was applied to the lifestyle lived by those people who chose to live a quasi-monastic life within urban society, as described so well by Van Engen.[777] But it also describes the "Commonality" or "generous loving" as defined by Ruusbroec, applicable to a wide section of society. That was his vision of how the dynamic life of God as Tri-unity pervades the universe and how 'we are invited to share in this fusion of restful fruition and pulsating energy'.[778] In many situations these two were conjoined. As Nieuwenhove comments,

> 'Common', can refer to that which is shared by or belongs to a whole community (as within the houses of the Devotio Moderna). In that sense Christ is called common, as he "had nothing proper to himself, nothing of his own, but everything [was] common ... In a more specific sense, the commonness of Christ reflects the common nature of the divinity in its active and fruitive aspects. The "common" person is somebody who through his/her participation in the Trinity is equally ready for contemplation and virtuous activity and perfect in both'.[779]

Ruusbroec encouraged a personal transformation of the individual, 'a conversion', whereby the individual, 'acquires a selfless, theocentric focus in whatever he/she does'. So that,

> 'By being "intent" on God in whatever we do, we "rest" in God. Thus we will lead the "common life", a life (in imitation of Christ) in which contemplation and virtuous activity are perfectly integrated in a perfect reflection of the "common" nature of the Trinity, which is both activity in the Persons and the "enjoyable rest" in the perichoretic unity'.[780]

That same inclusive unity was given voice in John 17:21, as Christ prepared to leave the world and petitioned the Father to care, not only for the eleven remaining disciples, but

[776] (Uyttenhove 2012) p.235 From Ruusbroec's *The Spiritual Tabernacle*
[777] (Van Engen 2008) p.2ff
[778] (McGinn 2012) p. 59
[779] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p.179-8
[780] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p.5

all those who would follow them in faith: 'That they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.'[781]

Those who attempted to lead the "common life", discounting for the moment the inherent practical problems associated with such a commitment, were engaging with an ancient concept of man's relationship with God.[782] "Ruusbroec presents God's Trinitarian reality as one unity of love on 'the one hand out-flowing and inward-drawing through a threeness of Persons, on the other hand, one enjoyment, without distinction of Persons'.[783] As noted, Ruusbroec did not have the Latin *regiratio* in his Dutch vocabulary, but aptly describes the 'common life', common in its physicality and its spirituality, the mortal human could attune to the *energies* and *essence* of God, as an ever present force.

Jan van Ruusbroec's Theology and Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*: A *Rapprochment* between them in the 'light' of The East

Familiarity with sacred thing,' as Huizinga pertinently pointed out in the first half of the 20th century, 'is, on the one hand a sign of ingenuous faith, on the other it entails irreverence when mental contact with the infinite fails,' thus resulting in, 'the deprecation of sacred imagery': A twentieth century, scathing look at the religious life of the middle ages. The era he describes includes that during which Rogier conceived and wrought his masterwork. For a working master painter, any man of the world, his own religious understanding had to take its chance within the disparate influences that were abroad. He and his work could not be quarantined. It had to enter into the mêllé of early 15th century Northern European life and by force of excellence and creativity state its case.

How could his work maintain its contact with the infinite and yet avoid deprecation? The integrity of Christian thought was and is, immensely vulnerable. There were powerful forces at work to subvert official church power and promote

[781] (Nieuwenhove 2000) p.180
[782] See section on Neoplatonism.
[783] (Uyttenhove 2007) p.422

alternative thinking, against which the Church was ever vigilant. Highly personal interpretations of Christianity attracted large numbers of followers and the mystical elements within those interpretations often became dangerously creative. Jean Gerson was one who was constantly aware of the potential dangers of mystical writings.

