

PICTURING “THE MAN OF SORROWS”:
THE PASSION-FILLED AFTERLIVES
OF A BIBLICAL ICON

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*Spurned and withdrawing from human society,
he was a man who suffered:
pain was his close acquaintance.
Like one who must hide his face from us
he was despised;
we held him in no account.¹*

Isaiah 53:3

Visualizing the servant in Isaiah 53

Isaiah 53,² the poem celebrating a mysterious and unknown servant from the Hebrew Bible who suffers on behalf of the sins of others, has been the subject of much scholarly debate over many decades, debate that has focussed on questions relating to his identity, the reasons for and nature of his suffering and whether his eventual martyrdom is envisaged.³ The fact that the male servant became associated with Christ from earliest New Testament times accounts for the enormous attention given to Isaiah 53 (to the neglect, many would argue, of the female servant who appears at the start of the following chapter)⁴ and has assured him iconic status not only literally, in his depiction on scores of early Byzantine icons, but also through the later incarnations of his chiselled, Herculean, naked and frequently erotic body of the Italian Renaissance. That he was a *man* would clearly appear to be as significant in his visual afterlives as the *sorrows* the servant experienced.⁵ In this essay, I want to explore some of these visual afterlives and show how they enrich our understanding of the poem’s literary dynamic, even though the servant-figure from the Hebrew Bible is most often mediated through Christian perspectives. I would argue that in several instances we can suspend traditional iconographical readings of the Man of Sorrows as Christ in order to let the visual image interact more directly with the Hebrew poem itself and so facilitate more creative and unexpected readings.⁶ Frustratingly, art

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historians invariably inform us that the image of the Man of Sorrows “relies on” or “refers to” Isaiah 53 but never quite explain how the underlying concerns of the poem surface in the painting; thus the need to let the literary qualities of the poem interact more creatively with, and account for, some of the quite striking aspects of the visual image.



1. Carlo Crivelli, *the Dead Christ supported by Two Angels*, c. 1494. London, The National Gallery.

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In his now classic literary analysis of Isaiah 53, David Clines argues convincingly that what is fundamental about the poem is not the “factual” information it can provide but rather the reader’s response and reaction to the figure of the servant. Pointing to its many ambiguities, he stresses that the poem’s most striking aspect is the way it conceals as much as it reveals:

The force of the poem—to say nothing of the poetry of the poem—lies in its very unforthcomingness, its refusal to be precise and to give information, its stubborn concealment of the kind of data that critical scholarship likes to get its hands on.⁷

All that can be said with any certainty, he proposed, is that the poem revolves around four key personae, identified only by the pronouns “I”, “he”, “we” and “they”; the movement of the poem is wholly occupied by them and by the various connections that exist between them.⁸ In particular the “he” (the servant) stands in the centre of the nexus of relationships and the poem is almost entirely taken up with the relationships in which “he” figures. At the start, the “we” express an attitude of disgust towards the servant but as the poem proceeds, however, their attitude changes very markedly from rejection to acceptance and recognition. The change of attitude provides the only clear *before* and *after* in the poem since there is nothing else that entitles us to structure a temporal sequence of past, present and future. As matters of time and place are absent and questions of identity are out of focus, Clines argues that the poem lends itself easily to multiple interpretations and that we only come to appreciate it fully through the situations to which we apply it.⁹ Following the hermeneutical approach of Gadamer,¹⁰ he proposes that we let the poem become a “language-event”, let ourselves be taken hold of its creative language in order to “enter” its alternative world:

The poem exists to create another world, a world that is recognizably our own, with brutality and suffering and God and a coming-to see on the part of some but not a world that simply existed and is gone for good. The poem’s very lack of specificity refuses to let it be tied down to one spot on the globe or frozen in history: it open up the possibility that the poem can become true in a variety of circumstances—that is its work. The poem is free to do its

work by its very lack of specificity; its subject matter becomes true in a variety of circumstances.¹¹

Isaiah 53 can create a variety of meanings; for example, in Acts 8, when Philip discusses the poem with the Ethiopian eunuch, it is not a question of a *re-application* of an ancient prophetic text that once meant something quite different in an original setting, but only one of a vast array of meanings the text itself can create. Later, we shall see that Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetic works in exactly the same way for the visual arts, allowing the image to create an unlimited range of meanings through its visual expression. First, however, I want to draw attention to two key (but, to me, contradictory) aspects of the poem highlighted by Clines: the first relates to the use of highly visual language and the second to the absence of affective terminology that evoke feelings of sympathy or compassion on the part of the reader.¹²

The absence of speech in Isaiah 53 and the silence of its characters tell us that the poem is about seeing, not hearing; it is about vision rather than verbal communication and how the servant should and should not be seen.¹³ The initial words "look! behold!" in 52:13 introduces the servant to the reader while his visual appearance is described in 52:14. In 52:15b, "they" see what has not been told them. The reaction of the "we" is expressed in visual language: he had no "form or splendour to make us look at him and no appearance that we should desire him". The "we" look away from his disfigured appearance. The attitude of the "we" and the "they" to the servant is symbolised by the way they see him and for the servant, seeing symbolises his future and the fruitfulness of his suffering. Other visual aspects of the poem include the elevation of the servant which implies a visible aspect in 52:13 as does the revealing of God's arm in 53:1. Finally, seeing throughout the poem is conceived of as an activity parallel to understanding in 52:15 and to contemplating and reflecting in 53:3–4. Seeing is used, then, in a metaphorical sense as a coming to an awareness, a realization of, as well as simply the physical act of seeing.¹⁴ With regard to the lack of affective terminology: God does not say how he feels about the servant and, of the servant himself, not a single emotion is expressed. Various translations have sought to make amends for the psychological vacuum by making him a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" in 53:3 but the Hebrew terms used refer to physical pain, not emotion, and so leave the servant's inner state undisclosed. The reaction of the "we" to the servant initially is expressed in affective terms, "he had no beauty that we should desire him" in 53:2 and "he was despised" in 53:3 but these are emotions that the "we"

have rejected and the change in attitude is characterised precisely by language entirely free of emotion. Clines suggests that the lack of affective language is deliberate: the servant moves in silence so as not to divert the reader from what goes on in the poem by the use of adjectives or emotive speech.¹⁵

In comparison to the next chapter Isaiah 54, which simply resonates with vocabulary expressing emotion, the lack of affective language in chapter 53 becomes even more striking. John Sawyer notes that “the differences in language and imagery (between the two chapters) are compelling” and draws attention to the masculine imagery of chapter 53 and the distinctively feminine imagery in chapter 54,¹⁶ in particular the “gendered” rewards given to the two servants: while the male servant shares the spoils of war with the strong (53:12), the female servant story ends ultimately in a description of childbirth and the joy of contentment of a mother with her children (Isaiah 65–66). The way God acts in the two servant stories is different: in the first, he is like a judge or a king eager to demonstrate his power, while in the other, he empties himself of exalted status and almost on bended knee, expresses his love as of a man for a woman and speaks affective words of love (54:4–5). Perhaps the male servant is presented in a detached, impersonal way deliberately in order to heighten the emotional impact of God’s attitude towards the female servant. But I shall return to this point later and here merely point out that the “maleness” of the servant, so significant in the poem’s cultural afterlives, is also relevant to reading the poem in its literary context of Isaiah 53–54.

That the reader should be introduced to the male servant in Isaiah 53 in highly visual language and expected, along with the “we” of the poem, to register and acknowledge a change of attitude towards his suffering and rejection in language that avoids evoking empathy, pity or compassion seems a contradiction in terms. If the poem is “to interpret the reader” and “create a range of meanings”,¹⁷ how can it become “an event for the reader” without an appeal to the emotions? Is it possible to *see* the servant without *experiencing* sympathy or sorrow? Is it part of the poem’s enigma and challenge, part of its concealing and revealing, that the reader must infuse the poem with the feeling and emotion it lacks? In complete contrast, a visit to any museum or art gallery shows that the most striking aspect of any painting or image with the title *Man of Sorrows* is not its reticence and detachment but its highly emotive quality, its ability to transfix the viewer and the artist’s obvious intention to evoke an immediate and empathetic response. How can we explain and reconcile the deliberate absence of affective language in the poem with the intensely emotional content that characterizes its visual afterlives?

