

Introduction

“What is an image?” is a question perhaps as old as humanity itself. In 2008 James Elkins posed it to 30 historians and image theorists who then spent 35 hours at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago debating it. In the introduction to *What is an Image?* (2011), the written records of these taped seminars, Elkins begins with a playful “selection of theories . . . in absolutely no order” (3). He soon breaks off, however, conceding that any attempt to order and delimit potentially infinite theories of the image is intrinsically “hopeless” (6). Why so? In answer he tabulates six possible problems, four of which deserve to be quoted here because of their implicit relevance to the current volume:

3. Some accounts are primarily concerned with the politics of images or images as politics, while other accounts do not feel the necessity of approaching political concepts at all. [. . .]
4. Some accounts are about the agency of images – their “voice,” their “life.” . . . At the extreme, when such accounts draw near to anthropology, religious belief, or animism, they may also involve a suspension of disbelief . . . It is not clear, at least to me, exactly how to change the register of the conversation when talk goes from a picture’s structure, or even its politics, to its agency, its voice, its life. [. . .]
5. The same sort of observation can be made about the idea that images are a fundamentally religious category. [. . .]
6. The same problem of theorizing the move from one form of understanding to another also emerges again in the discussions about the claim that images have a certain logic or rationality, and the companion claim that they possess a kind of irrationality. [. . .] (8-10)

“What is an Image in Medieval and Early Modern England?” was a question originally posed to some 60 participants at the 5th Biennial Conference of the Swiss Association of Medieval and Early Modern English

Studies held in Zurich in 2016. The conference aimed to complicate the question that Elkins had identified as problematic in two interrelated ways: firstly, by focusing on the image at a particular time and in a particular location, and secondly, by exploring the status of the visual image in relation to another sign system and medium, namely words and texts.

In the Latin West, it was in the late medieval and early modern periods that religious images would be subject to particular pressure, notably in the first half of the sixteenth century when reformers in Strasbourg, Zurich and Geneva would denounce them as idolatrous, and Catholics would reinstate them. But it was in England that the debate on images was particularly protracted, first expressed in Lollard resistance to depictions of the divine and then in the iconomachy and full-blown iconoclasm of the Reformations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a consequence, the relationship between the so-called sister arts of *pictura* and *poesis*, image and word, would be problematised. Yet, the story of the inexorable demise of the religious image in early modern England and the concomitant “iconophobia” of its people is being revised. Evidence suggests that there was a far more variegated iconic landscape in post-Reformation England and that the status of the religious image was inflected by its medium, location, and subject matter. Moreover, such images formed and were in turn formed by images produced in new media across a range of disciplines. What, for example, did the new print culture do to the status of the visual image embedded in a text on a page? What happens to images when they move from page to stage, or from sacred space into the secular world? How far did the Protestant celebration of hearing and denigration of sight in theory actually recalibrate the hierarchy of the senses in practice?

The 10 essays in this volume are representative of the creative ways in which established and newer scholars in the fields of medieval and early modern literature, history, and art history grappled with the difficulties intrinsic to our question. We have arranged them in roughly chronological order as a way of demarcating the historicist nature of the original project. But lest we fall for simple teleology, Brian Cummings’s lyrical, suggestive “Afterword: Words and Images” takes us back to the beginning.

For Christiania Whitehead an image is the late fifteenth-century cycle of 17 panel paintings depicting episodes from the Life of St Cuthbert, the great Northumbrian, Anglo-Saxon saint, found not in Durham, the centre of his cult, but in Cumbria at Carlisle Cathedral. She argues that in rendering pictorially the markedly visual Middle English metrical *Life of Cuthbert* while alluding to Bede’s authoritative Latin *Prose Life* beneath,

the cycle conveyed its message to both lay and clerical viewers alike. More broadly, Whitehead posits that the cycle is indicative of Durham's agenda to make Cuthbert the leading saint not just for the Benedictines of Durham but for all orders in the entire northern region. For Nicolette Zeeman an image is the pagan idol of medieval religious discourse and manuscript illumination, a figure whose insentient lifelessness paradoxically raises the possibility of aliveness and psychological interiority. By transposing this understanding of the idol to the armoured knight of Arthurian romance, the reader is alerted to the sentient being beneath the insentient exterior.