Jan van Engen makes the point, as to how this complex era has been interpreted in the light of our own time and cultures. He contrasts the view of the young protestant Albert Hyma of the 1920's with that of the later, late sixties, Catholic, R.R.Post, on the phenomenon of the lay devout of the mid to late Middle Ages. Hyma, in his youthful enthusiasm wrote, "this, 'New Devotion' ... absorbed the wisdom of the ancients, the essence of Christ's teachings, the mystic religion of the Fathers and the Saints as well as the learning of the Italian humanists." Post was sternly factual; the "Devotionalists" were "Netherlandish, ascetic, sober and quaisi-monastic in their ambitions".[784] Maybe in reality there was a balance of the two? Engen comments that, 'as the Modern Devout had trouble fitting in [with their own contemporary society], so too have historians had trouble finding ways to fit **them** in'.[785] This is equally pertinent for the work of the Flemish artists.

By the end of the fourteenth century, those initial writings of Jan van Ruusbroec had become translated into the movement of *The Modern Day Devout*, within the Lowlands of Northern Europe. The preaching of Geert Grote (1340-1384), inspired by Ruusbroec, was regarded as the spark for the Modern Devotion; an extra-ordinary movement, within an extra-ordinary era. Rogier's world was but one part of, 'an extravagantly expansive world of devotion in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Europe, so powerful in its impetus as to produce hundreds of vernacular texts and tens of thousands of cultic and visual objects, so divers as to defy any single rubric or characterizations'.[786] That is without record of the vibrant oral culture that integrated the Christian God into everyday life. At its core however, the modern devotion, in its most perfect form, held to the ideal 'of the relationship of mutual love between God and

[784] (Van Engen 2008) p.3
[785] Ibid p.4
[786] Ibid p. 9

humankind on the one hand, and the love of the Trinity on the other'.[787] It was quite revolutionary in that it allowed the very ordinary citizen, outside the control of Church authority, a self determining 'rite of passage' to a union with God a freedom that alarmed the Church and brought censor. 'During the whole of the fourteenth century there was a growing hostility against less conventional religious commentaries'.[788] Ruusbroec was ever mindful of this dangers; his 'attitude to overenthusiastic mysticism was as encouraging as it was careful'.[789]

The obsessive involvement with the brutalised body of Christ, as understood through Francis and Bonaventure had changed. With Ruusbroec there was a broader understanding of God, through the nature of the Trinity. There was the assertion that,

> 'we can only participate in the Trinitarian life through Christ, He is according to his human and his divine natures, the door through which we attain blessedness ... Christ exemplified the outgoing, ingoing and enjoyable dimensions of the divine life: He was always raised with devotion towards his Father and was always turned downward towards the need of his fellow men'.[790]

Just as this was the continuous dual nature of Christ and his relationship with the Father, so too with those conducting a 'common life', their lives were one of, 'virtuous activity and contemplation' which are always in perfect harmony,[791] by virtue of *regiratio.* There is always the potential for any man or woman, of whatever station, to aspire to 'the brilliant darkness of God'.

In considering the 'local' Jan van Ruusbroec, the final question has to be, how could any understanding of his theology be expressed on a flat plane using a literal interpretation of the dead historical Jesus? We still have the painting preserved, seemingly miraculously for its 580 years. We have, over the last fifty years, acquired a corpus of writing on the social, political and religious lives within Northern Europe in the mid to late Middle Ages: the lives of the artist and those, a party to this particular

[787] (Uyttenhove 2007) p. vii
[788] (Warnar 1999) p.370
[789] Ibid.p.382
[790] (Nieuwenhove 2003) p.179
[791] Ibid.p.194

masterpiece. We have translations of Ruusbroec's work. What have they to say to one another? Where possibly can any *rapprochment* lie? After long contact with this artwork and despite an acute awareness of modern intellectual attitudes toward works of religious art,[792] there are two aspects of the painting that I believe can make the link to Ruusbroec. Firstly, there is the highly charged emotional nature of the panel; for which it was so celebrated: Expressed, so intensely; that emotion grounded in 'love', human and divine. Secondly, there is the particular description of the central figure of Christ. He may be central to the work but he is not apart from those around him. The figures enact John's Gospel: the earthly physical hovers between the divinity of Scripture. The visual descriptions of brutality are reduced to references. There is an inbuilt facility for vacillation between the earthly and the divine: The charitable, caring action of 'removal' and the still, consummation into the divine, that presents the potential for *energia* and *essence*, for *regiratio*.