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The servant and his visual incarnations

Christian interpretations of Isaiah 53 where Christ is identified as the Man of Sorrows have ensured that visual representations of the servant retain a central place in the iconography and culture of Western Europe. Despite their mediation through Christian perspectives, however, they still illumine the way the servant is presented within the literary dynamic of Isaiah 53 and, as we shall see, it is possible (and desirable) to free the servant from his almost exclusive identification as Christ. The tradition of Christ as the Man of Sorrows does not spring from any specific incident or episode in the Gospels but stems directly from the Eatin Vulgate translation of Isaiah 53:3, the *vir dolorum*. It is striking, as John Sawyer notes,¹⁸ how art commentators always underplay the role of the servant in interpreting the visual image of the Man of Sorrows; it is not the Gospel narrative that created the figure but Isaiah 53 and therefore it is the dynamics arising from that text that illumine the visual image and, conversely, the image that can help us appreciate the text.

The most essential characteristic of the visual image of the Man of Sorrows is its removal from any narrative context in the gospels; unmoored from specific incidents associated with the passion of Christ, it becomes free to express the sentiments of Isaiah 53 more ambiguously. The function of any devotional image was to inspire the viewer to contemplation and empathetic involvement with those depicted and so artists, following the pattern of icon makers, often removed the biblical figure from the distraction of a narrative context to promote an intense interaction with the viewer. By placing the Man of Sorrows within an ambiguous background the artist could enhance an atmosphere of intimacy and immediacy. With no narrative context, the iconography of the image is generally very restricted; for example, there are few, if any, symbols that refer to Christ's divinity,¹⁹ thus encouraging the viewer to engage with the human suffering of this pitiful figure. If we see the Man of Sorrows not (or not only) as Christ but as an unidentified suffering individual, it allows us to interpret the image more imaginatively as an expression of Isaiah 53. Several examples show how the image could be interpreted quite flexibly, especially in the late Middle Ages when the popularity of the image was at its height and the viewer could impose different identities on the figures it contained; Michael Camille notes the artistic practice of depicting a uniform facial format on which the pious beholder could impose his or her personal detail, "more particularly but less structured than what the painter offered".²⁰ With regard to gender, Caroline Bynum has shown how medieval mystics and devotional viewers generally were "always mixing up their genders and associating

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Christ's fleshiness in the image with the feminine".²¹ The image could also be associated with motifs from classical literature that resembled those of Isaiah 53, for example, Giovanni Bellini's *Man of Sorrows* (c. 1470, Brera Gallery, Milan). An inscription below the painting based on a quotation from an elegy of Propertius,²² suggests indirectly that the painting has the same rhetorical power as antique poetry, as well as the ability to draw attention to the skill of the artist:

*Haec fere quum gemitus turgentia lumina promant Bellini poterat flere
Joannis opus*

*As these swollen [from weeping] eyes produce sighing, the work of
Giovanni Bellini was able to weep*

The inscription claims that Bellini's painting of the Man of Sorrows can evoke the same empathy and compassion from the viewer as Propertius' elegy, which relates a story of suffering and self-sacrifice similar to Isaiah 53.²³ There was, then, considerable scope for the imagination when viewers contemplated the image before them since they were expected to identify personally and imaginatively with the Man of Sorrows so that the power of the image could effect a change and transformation in their lives.

Clines's point that the literary dynamic of the poem, with its intentional lack of specificity, leaves it free to become meaningful in a variety of circumstances is even more true for the image. Extending Gadamer's application of hermeneutical aesthetics to the visual arts, its fundamental premise is that the subject-matter of a work of art (in this case, the servant) can never be "finished": it is always more than its individual expressions since no art work can ever exhaust its subject matter, even though a work may exert its own merits in contradistinction to previous examples of its type. An art-work occasions the "coming forth (*Darstellung*) of its subject matter, facilitating its epiphany, its showing, its coming into appearance" in the life of the viewer.²⁴ Thus the importance of suspending, at least partially, our identification of the Man of Sorrows exclusively as Christ (since this is only one manifestation of the servant) in order to allow a more imaginative range of interpretations of both the image and the poem.

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The Imago Pietatis

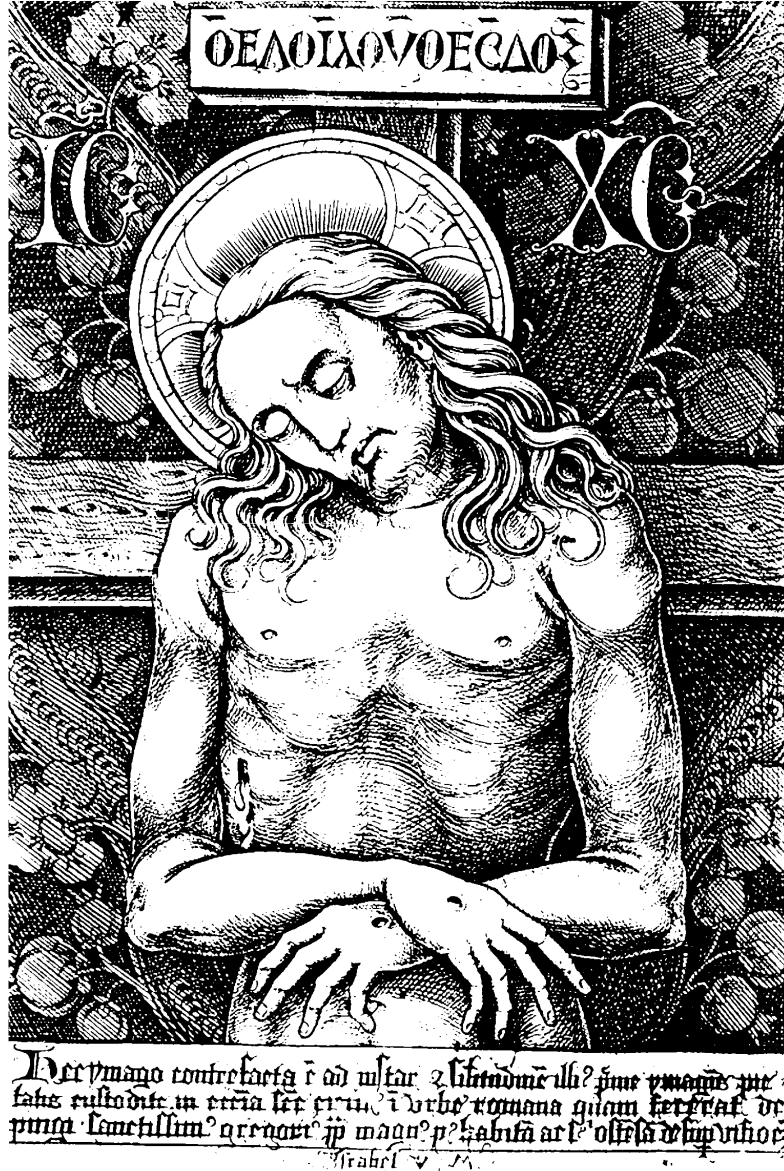
The *imago pietatis* (image of pity) depicting Christ as the Man of Sorrows became one of the most popular of all devotional images throughout medieval and early Renaissance Europe.²⁵ It depicts Christ wounded, bleeding and dead in the tomb, yet paradoxically alive, upright and suffering, animated by a mysterious life force.²⁶ The widespread popularity of the image is explained in part by the account given of its origins; it is said that as Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) celebrated Mass in the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome, he had a vision of the Man of Sorrows appear from his tomb on the altar before him, surrounded by the instruments of his torture (fig. 2).²⁷

The vision was recorded in a painting which was revered as the original *imago pietatis*, now in the church of Santa Croce. In effect, this image was not a sixth century painting but rather a mosaic icon that had found its way from Constantinople to Rome in around 1380, a “passion portrait” developed in conjunction with the Good Friday liturgy of the Eastern Church; its function was liturgical—to draw the worshipper into an affective relationship with Christ in his suffering (fig. 3). An indulgence of 20,000 years was available to those who prayed before the icon of Santa Croce and this was extended by Pope Urban IV (1328–59) to apply equally to licensed copies so that in time the indulgence increased to 45,000 years. The “discovery” of the icon also coincided with the gradual institution of the feast of *Corpus Christi* that re-affirmed the presence of the physical body of Christ in the eucharist.²⁸