An image for Alexandra Walsham is, paradoxically, a graphic representation of an act of iconoclasm – an image of image-breaking – be it in a printed Protestant Bible, in Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, in a painted anti-papal allegory, a Catholic martyrology, or a Civil War pamphlet. Walsham asks why Protestants sought to remember their “rites of oblivion” in this way and suggests that such images served to commemorate and advocate types of reformation – from above or from below, orderly or violent, in pursuit of truth or in the face of it. Such images were thus implicated in the process by which Reformations in England and on the Continent became part of collective memory.

But an image can also be less material. It can be an image in the mind's eye. Kilian Schindler reads Marlowe's *Faustus* in the light of radical scepticism towards diabolical intervention in the material world, a sceptical position advocated by Dutch Anabaptists, Libertines, and the Family of Love, but already evident in Marlowe's England. This reading puts into question the material presence of the devils in the A-text of the play, insinuating that they are the projection of Faustus's deranged imagination. Schindler grants greater demonic agency in the B-text, but interprets this not as a critique of predestination but a response to Bullinger's and Vermigli's nuanced understanding of reprobation. An image for Sonia Pernet is a metaphor, specifically John Donne's use of liquid metaphors across a range of sermons to illustrate the act and effect of preaching on the believer. Pernet argues that for Donne hearing is the pre-eminent sense, and yet in drawing our attention to his brilliant use of visual images of flowing water to represent the workings of grace, she intimates that Donne validates the sense of sight no less.

In Hannah Yip's and Rachel Willie's essays images are printed portraits embedded in texts. Yip alerts us to the ways in which material images – commemorative portrait miniatures and epitaphs from funeral monuments – migrate onto the pages of two seventeenth-century printed sermons. She suggests that the visual and textual dimensions of these

sermons work together to commemorate the exemplary dead and so edify the reader. In contrast, Rachel Willie traces how van Dyck's portrait of Archbishop William Laud (c. 1633-5) gets recycled and subverted for satirical ends after Laud's impeachment in 1640. By contextualising a particular printed pamphlet of 1641 illustrated with numerous satirical woodcuts, Willie shows how Laud's episcopacy is equated with the papacy.

An image for Andrew Morrall is a word-picture or micrographic portrait – a pen and ink drawing of King Charles I composed of minutely written words purportedly taken from the Psalms, an image that has hung in St John's College library since at least 1662. Reading this portrait in the context of the posthumous cult of the martyr king and through the lenses of particular viewers including a university poet, Celia Fiennes, and finally Joseph Addison, Morrall plots the rise and fall of its reception. More generally, Morrall posits that its nature as word-image is symptomatic of an evolving Protestant logocentrism.

For Antoinina Bevan Zlatar and Erzsi Kukorelly an image is visual description, an epic poet's or novelist's power to render a picture of someone or something through words. Bevan Zlatar argues that John Milton's famous descriptions and similes of supernatural and pre-lapsarian beings in *Paradise Lost* are integral to the poem's theology, anthropology and diabolology. What someone looks like in *Paradise Lost* tells us about his or her nature and how he or she relates to the poem's God. Moreover, the embodied viscosity of these beings validates the material world as a repository, and the sense of sight as a conduit, of the divine. In Erzsi Kukorelly's essay an image is visual description and its effect on the reader as theorised by Henry Home and Hugh Blair, and as practised by Samuel Richardson. By tracing Richardson's use of "painterliness" principally in *Clarissa* (1748) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753), Kukorelly plots his evolving didactic sensibility.

In his "Afterword: Words and Images," Brian Cummings leads us back to the beginning of our volume, especially to Nicolette Zeeman's and Alexandra Walsham's explorations of the power of images and the Protestant attempts to disempower them. For Cummings, the iconoclast is compelled to destroy because "word and image cannot be separated *except* by force."

Antoinina Bevan Zlatar

Reference

What Is an Image? Ed. James Elkins and Maja Naef. Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2011.

Visual and Verbal Vernacular Translations of Bede's *Prose Life of St Cuthbert* in Fifteenth-Century North- ern England: The Carlisle Panel Paintings

Christiania Whitehead

This essay offers a new reading of the late fifteenth-century sequence of wood panels depicting the Life of St Cuthbert painted on the back of the north choir stalls at Carlisle Cathedral. The panels display scenes taken from Bede's influential *Prose Life of Cuthbert* (c. 721), identified by vernacular couplets. The essay reads this visual and vernacular translation of the *Prose Life* in the light of other late medieval vernacular versions, notably those in the southern legendaries, and in the largescale metrical *Life of St Cuthbert*, produced in Durham Benedictine Priory in the early fifteenth century.

