Sensual and Sensory Experiences in the Middle Ages

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On Pleasure, Fear, Desire and Pain

Edited by

Carme Muntaner Alsina,
David Carrillo-Rangel,
Delfi I. Nieto-Isabel
and Pau Castell Granados

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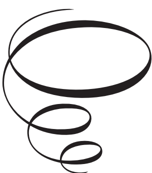

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INTRODUCTION

CARME MUNTANER ALSINA

This volume aims to show the different aspects of sensory experiences that medieval people conveyed through documents, literary accounts, and religious practices. The unifying theme of the volume is how pleasure, pain, desire, and fear appear in different and sometimes conflicting combinations and settings: from the private space of the monastic cell to the shared hustle of the market. Therefore, we propose to show snapshots of human experience and passions, arranging them through the use of the so-called "stoic quartet;" a structure that highlights the complementarity of the contributions and the emotions analysed by the authors. Stoicism was a fundamental part of the development of Christian thought and was highly influential in authors such as Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine. The Stoics held that men acquired knowledge through the senses; a process that was in turn mediated by the self, which sorted out judgements and weighed what was perceived against a series of stimuli. In particular, medieval Stoicism would consider Pain and Pleasure as the most basic of passions. Furthermore, within the framework provided by the Stoic theory of knowledge, the combination of these passions and the virtues would allow representations whose full meaning we can barely grasp.

The geographic focus of this volume is Mediterranean Europe, although it also touches on other Western contexts. This collection of essays is multidisciplinary and the combination of different points of view aims to provide an original contribution to the study of sensory experiences in the Middle Ages. The contributors are young researchers and early career scholars who use a variety of sources: private documents, archaeological and topographical data, literary works, theological sources, and judicial records. The different chapters, presented in two blocks respectively centred on pleasure and fear will transport the reader from the sobriety of a monk's cell to the harshness of a battlefield, from the exuberance of a marketplace full of spices to the severity of a judicial court.

Framing these two main blocks, the opening and closing chapters of the volume revolve around pain and desire, specifically focusing on a key element of the medieval imagery of the Christian West: the crucified Christ. The chapters by Pablo Acosta and Sergi Sancho look into the desire and pain that Angela of Foligno, Marguerite d'Oingt, and the anchoresses of insular Britain experienced in order to reach spiritual fulfilment.

According to Pablo Acosta, pain and desire were the crucial physical and spiritual sensations in Angela of Foligno's mystical experiences, which she described in her *Memoriale* in the late thirteenth century. In her works, this Franciscan Tertiary shows a clear preference for the figure of the Virgin Mary, which she places in a central place of her imaginary as "the main doorway between two worlds." Thus Mary is second only to the Trinity and remains above other main figures of the Gospels, such as the apostles. It is through Mary that Angela experiences the pain and suffering of the Passion of Christ in the first person, which in turn allows her to establish an intimate relationship with Him.

Acosta focuses on discussing whether Angela of Foligno engaged in these mystical experiences through the contemplation of physical images—similar to some of the extant artworks from that time—or only used mental images; a divide that appears blurred and remains ambiguous in many passages of the *Memoriale*. The author attempts to reconstruct Angela's spiritual journey through these images. At first, plastic and public images—the stained-glass windows and frescoes of the Basilica Superiore of Assisi—awakened Angela's mystical curiosity for Christ's Passion. Later on, during her meditations in a private context she used devotional objects that prompted the development of more intimate and intense mental images. Finally, she would end up reliving said images, which helped her reach a state of grace and intrinsic understanding of the pain of Christ on the cross, and even caused her to reject physical images of the crucifixion, for they held no truth as to the true pain Christ had endured.

In this chapter, Angela's experiences are also placed within the general context of the privatization of cult images and ways of meditation in the late Middle Ages, and the practice of Mary's *com-passion*. In this sense, one of the main contributions of the author is the affirmation that the experiences of mystics like Angela of Foligno would play a main role in the collective imaginary for they anticipated elements of later art.

While in Umbria Angela of Foligno used the crucifixion as the central motif for her meditations, Margerite d'Oingt did the same in southern France, just as the anonymous author of the *Ancrene Wisse* had earlier advised in the British islands. In his final chapter, Sergi Sancho compares the reflections of these two authors—a female mystic and a canon or friar—on the crucifixion and the bodily sensitivity that derived from it.

Whereas Acosta focuses his analysis on devotional objects and the use that Angela of Foligno made of them throughout her mystical journey, Sancho concentrates on the presence of the five senses in penitential and devotional instances. Meditating before a crucifix enabled mental recreations of the crucifixion. These mental images led to a deeper understanding of the wounds of the crucified Christ and the assimilation of his pain, which in turn made it possible to heal human sensitivity, that is, the illness caused by the senses.