Thus, a combination of circumstances catapulted the *imago pietatis* into widespread popularity, and in particular, allowed artists the scope to stage a range of devotional responses to the suffering of the Man of Sorrows in terms of an empathetic identification with the viewer as well as include a wide range of eucharistic allusions.²⁹ (The association between the eucharist and the physical body of the Man of Sorrows is a crucial one because it emphasised the locus of the body as a key identifying aspect of the Man of Sorrows.) The *imago pietatis* had an immense variety of manifestations: while paintings of the image were restricted to wealthy households, rather crude woodcuts of the image were affordable to all. Prints were hawked at pilgrimage shrines and fairs or sold by itinerant peddlers travelling around the countryside and so were widely disseminated. Once purchased, they could be attached to chimney-mantels for all the members of a family to see, or pasted into Books of Hours or private prayer books. We cannot, therefore, overestimate the influence of the image as a cultural icon nor its flexibility in providing a range of different ways of *seeing* the servant; it parallels the poem’s literary



2. Follower of Simon Bening, *Mass of St. Gregory the Great*, c. 1500. The Hague, Museum Meermanno Westreenianum, 10 E 3, folio 190V.



3. Van Meckenem, *Vera Icon*, c. 1490. Berlin, Staatliche Museen. With a Latin inscription reading: “This image was made after the model and likeness of the well known image of the first imago pictatis in the Church of Santa Croce, Rome, which the holy Pope Gregory the Great ordered to be painted according to the vision he had had from above.”

emphasis on *seeing the servant* literally and metaphorically, contemplating the significance of his suffering and rejection.

It was the art historian Erwin Panofsky who first stressed that the power of the *imago pietatis* lay in its isolation from any biblical narrative associated with Christ's passion or any other reference to time and place. In the *imago pietatis*, Christ is usually shown alone, an isolated and rejected human figure lacking any divine attributes, sometimes upheld by two angels who present him to the viewer. Detached and frozen in time, the image transfixes the beholder in what Caroline Bynum describes as a "simultaneity of opposites":³⁰ on the one hand, the figure's pathetic state appeals directly to our sense of pity and compassion and on the other denounces the viewer as a perpetrator of crimes against the just and innocent man. The *imago pietatis* with its pitiful yet reproving gaze was frequently inscribed with Lamentations 1:2: "Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow which was brought upon me which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger." An exchange of gazes establishes a dialogue between the Man of Sorrows and the spectator that is generally facilitated by the artist's desire for psychological realism, usually in the vivid and often lurid depiction of physical suffering and wounds.

We can draw several obvious parallels between the literary dynamic within Isaiah 53 and the way in which the Man of Sorrows is presented to the viewer through the *imago pietatis*; these can be illustrated with reference to an early version from c. 1250 by the unknown Umbrian Master (fig. 4). This painting derives its style from types of Byzantine icon which show Christ, the Man of Sorrows, as a suffering human victim with eyes closed, furrowed brow and drooping head. The figure is emaciated with spine and ribs visible and his imminent death is suggested by the sombre and shadowy outline of his flesh. In both the image and the poem, there is a deliberate lack of spatial and temporal detail and no context that explains the reasons for the suffering. Just as the presentation of the servant in Isaiah 53 is seen in terms of his relationships with others (particularly the relationship between "he", and "we"), so too, the focus of the image centres on the relationship between the figure and its viewer, the "he" and "we" of the poem.³¹ The change in attitude, the transformation, the coming to awareness of the significance of the servant's suffering on the part of the "we" in the poem are reflected in the viewer's change of attitude, in the spirit of penitence that the artist hopes an affective engagement with the Man of Sorrows will bring about. As in the poem, the subject-matter of the image concerns the breaking in of a new vision of the servant in the life of the viewer. The "seeing" in both the poem and the painting refers to more than physical seeing; it refers



4. Unknown Umbrian Master, *The Man of Sorrows*, c. 1260. London, The National Gallery.

also to pondering, contemplating and understanding. Like the servant in the poem, the Man of Sorrows in the image is passive, indicated by the crossing of his arms, there is no indication of his inner state or attitude and he is deathly silent. We should not think of this image as a “copy” of a template or a “re-application” of an ancient prophetic text but rather one of a vast array of meanings the text itself can offer and powerful evidence of the poem’s capacity to create. In the language of Gadamer, each instance of the subject-matter (the servant) extends the subject-matter itself; to all who see the image, it presents the servant as an event, a “coming forth” and an opportunity to create new meanings. Turning to the visual appropriation of two specific themes in the poem, the suffering of the innocent man on account of the sins of others and the servant’s disfigurement and abhorrence, we see how they expand imaginatively the meaning of the poem.

In the Book of Isaiah and in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, there is no hint that God will accept the suffering of the innocent and righteous in place of the punishment of the guilty and wicked. People well may suffer unjustly or excessively but not in place of the deserved punishment of others.³² Whybray interprets the transfer of sin from others to the servant in a Christian light suggesting that “through the servant’s own unmerited suffering, he enabled others to escape the divine punishment that they deserved”.³³ In terms of the reader, Clines proposes that if one accepts that the suffering of the innocent is in any way because of, or for the sake of, or on behalf of oneself who deserves to suffer, then one has joined the ranks of the “we”. Identification with the “we” puts one within the world of the poem.³⁴ The notion of transfer is even more central to an appreciation of the dynamic of the *imago pietatis* where it is developed and expanded from the poem. The viewer is drawn into the image by the pitiful gaze of the Man of Sorrows who stares out at him/her; but his demeanour of innocence and suffering becomes a reproach to the viewer and his distressed state engenders a sense of guilt; it is the sins of the viewer that have caused his suffering. Medieval scholars have argued that it is precisely this notion of the transfer of suffering from the “we” to the innocent servant that made the *imago pietatis* an image of violence. Merback claims that, as an archetype image of sacrifice and suffering, it stakes its rhetorical power on several basic stereotypes of visual violence, a violence that lay at the heart of medieval religiosity.³⁵ Caroline Bynum notes that the graphically violent art evidenced in the popularity of the ubiquitous figure of the Man of Sorrows is central to medieval scholars’ understanding of the “violent tenor of life” in the 14th–15th centuries. She argues that it is the paradox of the image that gives it its violent potential: the half dead body in the coffin expresses not solution or res-

olution but a “simultaneity of opposites” that affirms life in spite of death, glory in spite of agony and salvation in spite of sin. Detached from any narrative, the image transfixes the viewer with a spectacular surplus of blood, wounds and pain as objects for contemplative immersion, unbearable to behold, yet salvific.³⁶ It suggests a religiosity of blame and self-reproach as well as of ecstasy and love and calls for vindication of, as well as empathy with, the Man of Sorrows: the figure was an aching revelation of one’s own guilt and encouraged a blaming of oneself and a call to repentance.³⁷ Contemplation of these images unleashed a violence of guilt and self-accusation, ultimately of condemnation. The excess of guilt engendered by the gaze of the Man of Sorrows cried out for transfer and turned from the blaming of self to the blaming of others: unbelievers, the damned, the Jews, in a spiral of scapegoating and self castigating.³⁸ As “a simultaneity of opposites”, the Man of Sorrows became a “living god of reconciliation and an atavistic icon of bloody persecution,”³⁹ an ambiguity and tension that remained unresolved, as is evident from the literature of medieval hagiography.