Ruusbroec and Rogier's 'Love' of God

In his *Mirror of Eternal Blessedness,* Ruusbroec defines four categories of loving God; the highest of these, *above us,* is beyond our comprehension and is "the Spirit of our Lord". Below that there is the love inherent in the individual, a gift of nature, or more properly Grace, a love *within.* Combining the two, there is the love *between* the lowly mortal and God himself and lastly the love which is *beneath* you, expressing the more mundane charitable love of neighbour.[793] It could be argued that Rogier's masterwork embodies all four or if any one were to be excluded it would be the last, as the context and description take love way beyond the merely charitable. To grieve with such distress, denotes the love *between* and also *within* but surely also alludes to the highest, that incomprehensible, "Spirit of our Lord" which is *above* us.

But how does the mere human learn and understand, Christian 'Love,' except from experiences with other humans and almost secondarily, within the teaching of the Gospels? And what is the highest form of this 'Love,' in human terms, but one that is

[792] (Kessler 2004), (Kessler 2000),(Kessler 2005), (Freedberg 1982), (Freedberg 1989)
[793] (Ruusbroec 1985) p.191 Part One: The Life of Virtue

given freely and with a light heart, without any expectation of reciprocation through which we can only glimpse what it is meant by divine love. We can only begin to understand the love of God from observation and experience within the worldly life, from seeing and being the recipient of selfless love. For all the acceptance of Ruusbroec's worthy theologising, with his exceptional perception of God, in practice it would have had to have been tempered by circumstance and experience.

In terms of the love of God, there were inevitably other, older influences that wove their way into the whole tapestry of his late medieval religious thought. In *The Descent*, there seems to be an overwhelming statement of human love at its most ennobling and altruistic best. There is bewilderment and an inability to comprehend. That level of love is not intended to be understood for, "in progress toward final union, love goes further than any kind of knowing."[794] Ruusbroec wrote, "Where intellect remains outside, there longing and love go in." These statements can take us deep into mystical thinking where, "the highest form of knowing is unknowing, or "learned ignorance." To understand the intensity of a love, the apparent loss of which elicits such tangible grief, is to go beyond basic human facility. Communication moves from the physical to the spiritual. From *The Sparkling Stone*, Ruusbroec wrote,

> *"*our reason stands open-eyed in the dark, that is the unfathomable unknowing. And in this darkness the unfathomable brightness remains covered and hidden from us, for its overwhelming unfathomableness blinds our reason ... without knowledge we cannot possess God, and without our practice of loving we cannot be united with him." [795]

Ruusbroec's detailed understanding of the Trinity may have been outstanding, but it did not escape severe criticism, as it edged boldly toward an unacceptable intimacy with God. This is particularly explicit in the third book of his *Spiritual Espousals* which Jean Gerson, called to be disregarded. The text is the last section of guidance as to how the devout Christian may enter into the final stages of attaining a union with God. "Through

[794] McGinn 2012) p.49.
[795](McGinn, 2012) p 51 *Steen* 621-24

the eternal act of gazing accomplished by means of the in-born light, they are transformed and become one with that same light with which they see and which they see".[796] This was read as meaning that 'the persons ultimately ceased to exist and disappeared completely into the divine essence or, in other words, that the ultimate goal of (contemplative) life is to be absorbed into the divine All, then there are clearly far reaching consequences'.[797] As Faesen comments, this (apparently) goes beyond any concepts of 'love' or spiritual ascent and becomes a fusion. But in his *Steen,* Ruusbroec asserts that "we cannot become God at all and lose our createdness: that is impossible. Ruusbroec flounders with inadequate words that can never hope to express divine love, or to accurately link the love within the Trinity with the love between God and the human.