From the eleventh century, Cuthbert's cult had been centred at Durham Cathedral, administered by the bishop and Benedictine community there. What are we to make then of this manifestation of Cuthbertine veneration in a cathedral served by Augustinian canons in the Cumbrian diocese? This essay suggests that Cuthbert's inclusion at Carlisle may be designed to highlight its putative early association with Cuthbert's episcopal see. As a consequence, these panels can be interpreted as part of an assertive programme masterminded by Durham to reinvigorate and expand Cuthbertine veneration during the fifteenth century, extending his reach west and valorising him as the premier saint of the entire northern region.

In Carlisle Cathedral, in the final years of the fifteenth century, seventeen pictures depicting scenes from the life of the Northumbrian saint, St Cuthbert, were painted directly onto the wood panels on the back of

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one section of the north choir stalls (Colgrave; Park and Cather 214-20) (see Figure 1). St Cuthbert (*c.* 634-87), the most celebrated northern saint of Anglo-Saxon England, entered Melrose monastery as a young



Figure 1: Cycle of St Cuthbert panel paintings on back of north choir stalls at Carlisle Cathedral. © Historic England Archive. Reproduced by kind permission.

man, after experiencing a vision of the soul of St Aidan, the Irish missionary to Northumbria, ascending to heaven. After a short spell at Ripon monastery, he was sent to Aidan's foundational monastery on the island of Lindisfarne where he became prior. Around 676, wishing for a more contemplative life, he retreated to the island of Inner Farne where he built himself a hermitage. In the 680s he was reluctantly recalled from this seclusion to become bishop of Lindisfarne. Faced by the onset of ill-health, he returned to his hermitage in 686 and died there the following year. He was buried in Lindisfarne monastery, where his body quickly became the focus of a tomb cult. Within a few years of his death, an anonymous *Vita* was composed by one of the Lindisfarne monks to promote his cult, later superseded by the Metrical and Prose *vitae* of the Venerable Bede (respectively, *c.* 716 and *c.* 721).

The cycle of Cuthbert paintings at Carlisle Cathedral was one of four, unevenly divided between the north and south choir stalls, which all appear to have been commissioned and carried out during the priorate of Thomas Gondibour (1470s-1502), prior of the house of Augustinian canons which had served the cathedral since the early twelfth century.¹ The other three cycles comprise, on the south side, parallel with the Cuthbert cycle, a *Life* of St Augustine of Hippo in twenty-four panels, and on the north side, adjacent to the Cuthbert panels, a *Life* of St Antony of Egypt in eighteen panels, and a further cycle of non-narrative images of the twelve apostles (Harcourt).² While each of the twelve apostles is flanked by a matching Latin sentence from the Apostles Creed, the three cycles of saints' lives are all accompanied by rhyming couplets in the northern vernacular, one couplet above each panel image, identifying the subject matter of the scene below.

¹ The house of Augustinian canons at Carlisle was founded in 1122. In 1133, their church was raised to the status of a cathedral, forming a new see and detaching Cumberland from the diocese of York (Summerson 30-31). One of the panels in the St Augustine cycle contains the monogram of Prior Gondibour. Gondibour was also associated with other contemporary decorative programmes within the cathedral and priory.

² Harcourt's mid nineteenth-century monograph is devoted to the three hagiographical cycles depicting Cuthbert, Augustine and Anthony at Carlisle; Park and Cather note that while the single figures of Sts Augustine and Anthony occur commonly in late medieval art, these panel paintings represent the only surviving cycles of these saints in England (220).

Textual and Visual Sources

Many questions present themselves: what is Cuthbert doing at Carlisle given his Northumbrian and Durham associations? What are the implications of his veneration within a house of Augustinian canons? What should we make of his representation alongside Sts Augustine and Anthony? But before turning to these, it is first necessary to establish the *version* of Cuthbert's *Life* represented in this cycle, bearing in mind the variety of versions circulating by the fifteenth century, and to summarise the current scholarship regarding the probable source of this version. The seventeen panels that make up the Cuthbert cycle depict (1) a child's prediction of Cuthbert's episcopal destiny, (2) the healing of his knee by an angel, (3) his vision of St Aidan's soul ascending, (4) his horse finds bread for him during a journey, (5) he is received by Prior Boisil at Melrose, (6) he offers an angel hospitality at Ripon and is given bread in turn, (7) Boisil prophesies Cuthbert's episcopal future, (8) Cuthbert preaches to the people, (9) he prays in the sea and is dried by otters, (10) he is fed with fish by an eagle, (11) he builds a hermitage on Farne and drives away devils, (12) he miraculously finds a water spring on Inner Farne, (13) he reproves thieving crows on Inner Farne, (14) he is consecrated as bishop, (15) he heals a sick child during an episcopal journey, (16) he receives the sacrament on his deathbed, (17) his body is discovered to be incorrupt.³