In a painting by the school of Jan Mostaert (fig. 5) entitled *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, the accusatory nature of the figure is clearly seen. The artist includes the *arma Christi*, the instruments of Christ’s suffering, the crown of thorns, the reed thrust on him by the Roman soldiers and the birch with which he was flogged, to encourage the viewer to reflect more on the sufferings of the passion of Christ.⁴⁰ However, if we disregard the passion iconography that identifies the Man of Sorrows as Christ, that is remove it from its narrative context and see the figure as the servant of Isaiah 53, the painting illustrates how, in this context too, his gaze engenders a sense of guilt in the viewer: tears stream from his face in large crystal beads as he looks directly at us, lips slightly parted as if about to speak words of reproach and disappointment. The artist has used every means to induce feelings of compassion and contrition in the viewer, from the small scale of the image which already assumes intimacy to the catchlights in the tear-filled eyes, which demand a pressing response. The drooping of the figure’s shoulders reflects the plaintive character of the painting. This was undoubtedly an image for private contemplation and in the privacy of prayer it was intended to elicit tears.⁴¹ Not only does the painting present us with graphic detail of the servant’s suffering but it also allows the servant to see us, thus ensuring that “seeing” is a reciprocal activity—the servant interpret *us* as much as we interpret *him*, a point that will be developed later in relation to Meister Francke’s *Man of Sorrows*.⁴²

The second aspect of the poem, in the context of the Hebrew Bible, is its description of a servant of God as physically unattractive, even



5. Style of Jan Mostaert, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, c. 1520. London, The National Gallery.

repulsive: "He had no beauty, no splendour to attract us, no grace to charm us . . . like one who must hide his face from us, he was despised" (53:2–3). As Claus Westermann notes, the servant in this aspect is quite unlike other handsome biblical heroes such as Joseph (Gen. 39:6) and David (1 Sam. 16:18) where a prerequisite of their story—and their importance—is their "beauty and splendour." In the Hebrew Bible, the beauty of the person is associated with a blessing: Joseph's beauty indicates that he is blessed and will prosper, but of the servant in Isaiah 53 it is said that there was nothing beautiful about him. He is, therefore, a man without a blessing and no regard will be paid to him.⁴³ However, later instances of the *imago pietatis*, especially in the Italian Renaissance, depict the Man of Sorrows as physically attractive, often erotic.⁴⁴ Michael Camille refers to "the southern chiselled, Herculean, neo-classical body, triumphant in its homo-erotic masculinism."⁴⁵

An example of a somewhat erotic visualization of the Man of Sorrows is Bellini's *Dead Christ supported by Angels* (fig. 6) where the dead Christ is held up to the viewer by two androgynous angels whose looks insinuate the viewer into the scene. The unbloodied and exquisitely delineated torso of the Man of Sorrows reminiscent of a heroic figure such as David can present something of a paradox to the viewer. In Mantegna's *the Man of Sorrows with Two Angels* (fig. 7) his body, now full length whereas generally it is depicted in half length, is propped up on the end of a sarcophagus by two angels for the admiration and contemplation of all. The blessings associated with physical beauty elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible now appear embodied in this Man of Sorrows; his victorious nature is hinted at through the elegant portrayal of his body. The paradox of portraying the Man of Sorrows in this unexpected way may be connected to another paradox in the painting that is suggested by the landscape: depicting death and burial, the landscape is delicately bisected to evoke a pivotal moment between Crucifixion and Resurrection. The Man of Sorrows is frozen in the anguish of death, to his left Calvary is seen in the light of the setting sun, to the right the landscape lightens to evoke the dawn, yet he is alive with eyes open imploring the viewer.⁴⁶ The victory and future vindication of the Man of Sorrows is mirrored in his perfected body; his success is reflected in the depiction of a body that has been elevated to the status of heroic. Ridderbos has shown that one of rhetorical functions of the *imago pietatis* was that of disclosing "antithetical theological concepts" to the viewer especially concerning death and life; the Man of Sorrows can be alive while dead, he can be a "living dead".⁴⁷ The physical definition of his body, its sensuousness, assures the viewer that this is a living and desirable body and not a body of wounds, suffering and decay.



6. Giovanni Bellini, *Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels*, c. 1465. London, The National Gallery.



7. Andrea Mantegna, *The Man of Sorrows with Two Angels*, c. 1470.
Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst.

Eroticizing the Man of Sorrows was not restricted to Renaissance Italy. Although sixteenth-century Calvinist literature recoils from the visual and affective piety of southern Europe, the pathetic iconography re-enters Calvinist representations in the next century when Hall and Heinsius, as well as several English preachers, dwell on the horrific agony of Christ's tortured body.⁴⁸ They tend, however, to betray a certain discomfort with the figure of abject vulnerability and so in passages describing the Man of Sorrows they intersperse two radically different images: the lover of the Song of Songs and the youthful knight. The bruised and deformed figure of the Man of Sorrows is suddenly reconfigured and becomes beautiful and virile. The images of the grotesque and erotic bodies are very closely juxtaposed: Heinsius exclaims "Behold the Man of Sorrows . . . behold him that was the fayrest among men, being both white and ruddie . . . his cheekes as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers . . . he lyeth now disfigured with wounds, weltring and panting in a crimson river of his own bloode."⁴⁹ The juxtaposition maps the erotic body of the young lover onto the disfigured figure of the Man of Sorrows evoking erotic overtones of a body in pain. In an early theological dialogue, Erasmus observes that the agonies of the Man of Sorrows make him desirable (*amabilis*).⁵⁰

That the *imago pietatis* intended to evoke an emotional response from its viewers resulting in a spirit of penitence has been illustrated in paintings discussed so far. Medieval literature describe how viewers were moved by the image to great extremes of grief and guilt, often resulting in a desire to experience the same suffering and anguish as the Man of Sorrows.⁵¹ With particular reference to Meister Francke's *Man of Sorrows* (1420), Michael Camille highlights the mimetic role of the *imago pietatis* as an object structuring the beholder's psychological identification and empathy with its central figure and emphasises the scope and flexibility viewers had in their imaginative efforts to identify personally with the Man of Sorrows.

Meister Francke was a Dominican monk-painter⁵² in the Netherlands to whom only a handful of works can be attributed. Of these, two versions of the *Man of Sorrows* are considered his most important and depict the theme in quite different ways.

The version now in Hamburg (fig. 8) depicts a muscular and active figure against a background containing iconographical references to the Last Judgement when flesh will re-clothe the body (the red inner lining suggests the notion of being re-clothed in flesh) and depicts Christ at the end of time as a "paternalistic, judging and male God".⁵³ The angel to the left carries a branch of lilies and to the right a second angel carries a sword suggesting a judgement tempered by mercy. Camille argues that



8. Meister Francke, *Man of Sorrows*, c. 1420s. Hamburg, Kunsthalle.



9. Meister Francke, *Man of Sorrows*, c. 1430. Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste.

in the second version now in Leipzig which he calls “the female Man of Sorrows”, Francke deliberately re-engendered the image to suggest a figure that was more open to projection and less self-contained and triumphalist than the first.

The Leipzig *Man of Sorrows* (fig. 9) is a tiny panel painting (16 by 12 inches); the space depicted in the panel is claustrophobic, so shallow in fact that the figure’s flesh, pressed out by the great dark wings of the angel, seems about to spill over into our world. He seems paralysed and his limp arms so weak that they have to be manipulated by two tiny angel puppeteers who thrust the (ridiculously inadequate) instruments of his torture between his feeble fingers. Unlike other instances of the *imago pietatis* (for example, fig. 7), there is no tomb: the Man of Sorrows is not on the other side of death but is suffering in our presence as a living exemplar—his eyes are not closed, he is not dead, he is not a corpse. The angel’s eyes lead our own to the figure and his languid look meets ours. The fact that his eyes are open and that he is alive gives the image a timeless quality; it is “a never-ending and continually repeated spectacularization of suffering”.⁵⁴ The remaining two nails on the cross have not been removed, and so emphasise the idea of an extended agony and disrupt any notion of narrative temporality and specific location in order to make his suffering ever present as a fact. Francke’s *Man of Sorrows* receives no divine approval for his suffering within the image itself and must look to us for validation of his ongoing agony.⁵⁵