Rogier must have floundered before he secured his composition. But in his floundering, Rogier captured a pivotal moment, one that is grounded in earthly love and the ultimate challenge of human death. Its stillness and its restraint are forced to breaking point as it offers worldly and Godly empathy. It also offers the contemplation on the dual natures of Christ God, the worldly activity and the resting in his essence. In its modernity, it holds within its fabric, a distillation of nearly fifteen hundred years of Christian wrestling with the 'mystery' of the God Man; Anselm, Bonaventure and Ruusbroec but three voices. There is the particular Northern European lay piety which held, at its core, the Christ Jesus, as one of its own. In prayerful contemplation of this work, there surely was the capacity for *regiratio.* The visual stilled by the gravity of the moment, conveys in its ambiguity that which words fail. For every individual, who avowed of Ruusbroec's guidance to aspire to communion with God, there was the capacity to, 'go forth ... by means of blissful love,' where he/she may, 'transcend his creaturely state and find and savour the riches and delight which God is himself ,' to 'where the spirit bears a likeness to God's own nobility.'[798] These may have been only rare, fleeting moments, when the physical reality melted into that 'dark stillness'; when

[796] (Ruusbroec 1985) p.150
[797] (Uyttenhove 2012) p.vi. Preface by Rob Faesen
[798] (Ruusbroec 1985) p. 151

even such a sublime description as Rogier's *Descent* became as nothing, became invalid. It is a moment to which Ruusbroec's simple poetry is applicable:-

O mighty jaw
Without any mouth,
Conduct us into your abyss
And make us know your love,
For though we be wounded mortally,
When grasped by love, we are sound. [799]

A last perspective on Ruusbroec

"Of what profit is it to you to dispute high things about the Trinity if you lack humility and thus displease the Trinity? ... If you were to know the whole Bible and the sayings of all the philosophers, what would all that profit you without the love and grace of God', wrote Thomas à Kempis (d.1471, the same year as Ruusbroec) in his first pamphlet [800]. This was the Thomas whose text, the *Imitation of Christ,*[801] has become synonymous with vernacular medieval mysticism. Despite being, 'no theologian, no humanist, no philosopher, no poet and even hardly a true mystic ... he wrote the book which was to console the ages'.[802] The contradictions within the abiding popularity of Kempis[803] and his obsessive insistence on ultra-humility, the theological depths the modest secular cleric Jan van Ruusbroec plumbed, in Middle Dutch, with his exposition of the Trinity and the complexity of the religious and social climate of the era that received both writers with enthusiasm, contrived to make succinct conclusions riven with caveats.

[799] Ibid.p.61. Taken from *Stolten*
[800] (Engen, John van 2008) p.239
[801] (à Kempis,Thomas 1979)
[802] (Huizinger,Johan p.201
[803](à Kempis,Thomas 1979) In his introduction to the *Imitation of Christ,* Blaiklock acknowledges the strong and simple Latin of Kempis – 'he wrote to be understood'. P.17

Geert Warner makes a compelling argument for suggesting that modern scholarship, in concentrating on the theological and philosophical aspects of medieval religious texts, has omitted, to its cost, the importance of context:[804] that it has to a certain extent been stranded on the sandbank of its own expertise. To read the *Spiritual Espousals* unedited, is to read a text from which a wide section of contemporary society gained spiritual support and enlightenment, regardless of what intellectual level their reading took them. The early passages of the *Espousals* are, almost patronisingly, simplistic in their aphorisms and use of similes, yet later he elaborates on a profound understanding of the nature of and communion with God, making the circumstances and reception of the work critical to its understanding. People in the fourteenth century did not conduct their lives unheeding of their mortality. Lives were lived in the daily company of death, often sudden, often long and brutally painful; the image of a skeleton was a regular motif in illustrated literary texts. It was of considerable importance that the ultimate destination, with God, was secured. Rather than being, as he has often been perceived, a solitary mystic, Ruusbroec and his colleagues were actively engaged in 'creating an environment in which the true Christian spirituality was no longer obstructed by the corrupted mechanisms of the fourteenth century church'[805]; there was introduced a very personal, self-determining methodology for building a relationship with God, whilst on earth. 'There is hardly a historian who does not ascribe the overwhelming religious climate in Middle Dutch literature to the reform movement of Geert Grote and the Modern Devotion',[806] but it was to Jan van Ruusbroec, in Groenendal in 1377 that Grote went for clarification of this new religious understanding.[807] Critically important to appreciating the social context of his work and the quality of his theology is the emphasis he placed on the 'active' life, the quality of the life lives as a prerequisite for further spiritual advancement. Reminiscent of St. Francis he wrote, 'He [God] has placed before us Nature, Scripture and creatures to be a mirror and example in which we may observe and learn how to turn all our works into virtues'.[808] They had to, 'discover the image of God within themselves – in *imitatio Christi* – by living their humble active