These seventeen panels illustrate a number of chapters from Bede's highly influential *Prose Life of St Cuthbert*, written in Jarrow in the early eighth century and easily the single most important text at the heart of Cuthbert's cult up until the Reformation. As is well-known, this cult was centred at Durham Cathedral where Cuthbert's body was enshrined under the custodianship of a priory of Benedictine monks from the late eleventh century. Bede's *Prose Life* consists of forty-six chapters; however less than half of those chapters are illustrated at Carlisle, and it would seem that the Carlisle artist was also influenced by the chapters from Bede selected for use within the southern legendary tradition: the relatively terse legends of St Cuthbert in the *South English Legendary* (*SEL*) and the *Gilte Legende*. It is thus the case that the panel paintings favour certain early chapters from Bede's *Prose Life*, including a child's prophecy of Cuthbert's episcopal future, the healing of his knee by an angel, and his vision of Aidan's soul ascending to heaven, in the same

³ I number the panels in accordance with the order given in Park and Cather 217, Figure 2. The transcription of the couplets follows Fowler, *Life of St Cuthbert* 10-11 throughout.

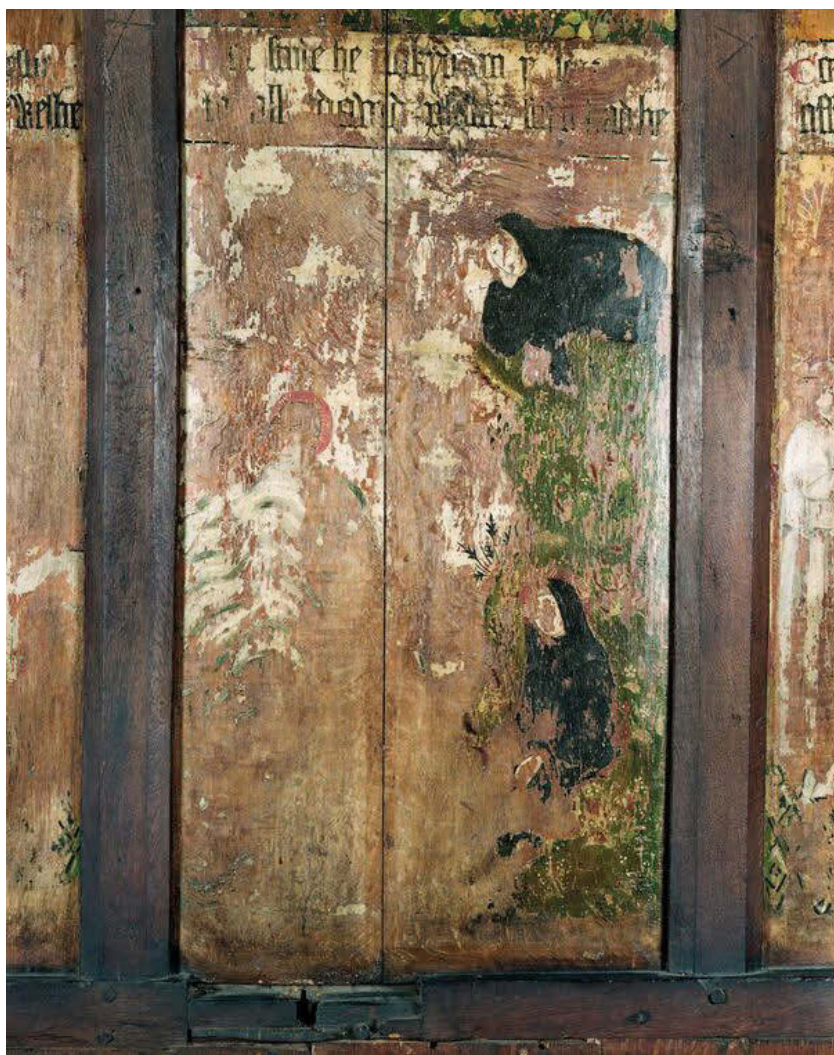


Figure 2. Cuthbert immerses himself in the sea to pray and has his feet dried by sea creatures (Bede, Prose Life, ch. 10).

A): British Library, Yates Thompson 26, fol. 24r. © The British Library Board. Reproduced by kind permission.