Camille notes that when any character in a painting looks directly at us, conscious not only of being observed but also observing us, this crucially breaks the illusion of reality that has been constructed. Instead of being a historical narrative happening in the past, the internal gaze incorporates the viewer within the scene. Francke’s *Man of Sorrows* asks that we return his gaze, that we look at him as piteously as he looks at us; the painting thus produces a viewing subject in a highly interactive and imaginative dynamic. Camille highlights three aspects that affect the way the viewer responds to this image: its size and the infantile and feminine attributes of the figure, making him appear weak, childlike and female. He argues that these aspects are intentional in order to encourage new responses, to reconstruct its devotional viewers and to broaden its appeal. The effect, he argues, is to create a more empathetic Man of Sorrows, weaker and more sexually ambiguous, more open to projection than the ubiquitous closed, self-contained and masculine image of the Italian Renaissance. In the shallow space in which this body is squeezed out to us, the figure’s wounded hand can make only the tiniest of movements. The figures seem to press right up against our retina and seem too close to our bodies. The bodily proportions of the figure, its

smoothness and weightlessness, just a head and a tube with no backbone, contrast with other instances of the *imago pietatis* and suggests a body too flimsy to have been broken or crucified. With regard to the child-like proportions of the body, Camille argues that these are evident in the facial features where the eyes, with their socket pushed almost vertical and meeting at the centre, carry much of the movement and empathetic effect. It is a hairless body, a baby body. In the late Middle Ages, the infantilization of the body crossed gender boundaries and gave both men and women access to a body that could be contemplated, since it appeared neutral and asexual and “outside gender.” Camille argues that Francke has also staged a feminine presence in this painting, that the Man of Sorrows is given the delicate outline of the ideal female type in early 15th century culture, the same spidery arms and long tube-like torso can be found in court art of the same period and suggests that the wound on the figure’s side, to which he himself draws attention with his fingers, should be seen as symbolizing the vagina. Infantilization and feminization of Christ in late medieval imagery were modes of avoiding explicit sexual suggestiveness;⁵⁶ the image plays with gender but it does not do so in order to exclude one gender or the other but to emphasise the lack of boundaries between them.⁵⁷

Camille’s analysis of the panel depicting a Man of Sorrows with weak, childlike and female qualities and the fact that the painter had already painted a more “masculine” version underline the gender issues implicit in the image. Meister Francke succeeded in visualizing Isaiah 53 in new and unexpected ways by drawing attention to the stereotyped “maleness” associated with it. However, a female presence was also clearly important in earlier versions of the *imago pietatis*: Ridderbos⁵⁸ and Camille⁵⁹ point out that the function of the Virgin or Veronica (with whom the Man of Sorrows frequently formed a diptych, as in fig. 4, or was painted on the reverse of the panel as in fig. 9) was to draw the viewer’s attention to his sufferings and so intensify the sense of empathy. Centuries later and for different reasons, Vincent van Gogh was to conceive of a female Man of Sorrows too, by bringing together the male and female servants of Isaiah 53 and 54 in a way that reflects contemporary biblical scholarship.

Vincent van Gogh’s Still Life with Open Bible and Sorrow

Vincent van Gogh throughout his life identified with the servant in Isaiah 53 both personally and artistically and referred to “the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (usually writing this quotation in English)

many times in his letters.⁶⁰ The notions of earthly suffering and self-sacrifice in the service of others, to be followed by eventual recognition, made the Man of Sorrows from Isaiah 53 a powerful and attractive symbol to van Gogh both as a person and as an artist and he regarded his own sufferings, and suffering in general, as something that should not just be endured but celebrated. But while he depicted several lonely, isolated and vulnerable men and women,⁶¹ these did not include figurative representations either of the servant of Isaiah 53 or Christ as the Man of Sorrows and, apart from his two versions of the Pietà, executed after a work by Delacroix, he did not paint explicit images of biblical figures, preferring instead to incorporate them through allusion.⁶²

In his painting of the text of Isaiah 53, *Still Life with Open Bible* (fig. 10), van Gogh consciously imitated the still life and *vanitas* genre of the 17th century, found especially in Rembrandt, in which still life objects were considered symbols of mortality in contrast to the eternal nature of the Christian faith. The painting portrays a large Bible⁶³ open at Isaiah 53⁶⁴ set on a table with a burnt-down candle in the background. In the foreground to the side of the open Bible, is a copy of a novel, *La Joie de Vivre* (1884), by the contemporary French author Emile Zola.⁶⁵ The pages of the Bible are clean and well cared for whereas those of the novel are torn and tattered. Reminiscent of Rembrandt's style, van Gogh has given the painting a dark background, with pale yellow highlighting the foreground while the cover of the novel is deep yellow, a colour that for him signified life. The protagonist of Zola's novel, Pauline Quenu, orphaned at the age of ten, leaves Paris to live with her aunt, uncle and cousin in an impoverished fishing village. The small fortune she arrives with is squandered by her dishonest aunt, who increasingly turns against the girl and makes her life miserable. In the face of her problems, however, Pauline Quenu remains devoted to loving and serving those around her, including the village children. She remains very human—suffering with each new pain, experiencing profound feelings of doubt, anger, jealousy, and despair—but somehow finding strength and even joy in these circumstances. She is clearly presented as an example of self-sacrifice and service to others; Zola describes her as the “incarnation of renunciation, of love for others and kindly charity for erring humanity.”⁶⁶

Van Gogh positions the open text of Isaiah 53 directly in front of the viewer so that we become both reader and interpreter. But the presence of Zola's novel *La Joie de Vivre*, placed strategically between text and reader, ensures that we interpret the poem through the novel and, in particular, through the character of the selfless Pauline Quenu. A deliberate association is established between the servant and the young girl in that both experience personal anguish, yet assume the sufferings of



10. Van Gogh, *Still Life with Open Bible* (1885). Amsterdam, van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).

others. The irony of the novel's title *La Joie de Vivre* is that she should find joy and satisfaction in her suffering and selflessness in the same way as the servant does (Isaiah 53:11). The painting suggests that Zola, through his heroine, can convey the significance of the servant to a contemporary audience much more meaningfully than the institutional Church structures in which the same biblical text is preached—the yellow cover of the novel suggests life and fulfilment while the sombre dark colours of the bible and the snuffed out candle convey the sense of empty ritual and death.⁶⁷ The painting suggests that only when the reader becomes involved and engages with the poem can it create new meanings: it therefore supports Clines's literary analysis when he concludes that "meaning resides not in the text but in what the text has become for the reader".⁶⁸ The open bible reveals the story of the servant that is powerful and relevant for all times, but it remains incomplete and unfulfilled, becoming meaningful only in its specific applications; on the other hand, the fact that Zola's novel is closed suggests that, while

Pauline Quenu represents an embodiment of the servant that is relevant to Parisian life in the 1880s, this interpretation will prove limited and irrelevant in other times and places. In the words of Clines, "The servant poem exists to create another world, one that is recognisably our own and that questions who and where is the servant for oneself."⁶⁹ Beholding van Gogh's painting, the viewer is expected to create, to author, a new meaning and setting for the message that the poem contains—just as the three creators, or authors, in the painting have already done: van Gogh, Zola and the prophet-poet.

Unlike the various instances of the *imago pietatis* with their evocations of pity and sorrow, this largely symbolic painting does not evoke an immediate affective reaction on the part of the viewer except through the human and touching character of Pauline Quenu. That the heroine of the book is female and that she should be closely identified with the male servant of the poem is most significant; the identification of the Man of Sorrows as a young teenage girl concealed in the pages of a contemporary novel contrasts sharply with his ubiquitous "maleness" from the Renaissance. The image of God preferred by van Gogh in his letters (and in his art as well) was not male but more often that of an idealized, compassionate, maternal figure who, through devoted care, brought joy to humanity; much of his imagery came from Isaiah, for example 49:15 where God is compared to a nursing mother: "Can a woman forget her nursing child or show compassion for the child in her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you". It was also to the image of woman that he turned to explore notions of sorrow and suffering⁷⁰ and to one woman in particular, Sien Hoornik. Sien was a prostitute and alcoholic who was pregnant and already had a small daughter and been abandoned by her husband when van Gogh began to live with her. He described her, in language reminiscent of Isaiah, "withered—literally like a tree which had been blasted by a cold dry wind, its young green shoots withering".⁷¹

Sien was his model for the dejected and abandoned woman depicted in *Sorrow* (fig. 11) where the image of the young withering shoots form the background. The theme of the abandoned woman is highlighted at the bottom of the drawing in the reference to the novel *La Femme* by the contemporary writer Michelet:

Comment se fait-il qu'il y ait sur la terre une femme seule-delaissée?
How can there be on earth a woman so alone and so abandoned?