[804](Warner,Geert 1999) p. 366.
[805] Ibid p.373
[806] Ibid p.379
[807] (Ruusbroec 1985) p.25
[808]Ibid p.80 Part II

life'.[809] From the bounty of texts remaining to us, this piety was not limited to the formally 'devout'.

The range of intellect and imagination that Ruusbroec's *Espousals* embraces is a testament to the aspirations and mental imagination of the contemporary laity. While the social context is important, his theology and philosophy are important to us, not only historically, but as a creative part of our own attempts at understanding contemporary Christian belief into the future, an understanding that can equally embrace Rogier's masterwork. Lieve Uyttenhove's text is progressive in its consideration of Ruusbroec. Firstly she believes that his, 'Trinitarian mysticism offers perspectives for a new reunification of theology and mysticism',[810] a unity that was actively in place in the early fifteenth century. Secondly, the fact that he shows that, 'contemplative theology understood as a mutual love relationship between God and the human person is the source an origin of all acquired knowledge of God'.[811] And lastly, and key to chapter three, she acknowledges that a future challenge for any consideration of Ruusbroec and the East – 'the search for a common contemplative theology that is shared by fourteenth century representatives of both the hesychastic tradition in the East, such as Gregorius Palamas, and Middle Dutch mysticism in the Low Countries of the West',[812] is awaiting serious research.

Although Ruusbroec was, as Bonaventure had been, but a single mind in a complex and a very particular environment, his 'impressive oeuvre was above all the result of extraordinary powers of introspection and spiritual sensibility'[813] which greatly assisted in that move amongst the laity for their own spiritual self determination, a determination which included Rogier van der Weyden's aspirations and execution of superlative visual religious expression.

[809](Bocken) p.228
[810] (Uyttenhove,Lieve 2012) p.312
[811] Ibid p,312
[812] Ibid p.312
[813] (Bocken} p.386

Conclusion

Not long after the death of Rogier van der Weyden, the Italian, Jocopi Tiraboschi penned a lyrical verse extolling the supremacy of the painter.[814] He wrote of him, that he had rivalled and even excelled the work of the ancients, particularly Timanthes, with his renowned painting *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia* .[815] What the works of the two men had in common, he believed, was the *pieta,* that concept of sacrificial death accompanied by the human expression of deep grief, which Rogier had presented to the late medieval world in his Leuven altarpiece. It is this ability of the work to express, on the flat plane, the deep emotions of human distress that has carried the work through the ages and secured its place in history. But that place is not within the mainstream of Western Art. Maybe it was that the Reformation, with its iconoclastic fervour, that was so soon to come upon it, as well as the emerging dominance of the Italian Renaissance, with its sumptuous art works have contributed to the, almost hermetic, sealing of the work within its ancient accolade. It has been the prying into the circumstance, particularly the religious circumstance of the work that motivated me to research this painting.

When I set out on my quest to take an understanding of *The Descent from the Cross* beyond the limits of artistic historical analysis, I had a brief outline of what I wanted to explore, in terms of 'clothing the work with the context of its origins'. There were key lines of enquiry that naturally arose from the painting but also there were social and religious phenomena, influences, complexities, contemporary to the work that I had not predicted, that demanded to be explored, often needing references to their origins to secure their validity. There are many, seemingly trivial, asides that I would argue are poignant insights into the era, that express the timbre of the age: as an example, despite the brutal nature of the crossbow as an instrument of war, it is pertinent to know how the Dukes of Burgundy preferred to use less violent means of social control, where possible, with their *joyous entrances* and *magnificences,* that emptied the purses of the

[814] (Stock 2009) p.16
[815] Ibid p.15

burghers rather than taking their lives. Like the intricacies of the painting, these are there as part of the greater whole.

