

Introduction

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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

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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 Erzsí 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 visuality of these beings validates the material world as a repository, and the sense of sight as a conduit, of the divine. In Erzsí Kukorelly's essay an image is visual description and its effect on the reader as theorised by Henry Home and Hugh Blair, and as practiced 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.