Van Gogh intended that the drawing should express more than the plight of Sien and stated that it refers to "the struggle of life" in general.



11. Van Gogh, *Sorrow*, 1882. Walsall, The New Art Gallery. The Garman-Ryan Collection.

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I would propose that the figure in *Sorrow* should be associated with the unidentified and abandoned woman at the start of Isaiah 54 whose future happiness God, in language of compassion and affection, reaffirms. In supporting and caring for Sien, Van Gogh frequently used the image of God as a compassionate husband from Isaiah 54:5. The image of Sien, symbolising the “struggle of life” in general, is intended to evoke a reaction of pity and compassion from the viewer and to address situations of sorrow and suffering in society; it is the figure of Sien with her sad demeanour, sorrowful posture and look of dejection that evokes the response one might have expected had van Gogh produced a figurative portrayal of the Man of Sorrows, considering his close identification with that text. Joan Greer suggests, in the light of the depiction of Pauline Quenu as a modern day Man of Sorrows in *Still Life with Open Bible* and Sien as an image of sorrow, that we look at the two images together to get a better appreciation of the artist's work. Juxtaposing these images also corresponds to contemporary ways of reading Isaiah 53 and 54 where comparisons are drawn between the roles and fates of the two servants. Peter Quinn-Miscall notes that both poems reveal the surprising treatment that one chosen by God may have to undergo and the tensions that exist between expectations of justice and mercy. Van Gogh in *Still Life with Open Bible*, depicts a female “Man” of Sorrows concealed in Zola's closed novel; on the other hand, in *Sorrow* we have a figure that speaks to us powerfully and eloquently of rejection, abandonment and suffering and that visualizes the plight of the male servant of Isaiah 53 as much as the female figure of Isaiah 54.

Patrick Hall, *The Tale is Told that Shall be Told*

A final painting, from the late twentieth century, that offers the viewer an opportunity to engage with the dynamic of Isaiah 53 is by the contemporary Irish artist, Patrick Hall, *The Tale is Told that Shall be Told* (fig. 12). The title of this highly symbolic and enigmatic work makes no reference to the bible and the artist did not have the biblical poem particularly in mind when painting it.⁷² But Gesa Thiessen notes that the less obvious the religious matter of a modern work of art is, the more open and personal the interpretation can be and that abstraction and symbolism, instead of figuration, encourages this response even further.⁷³ The importance of symbolism lies in its mysterious powers of disclosing and revealing, its stirring the imagination and its transforming effect. In modern art, artistic subjectivity rather than Christian iconography of past centuries is central; the subjective-existential moment of the artist is its

point of departure and so the modern work of art through symbol and imagery can be an expression and interpretation of the artist's religious experience. To appreciate, then, the impact of the symbolism of *The Tale is Told that Shall be Told* and before we can relate it to Isaiah 53, we need first to outline some of the personal factors and perspectives that influenced Patrick Hall's work.

Patrick Hall was born in Ireland in 1935. Thiessen describes him as a deeply introspective and private person whose experience of life has been one of difficulties and complications that have been somewhat alleviated since becoming a practising Buddhist. He stresses the importance of contemplation and the Four Noble Truths that recognise the existence of suffering as well as the possibility of liberation from it. Living the eight fold path leads him to compassion and love, the main points of comparison, he feels, between Christianity and Buddhism. He strongly rejects the idea of perfection as it does not allow for weakness: "Art is about human weakness, in fact increasingly so today when man is weakened by social and personal alienation." Acknowledging weakness basically affirms the truth about oneself, it is the raw material of one's life; neither the great prophets nor mystics nor Jesus were perfect, "they worked with what they had". Hall admired Grünwald's syphilitic Christ as filling one with wonder and admiration and not disgust. With regard to the Bible, he sees biblical stories as archetypal, as touching something primitive, "The Bible speaks about the simplest things, it's about feeling, it's about saying the truth about something . . . it's so simple that its stories become universal." Like van Gogh, Hall stresses the social and ethical obligations of the artist: "It's taking on a responsibility to question humanness, meaning and meaninglessness. Painting must serve the interests of human beings . . . it must contribute to the harmony and the peace of the universe and to the energy of the universe." For Hall, his work as an artist has a profoundly ethical dimension.

John Hutchinson notes that "Hall's awkward and sometimes difficult works gain their vitality through their tension and ambivalence and their sense of turmoil at the edge of disaster"⁷⁴ and this is true of the painting here. Its title is the slightly altered first line of Bartok's opera *Bluebird's Castle* "the tale is old that shall be told" and for the artist, its meaning implies "dealing with fate and fatalism." The painting presents the viewer with an open book in bright red; the spine of the book, reminiscent of the spine and rib cage of a human, dominates the painting. The red of the open book contrasts sharply with its grey-black background and is partly surrounded by a circle that resembles a halo. A candelabrum is placed on either side of the book with lit candles while little



12. Patrick Hall, *The Tale is Told that Shall be Told*, 1989. Dublin, Private Collection.

red strokes resembling blood or fire emerge from the book. The bottom of the painting is decorated by a nervous zigzag line (the same red as the writing in the book) that creates an unsettling effect, particularly if the zigzag effect is seen as joining up with the swirling circle that surrounds the book; the same red in this line and in the lines of the book invites us to read something disturbing into the book's contents. The open book, the prayer shawl and the candelabra provide a "consciously Jewish" aspect that Hall was keen to give the work,⁷³ probably symbolizing the Hebrew Scriptures, the shawl with which the Torah is held in synagogue worship and the Jewish menorah (notwithstanding the two candles instead of seven). The red dabs on the fringes of the shawl (above the book) convey the idea of blood, an allusion to the blood sacrifices of animals carried out to effect atonement for the offerer (for example in Leviticus 1–7). Hall explained that the blood refers to "all the people who died of the law" and Thiessen suggests he had capital punishment in mind, particularly capital punishment as expressed in the Hebrew Bible (for example, Exodus 21:12–14, Numbers 35:29–34). The lit candles at the side and the halo suggest reverence for and contemplation of

the written word and the red dabs below the book may symbolize blood that drops from the book (or human rib cage) or fire from below that threatens to destroy the book, its thoughts or its author.

Despite its title, a single narrative or a simple tale is not offered in this painting. Thiessen describes it as “something of a religious epiphany”; it has a strong feeling of mystery, ritual, worship and adoration, yet because of the grey black background it touches on something sinister.⁷⁶ The book or human rib cage, a living yet bleeding intellect or body, enhances this feeling of ambivalence or even darkness. What is the tale that the painting tells? Thiessen suggests an interpretation that accords with Hall’s concerns with book censoring through the ages: “It is the story of the victims whose thoughts die precisely through those who perceive themselves as the ones responsible for the proper handing on of truth.”⁷⁷

When I first saw this painting, it brought to mind some striking aspects of the images included in this essay: the figure of the Man of Sorrows of the *imago pietatis* with its visible spine and rib cage (Figs. 3 and 4) often saturated with blood, and van Gogh’s *Still Life with Open Bible* (fig. 10). However, unlike the latter, there is no indication of a scriptural reference, no clue (such as Zola’s novel) as to how we should interpret the significance of the open book; here, we encounter a more intensified and abstract symbolism. As viewers, we are invited to project a text, a narrative, on to the blank pages of the book; the Jewish symbols of the painting, together with the subjective concerns of the artist suggest, to me, the text of Isaiah 53. It represents a contemporary and symbolic expression of the visual tradition associated with the Man (or Person) of Sorrows; the servant, symbolized by the spine, tries to emerge, to struggle free from the book, blood signifying his/her atonement for the sins and wrongdoings of others. We witness the destruction of the servant as he, or she, is sacrificed before our eyes, the halo that encompasses the book suggesting the innocence of the just person who suffers for others.⁷⁸ Like van Gogh, Hall recalls the still life or *vanitas* tradition that urges the viewer to reflect on life’s priorities, frequently by reference to death; here, however, the intensity of the symbolism of fire and flames (the candles are lit and not extinguished as in the van Gogh painting)⁷⁹ suggest a cataclysm, a final conflagration. The contents of the book become more enigmatic and unsettling and we can almost feel the dripping blood as we are drawn into the painting’s symbolism.⁸⁰ If we look at Hall’s painting with the *Imago Pietatis* and *Still Life with Open Bible* in mind, it offers a contemporary visual reading of the biblical poem which merges the text and servant as one: the figure of the servant *is* the text, conveyed by the

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spine that symbolizes both the rib-cage of a human person as well as the binding or spine of the book.