Throughout, there were areas of context that I had not anticipated. In the first chapter the Chambers of Rhetoric was a rich seam of insight into the aspirations of the laity, their rising importance and the sincerity with which they seem to have been inspired and guided by their faith. Their dramatic activities and its integration into the multifaceted medium of communication went beyond the religious but retained it at its centre. Their literary ambitions and presence within society begins to integrate Rogier's painting into the fabric of early fifteenth century Northern European life. The enactment of the *Seven Sorrows of Mary*, organised by the Crossbowmen being simultaneously trundled through the streets of Leuven as Rogier's altarpiece was newly hanging in the Chapel of Our Lady Outside the Walls in Leuven, suggests the seamless nature of their thought. Their activities endorse the creative expansion of their own vernacular language, one much more emotionally expressive that the Latin of the Church and aristocracy, the languages used by Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruusbroec.

Having created a basic environment for the masterwork by Rogier, the next avenue of enquiry for the second chapter, had to be the dramatic interpretation of Mary. Though the inclusion of text regarding The Virgin Mary is mandatory, given the prominent and expressive interpretation by Rogier, she is not quite the Mary that we have come to expect of the Middle Ages. She fits so seamlessly into the work that it takes persistent looking to acknowledge how very 'modern' she was, a modernity that lead to several lines of enquiry, that is, after the question of the contentious co-redemption had been considered. Within the section headings I have chosen, there are two threads that are relevant to Mary which feed into the later consideration of the painting. The diverse and creative medieval imagery arising from devotions to her and the progressive sophistication of the mystical dimensions of religious practice applicable to Mary, set down lines of thought that are carried though into the last two chapters. The Mary of Rogier's Leuven altarpiece had a long provenance. She did not arise out of the perceived laxity and wrong thinking of the pre-Reformation era, one that is now questioned. She was at the core of the initial rationalisation of the phenomenon of the

life and death of the man called Jesus. Her journey to Leuven had been long and complex, which is why I begin with a brief history of the status of Mary through that second millennium, one that originated in the Nicene Creed.

The culture of devotions to Mary that wound its own way through those Middle Ages was substantially assisted by the stories from the apocryphal texts. The encouragement by senior clerics such as Jean Gerson, fostered a very human and intimate relationship with Mary as part of the Holy Family, one that links directly into Rogier's intensely human interpretation of the Gospel of John and also the centrality of Christ. The illustration of these 'stories' abounded, without quality assurance. For Rogier, the brevity of presenting the Son of God, without notations of deity, within an intensely emotionally and contemporary human situation, a presentation that was so applauded, must surely confirm a stable confidence in the authority of such an image – the supposed naive but actually, sophisticated presentation of such an image.

The manner in which women from the beguine communities and the religious orders contributed to medieval religious thought, especially mystical thinking, has already begun to be explored and that emancipation clearly spread to the newly urban areas with their guilds. Rogier's 'lay' and very contemporary Flemish interpretation of Mary, invites conjecture as to the role and status of women from the mid-medieval times in Northern Europe, even though I would believe that his interpretation was not contrived. However, in terms of the veneration of Mary, maybe the most important contribution made was by the men of the monastic orders: Those men, of whom their order demanded celibacy, poverty and obedience, who developed a particular relationship with the mother of their Christ. I deliberately did not concentrate on the theological arguments for Mary that arose at various times during the Middle Ages, these are well documented, but also because the emphasis throughout this work is on the laity. The three theologians I chose, St. Anselm, St Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Bonaventure had, within their writings, a very personal attachment to the Madonna; For Bernard, his meditations were from a time of profound personal crisis. Anselm's, in a way, like Bernard, were an aside from his more serious work, a very personal expression of faith. Bonaventure's Mariology was inevitably integral to his task of rationalising the life of

Francis whose devotion was, predictably, excessive. All three provide a link, albeit a highly edited link, of the progress of Marian devotion as it was, at the time Rogier planned his altarpiece.

The third chapter presented a challenge. There was, in those mid to late Middle Ages of Northern Europe, this vast swath of visual religious imagery, of diverse quality and mostly unregulated, within which there were elements of mystical theology open to all manner of creative interpretations. The question was how to make sense of these parallel phenomena of Christianity; how to marry the two in relation to the masterwork of *The Descent* by Rogier van der Weyden which, from circumstance, must embrace both?

Key to the resolution, was to me, an acceptance of the need to look at how the Orthodox East, had at the time of its Iconoclasm, intellectualised the legitimacy of creating an image of Christ and other holy figures in the Icon, without charges of idolatry. And, at the same time consider briefly the counter argument, from the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which is still valid today within Reformed faiths and which still throws light on Western Iconoclastic sentiments. Once opened, the *Pandora's Box* of the East threw up the most surprises. Not only was there the omnipresence of the East from the time of the Crusades, but there was the terrible sack of Constantinople in 1204 and the pillage of religious artifacts to fill the churches of the West, but there were also the italio/grecian religious images, in imitation of the Icons, that littered Europe before the Reformation, even still in parallel with *The Primatives.*

In addition to those considerations, there is the Greek influence that comes under the heading of *Neoplatonism,* endorsed by scholars of Northern European mystical theology. It is from the work of those medieval theologians, that Northern Europe began to embrace the holistic union of Scripture with an intellectual/emotional/expansive understanding of its religious faith; adding to that, very practical interpretations, that could, ultimately, be found in the lives of the Devotio Moderna. The argument that I have made is that the visual impact of the Icon, in the absence of a shared language, influenced some art work in the west, without there being a full understanding of its theology; that is despite the fact that it is difficult to fully understand how the pseudo

icons of Italian origin, pupated into the work of *The Primatives.* I have endeavoured to trace how the mystical theology of the Middle Ages, in harmony with the plethora of religious images that littered its life, formed its own fluid, spiritual union.

What denotes the Icon as sacred was its dual function of holding the *Prototype* of Christ, or *Theotokos,* those who had at one time occupied a physical earthly body, with the e*ssense* of God; the union of the earthly and the divine. Veneration offered, ascended, to be returned, divinely, to the supplicant. Like Christ, the image was the portal for the mind's ascent to the 'unfathomable darkness of God'. The west never attempted such a formal strategy for the liturgical use of the image, but the importance of *contemplation* within personal religious practice held to a mental image of the crucified Christ, an image that was educated by those countless visual representations and the exquisite Christ of *The Descent from the Cross*. It is important to note that I am not saying that western mystical theology was wholly dependent upon Orthodox theologians and the Icon. Any, sincere religious practice which holds, within its belief system, those things which are outside the bounds of earthly physical laws requires, by definition, an acceptance of things that are unbelievable – are a mystery – the resolution of which hinges on continuing thought regarding those matters, in order to sense and even 'touch' the divine. It was at this point that I moved on to the fourth chapter and the three theologians I had chosen, whom I believed in this brief encounter, best carried the torch of divine contemplations as to the true nature of their Christian God and His relationship with humanity, one that was particularly western – that very particular western mysticism.

St. Anselm who predates the time Bernard McGinn cites as the beginning of mystical theology within Western Christianity, held within his Benedictine life, spirituality inherent within his Order. It was a spirituality that was to be found within Holy Orders, when at their best. The outside world sorely challenged Anselm's faith and demanded of him answers as to its validity. The rampant secularity of the Dukes of Normandy at home and within the newly conquered England, together with their determination to rule the Church, taxed him immeasurably; a task for which he was ill-suited. In this context, one of the most valuable treasures he has left us, are his personal

prayers, usually written at the request of devout laity, often aristocratic laity. They take the contemplation of the monastery though the cloister door and out into the wider community, so that they may begin to share in the burgeoning desire to draw closer to God. These prayers are particularly important, in this current context, for they are the beginnings of the personal devotions that became so important for the laity during the mid to late Middle Ages in Northern Europe. To have such a body of language with which to speak to God, more particularly Christ and his mother Mary, to the Saints, meant that there was the beginnings of a means of approaching and 'speaking' to God which mitigated the control of the Church.