The Artist as Reader of the Bible

Finally, I want to return to the point made in the introduction as to how art historians, when commenting on images of Christ as the Man of Sorrows, underplay the role of Isaiah 53 as if the artist were simply an illustrator of biblical scenes and not an active *reader* of the Bible interested in facilitating new and unexpected meanings emerging from the text. Exceptionally, Paolo Berdini, with specific reference to the late sixteenth-century artist Jacopo Bassano, has explored the process and implications of what happens when an artist paints a subject or narrative from the Bible.⁸¹ In the place of traditional art-historical criticism that emphasises text as *source* and the *function* of the corresponding image, he advocates the notion of textual expansion. What the painter visualizes is not the narrative of the text but its expanded form as it emerges from the painter's reading of it. Painting visualizes a *reading* and not a text, for the relationship between a text and its visualization has to take into account the circumstances under which that text is read, in addition to what makes it the object of the particular interest that might result in its visualization. Painting (and not only Bassano's) thus proceeds by a process Berdini calls "visual exegesis". Following the exegetical models of scripture, visualization addresses the *discursive* status of the text: the notion of "visual exegesis" thus registers and promotes the crucial move from image to beholder.

The artists who depicted the Man of Sorrows in the selection of images in this essay succeeded in addressing the discursive nature of Isaiah 53 and engaging the viewer in the subject matter of the painting. The images draw the viewer into the alternative world of the servant in a very direct and striking way either through the eyes of the figure that transfix the viewer, or by placing the servant's story on the pages of an open book for the viewer to read. In engaging us empathetically with the servant, each image creates a unique meaning for the biblical poem, or in the words of Gadamer, each visual instance of the Man of Sorrows extends and expands the world of the servant, it facilitates a coming forth, an epiphany of the poem and its concerns in our lives. This is more than a philosophical reflection: in today's world, we can probably assume that the majority of people who are introduced to, and engage with the poem, do so through one of its hundreds of visual expressions

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in galleries and churches around the world rather than through a liturgical reading or explicitly religious reading of the text and, as many will choose to interpret the image form outside the Christian tradition, it will continue to create ever new, unexpected and challenging meanings for its viewers. It also challenges the professional biblical commentator to “read” the Bible through its visual expressions, just as the artist van Gogh challenged his father, pastor and professional interpreter of the Bible:

I too read the Bible just as I read Michelet, Balzac or Fliot
but I see quite different things in the Bible from what
Father does, and what Father in his little academic way
gleans from it I cannot find at all.⁸²

NOTES

- 1 The translation is by David A. Clines from his classic work on Isaiah 53, *I, He, We & They* 12.
- 2 The term Isaiah 53 is a convenient, though loose, heading for the poem Isaiah 52:13–53:12.
- 3 For a summary of traditional views on the servant in Isaiah see Whybray, *Second Isaiah*.
- 4 See John F. A. Sawyer, “Daughter of Zion” 89–107; Marjo C. A. Korpel “The Female Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 54” 153–167; Peter Quinn-Miscall, *Reading Isaiah: Poetry and Vision*, 200–203.
- 5 In *Texts of Terror*, Phyllis Tribble interprets women’s stories (Hagar, Tamar, the Daughter of Jephthah) through Isaiah 53, “Women, not men, are suffering servants and Christ figures”, (p. 2). In *The Renaissance Bible*, pp. 115–116, Deborah Kuller Shuger discusses how images of the tortured and agonized Christ illustrate “a peculiarly Renaissance nightmare of emasculation, of the loss of power, autonomy, strength and status.”
- 6 Micke Bal, *Reading “Rembrandt”* 207–209, argues that the dogmatic views of theological or iconographical traditions can blind us to other possible readings, including readings that are acceptable within the context of theology; simply reading images iconographically is limited in that it can be used to ward off threatening interpretations and fit images into a reassuring tradition. Laurie Edson, *Reading Relationally: Postmodern Perspectives on Literature and Art*, explores how reading literature in the context of the visual arts enriches our understanding of what texts do and how texts mean. She advocates a practice of reading that directs attention to readers’ relationships with texts and to the ways in which our frames of reference and mediating practices shape an object under investigation. By “reading relationally” across the disciplines of literature and visual art, she sets in motion a series of reverberations between verbal and visual material. Reading relationally, she argues, can shed new light on texts by enabling us to think and see differently and therefore bring different textual details into sharper focus. A

verbal text read through the lens of a visual text, constructed according to different codes and interpreted according to different conventions, can unsettle some of the habitual or codified methods of analysis that have governed the mind and eye.

- 7 Clines, *I, He, We & They* 12.
- 8 The use of pronouns offer greater potency in the poem. See David Clines, *I, He, We & They* 37 and Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* 256–257.
- 9 Clines, *I, He, We & They* 33–37.
- 10 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 1–150.
- 11 Clines, *I, He, We & They* 61. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* 161, highlights “the impulse [of Hebrew prophetic poetry] to realize the extreme possibilities of the themes it takes up.”
- 12 Clines, *I, He, We & They* 40–46.
- 13 “More than texts, images have the far more pervasive potential to redefine the servant’s body in relation to the beholder’s body. The distance between words and flesh is greater than that between the viewer and the person in the image who always stands as the mirror image of that viewer.” Michael Camille, “Mimetic Identification” 204.
- 14 Ellen J. Esrock, *The Reader’s Eye*, has explored through a study of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* the value of the reader’s imagistic consciousness, the complex interactions between a text with visually evocative material and the reader’s disposition to visualize and argues that the importance of visual imagery must be recognized and integrated more fully into contemporary literary criticism.
- 15 Clines cites Genesis 22 as an example where Abraham moves in silence so as not to divert attention from the story line. Clines, *I, He, We & They* 46.
- 16 Sawyer, “Daughter of Zion” 92, notes “The feminine imagery of Isaiah 54 creates a story or picture as consistent and convincing as that of the Servant of the Lord in chapter 53.” Quinn-Miscall, *Reading Isaiah* 200–203, comments “Both poems reveal the surprising treatment that one specially chosen by God may have to undergo. That they are anonymous means that they can present patterns of the ways of God in the world and not just the Israelites. Both poems reveal the tensions and even the contradictions that exist between expectation and mercy. The poems of Isaiah 53–54 with the enigmatic portrayals of the servant and the woman remind us that God’s ways are not so simple and that the world is not so clear-cut.”
- 17 Clines, *I, He, We & They* 60–61.
- 18 John Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel* 86.
- 19 The image I am dealing with in this essay is derived from types of the *imago pietatis*, which is quite distinct, although not unrelated to, other images such as *Ecce Homo* and the those depicting the *arma Christi*, the instruments of Christ’s torture.
- 20 Camille, “Mimetic Identification” 197–198.
- 21 Cited in Michael Camille, “Seductions of the Flesh” 257.
- 22 “Quid nostro gemitu turgentia lumina torques?” (Propertius, Book 1, no. 21). “Why bend a swollen-eyed glance aside at the sound of my groaning?” Translation taken from R. J. Baker, *Propertius I*.