When considering Bonaventure, there had to be the inclusion of St. Francis of Assisi. Outside his academic work in Paris, Francis pervaded his life. His appointment to lead the Orders of Friars Minor immediately placed him at the forefront of the work of this medicant order and its work within the general population of Northern Europe. Neither he nor his work has travelled well into the modern era, but that does not mean that his work was inferior. It is, I believe, like the work of Rogier, susceptible to our modern manner of viewing pre-Reformation matters. How Bonaventure explored and documented his spirituality, his mystical theologising, with its often surreal lyricism and poetry, emit a great integrity. Once Bonaventure had managed the excesses of Francis and translated them into a more rational, workable form, as in *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum,* the mystical theology of the Middle Ages could be said to have been be securely in place.

Scholars have made the link between Rogier and Denis the Carthusian, between the writings of Jan van Ruusbroec and the lay pious of the era. In his conclusion to his text on *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, Bernard McGinn writes that it was the fourteenth century that saw the writing of the majority of mystical texts, from lone religious, male and female, but it was the fifteenth century, 'that saw the widest reception of those writings'.[816] That was the time when Rogier completed his *Descent from the Cross* and the Carthusian monastery in Brussels was still propagating the writings of Ruusbroec, to a responsive audience.

[816] (McGinn 2012) p.493

Rogier's image is a unique repository of visual information as its text vacillates between the earthly and the divine. Huizinga commented that 'France', and one can include the Burgundian Lands in that, 'had been the motherland of all that was strongest and most beautiful in the products of the medieval spirit';[817] more so than Italy. And in 1437, Brussels and Leuven still retained their *Gothic* character; the precision and colour of that age. Rogier's image was one which, once gazed upon, could be remembered and held at the centre of meditational contemplation, the contemplation of the dead Christ Ruusbroec advocated for spiritual ascent. "Through an eternal act of gazing accomplished by means of the inborn light, they are transformed and become one with that same light with which they see and which they see." For, "It is in this way that contemplatives pursue the eternal image to which they have been created; they contemplate God and all things without distinction in a simple act of seeing in the divine resplendence'.[818] 'The spiritual state called, *dulcedo Dei*, the sweetness of the delights of the love of Christ was, toward the end of the Middle Ages, one of the most active elements of religious life'.[819]

There was a creative importance in the vernacular languages, in the writings of, and aspirations of mystical understanding. 'Vernacular theology was not a simple translation of traditional Latin doctrine into the vernacular, but a creative process'.[820] Thus, the vernacular was the key to Rogier's masterwork. He described, in the visual vernacular, not only the verse from John's Gospel of 1500 years previously, but a contemporary expression of ultimate loss as the result of human injustice and brutality and the permanence of mortal death. He used his own, new vernacular language that combined, within the image, the Scriptural with the mystical, the earthly with the divine, for the contemplation he invites. That was because, '*Contemplation* is a type of knowing which does not merely move towards its object but rests in it. Contemplation concerns a purely receptive approach to reality, disinterested and independent of all practical aims of active life. It is pursued for its own sake (*contemplatio maxime quaeritur propter seipsam)* and is not subject to any other goal. It consists in "a certain liberty of mind", in

[817] (Huizinger 1929) p. 317
[818] (Ruusbroec 1985) p.150 Part four of Spiritual Espousals
[819] (Huizinger 1929) p.189
[820] (McGinn 2012) p. 494

"leisure and rest". [821] Rogier's *Descent from the Cross,* is a visual repository for contemplation, not yet emptied.

[821] Rik van Nieuwenhove. *Art, Contemplation and intellectus: Aquinas and Gadamer in conversation.* January 2016

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