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- 23 See Bernhard Ridderbos, "The Man of Sorrows" 151.
- 24 "All encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event" (Gadamer), cited in Nicholas Davey, "The Hermeneutics of Seeing" 15.
- 25 Ridderbos (after Erwin Panofsky and Hans Belting) argues that the image was used for liturgical purposes in Byzantium and when it came to Italy was expanded to include one or more figures. See Ridderbos, "The Man of Sorrows" 145–149.
- 26 Ridderbos (and Belting) interpret this "living-dead" position of Christ as evidence that the early function of the image was to disclose antithetical theological concepts. See Ridderbos, "The Man of Sorrows" 147.
- 27 In the narrative context of the vision, the underlying relationship between the body of the Man of Sorrows and the Eucharist is clearly highlighted. While the chalice stands on the altar, the bread of the Eucharist does not: the bread has been substituted by Christ, the Man of Sorrows. Implied is that those who partake of the eucharist become physically united with the body of the Man of Sorrows. See comments on the focus on the body in the *gregorymass* in the catalogue, *Seeing Salvation* 150.
- 28 Influenced by the teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi who encouraged an affective spirituality that concentrated on the passion imagery of Christ.
- 29 See Mitchell B. Merback, "Reverberations of Guilt" 38–39.
- 30 Caroline Walker Bynum, "Violent Imagery" 6.
- 31 Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel* 83, notes how the emphasis on the pronoun "we" gave the Church from earliest times the opportunity to identify with the suffering of the servant.
- 32 Quinn-Miscall, *Reading Isaiah* 198.
- 33 Whybray, *Second Isaiah* 77.
- 34 The "we" of the poem corresponds to the "we" or "I", the viewer of the image, depending on the image's cultic (plural) or devotional (singular) setting.
- 35 "The Man of Sorrows was a trigger of pilgrimage, persecution and program." Merback, "Reverberations of Guilt" 42, and see his subsequent exploration of the influence of the image in terms of a Freudian perspective on violence (42–47).
- 36 In particular, Bynum highlights the role of the *arma Christi*, the instruments of his passion that floated around Christ, "visual triggers" to remind Christians what God had suffered for them. "Non-narrative and scattered around the picture field with no regard to perspective or proportion the *arma* functioned as signs heaping up detail to encourage pious adherents to meditate in a random manner that could be different—every recourse to the image hence was ever challenging and ever new." Bynum, "Violent Imagery" 18.
- 37 One medieval tract cites Gerhard of Cologne "We are the new Jews", quoted in Bynum, "Violent Imagery" 27.
- 38 Bynum, "Violent Imagery" 28.
- 39 Merback, "Reverberations of Guilt" 47.
- 40 The artist may have been influenced by the spiritual movement in the

- Netherlands known as the *devotio moderna* that sought to make faith more accessible to lay people and encouraged a greater spiritual and emotional engagement with the person of Christ. See catalogue of *Seeing Salvation* 118.
- 41 Catalogue of *Seeing Salvation* 118.
- 42 A history of the first Dominicans written before 1269 by Gerard de Frachet reveals that “in their cells they had before their eyes images of the Virgin and of her crucified Son so that while reading, praying, sleeping, they could look upon them and be looked upon by them with the eyes of compassion.” Cited in Hans Belting, *The Image and its Public in the Middle Age* 57.
- 43 Westermann, *Second Isaiah* 261.
- 44 For views on the eroticizing of Christ, see Richard Trexler, “Gendering Christ Crucified” 107–119.
- 45 Camille, “Seductions of the Flesh” 259.
- 46 For a discussion of this painting see Dawson W. Carr, *The Adoration of the Magi* 47–50.
- 47 Ridderbos, “The Man of Sorrows” 178–180.
- 48 Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible* 95.
- 49 Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible* 99.
- 50 Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible* 100.
- 51 Camille, “Mimetic Identification” 183, quotes at length from the diary of the mystic Dominican nun Margaret Ebner, who went through so many paroxysms of pain and somatic transformations while contemplating the image that she lost all bodily control and had to be supported by others.
- 52 Camille argues that this is very significant considering the importance of the Dominican Order in the promulgation of the theme of the Man of Sorrows and other related Passion themes. Camille, “Mimetic Identification” 185.
- 53 Camille, “Mimetic Identification” 206.
- 54 Camille, “Mimetic Identification” 206.
- 55 In other paintings by Francke, the presence of God the Father gives divine approval.
- 56 Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible* 115, notes how Erasmus suggests the Christ’s female temperament might provide a physiological explanation for his terror and fear: people with “cold, scanty blood and thinned spirits—characteristics of female bodies—were more likely to suffer fear than those of hotter constitutions.”
- 57 Camille, “Seductions of the Flesh” 245–250.
- 58 Ridderbos, “The Man of Sorrows” 166–167.
- 59 Camille, “Mimetic Identification” 206–210.
- 60 This is clear from his letters to his brother Theo and especially in his general correspondence from 1877 and 1878. See Joan E. Greer, “Man of Sorrows and Acquainted with Grief” 30–42.
- 61 For example, *At Eternity’s Gate* or *Old Man with his Head in his Hands*.
- 62 Greer, “Man of Sorrows and Acquainted with Grief” 30. He wrote to artist Emile Bernard, criticizing Bernard’s painting of overt Christian themes: “You can give the impression of anguish without aiming straight at the historical

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- garden of Gethsemane; it is not necessary to portray the characters of the sermon on the mount in order to produce a consoling and gentle motif", cited in James C. Harris "Art and Images in Psychiatry" 1182.
- 63 Generally agreed to be his father's bible and a symbol perhaps of the latter's rather conventional faith and strict way of life as pastor in the Dutch Church. See Anton Wessels, *A Kind of Bible* 79.
- 64 The French title *Isaïe* appears at the top right of the page and CHAP LIII is highlighted in black in the right column.
- 65 Van Gogh urged his brother Theo "Read as much Zola as you can; this is good for one and makes things clear", cited in Jared Dockery, "Emile Zola's Influence upon van Gogh" 4.
- 66 James C. Harris "Art and Images in Psychiatry" 1182.
- 67 Kathleen Powers Erickson, *At Eternity's Gate* 95–96, explores how van Gogh, having abandoned the institutional Church, was seeking a new form, a modern context in which to express his values in a more meaningful way.
- 68 Clines, *I, He, We & They* 60.
- 69 Clines, *I, He, We & They* 61.
- 70 For a discussion of this and other images of "sorrowing women", of how van Gogh relates to the widespread late nineteenth-century fantasy of rescuing "fallen women" and of his understanding of Michelet as a moral authority on women and family, see Carol Zemel, "Sorrowing Women, Rescuing Men" 351–68.
- 71 Albert J. Lubin, *Strangers on the Earth* 4. The correspondence between the landscape and the imagery of Isaiah is reflected in a letter of van Gogh, "I tried to put the same sentiment into the landscape as I put into the figure: the convulsive, passionate clinging to the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm. I wanted to express something of the struggle for life in that pale, slender woman's figure as well as in the black, gnarled and knotty roots."
- 72 Hall states "Where my particular version of the Book comes from would be hard to say. It has all sorts of visceral resonances and texts that haunt the imagination . . . and I suppose there is meaning but I think the image is above meaning and myth," in correspondence from the artist, Autumn 2004. With regard to Isaiah 53, he considers it "one of the loveliest chapters in the whole Bible."
- 73 I am most grateful to Gesa Thiessen for points of clarification with regard to Patrick Hall's background and painting style. The information in this section on the artist and his painting comes from her analysis of his life and work in *Theology and Modern Irish Art* 112 119, 232 234.
- 74 John Hutchinson, "Foreword" in *Patrick Hall: Mountain* 7. The other quotations in this paragraph are from Thiessen, *Theology and Modern Irish Art* 233.
- 75 On Hall's love of Jewish symbolism and culture, see Thiessen, *Theology and Modern Irish Art* 232.
- 76 Thiessen, *Theology and Modern Irish Art* 233.
- 77 Thiessen, *Theology and Modern Irish Art* 233.
- 78 Van Gogh stated "I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo is used to symbolize and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our colouring", cited in Wessels, *A Kind of Bible* 81.

- 79 In Zoppo's *Dead Christ Supported by Saints*, c. 1475 (National Gallery, London), a version of the *imago pietatis*, the artist includes two burning candles.
- 80 Thiessen suggests that because of Hall's adherence to buddhism, the sacred text may also refer to the buddhist scriptures. A blending of perspectives on suffering from Isaiah 53 and Buddhism would offer another interesting interpretation of this painting.
- 81 Jacopo Bassano (1518–1592) was “a painter and reader of Scripture. His biographers tell us that, when fatigued by painting, he resorted to scriptural reading. Reading was his virtuous activity”, cited in Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano* xi.
- 82 Ronald de Leeuw, *The Letters of van Gogh* 115.

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