In Marguerite's work, devoted to the mystical experience, the senses are not an impediment to the ascension of the soul. In contrast, in the *Ancrene Wisse*, which was meant as a sort of rule for anchoresses, senses are seen as an extension of the five sensory sins and the suffering of Christ on Calvary and, therefore, are a reminder of sin. Thus, whereas the *Ancrene Wisse* focuses not so much on bodily redemption as on the human perversity that caused Christ's death, Marguerite's text leaves more room for hope.

The aforementioned analysis of the pain of the crucifixion and the desire to emulate it in order to reach spiritual fulfilment described in Chapter 1 is followed by the first block of the volume, which focuses on spiritual and worldly pleasures. This section discusses the pleasure provided by the elevated experience of touching Christ (Chapter 2), being surrounded by the fragrances and aromas of an incorruptible icon (Chapter 3), and the pleasure of walking among the stalls full of spices and a thousand other products of a weekly market (Chapter 4).

In Chapter 2, Lydia Hayes explores the senses as a means to approach Christ, and especially focuses on touch, considered by Aristotle as the lowest of them all. Interweaving the sensual poetics of the Song of Songs with several examples from the Gospels, Hayes studies the commentaries on these texts by several twelfth-century French authors, including Bernard of Clairvaux, Rupert of Deutz, Honorius of Autun, and Peter Cantor. Starting from different points of view, these commentators presented the relationship between the bride and groom of the Song of

Songs and the figure of the Virgin Mary as mother and wife of God as metaphors for the relationship between Christ and humanity. Thus, through these biblical sensory experiences, Christians would have been able to establish a closer connection with Christ.

It is indeed through touch that the Virgin and Mary Magdalene had a deeper connection with the Son of God. Conception, breastfeeding, kissing, tears, and anointing allowed them to form an intimate and unique union with Christ. Likewise, the French authors studied by Hayes claimed to feel closer to the Lord through this sense and, therefore, according to them it was through touch that Christians were able to approach God, either by means of the Eucharist or touching relics, for instance.

The core of Chapter 2 is devoted to the interpretations of French commentators on the different physical contacts that the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene shared with Christ. Hayes establishes the links between Mary's pregnancy and being pregnant with the Word of God, and compares breastfeeding and feeding Child Jesus with the Eucharist in which all the faithful take part. Hayes also notes the humility and contrition with which Mary Magdalene touches Christ, when she weeps at his feet or when she anoints him with oils. This physical contact conveys a sense of reverence and humility, but above all, the joy and spiritual pleasure brought by this connection with Christ—and God—through touch.

Scents are also important in this contact with Christ. The perfumes with which Mary Magdalene anoints the body of Christ and that fill the verses of the Song of Songs lead us to the next chapter, in which Ivo Elies transports us to the most perfumed passages of the *Cantigas de Santa María*, authored by King Alfonso X of Castile, known as the Wise, in the thirteenth century. Despite not leaving a trace whatsoever in material history, these smells have played an important role in the medieval imaginary and worldview.

In Chapter 3, Elies compiles all the references to smells contained in the 427 *cantigas* that make up this poetic corpus. Good odours are predominant, and they always appear in relation to the sacred and the Divinity. Perfume is featured in the *cantigas* as a healing substance linked to the odour of sanctity that some of the bodies or objects in these stories give off, in clear connection with the pleasant scent that Christ's body emitted in his tomb according to the Scriptures.

The Virgin Mary—the central motif of the *cantigas*—and the icons and objects related to her, are closely linked to scents. Alongside rose water, flowers, incense, myrrh and aromatic plants, we find spices, balsam, and ointments, which play a very important symbolic and spiritual role in these compositions and convey the olfactory imagery of the time.

Finally, Elies ends his chapter with an in-depth philological analysis of *Cantiga* 34, a paradigmatic example of the role of smells in this corpus. There he shows the contrast between the unpleasant odours emanating from the negative characters and spaces of the narration—the Jew, the latrine, the Devil—and the pleasant smell of the icon of the Virgin and the Christian who salvages it. The numerous literary references used to contextualize the analysis recall not only other similar compositions of the period, but also the Scriptures and several other authors of Western medieval Europe.

Finally, in the last chapter of this first section, Maria Soler looks into one of the most prosaic and at the same time more sensorially relevant instances of pleasure: life in the markets of the county of Barcelona between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries. The exercise is not easy, because the extant documents from this period are not abundant and even less so the sources that may help address the topic of sensory experiences. However, on the basis of documentary and archaeological sources as well as building on other studies on the matter, the author manages to draw a detailed picture of the products that were usually sold in these marketplaces and, by extension, of the sensations experienced by those who attended them.

Theirs was an experience linked to the five senses: to the sounds of the sellers' calls and the people who negotiated, the less pleasant noise of fights, and the festive din of the musicians who attended the fairs, while buyers, attracted by the colours of food or of the cloths displayed by merchants, touched or tasted the merchandise to check its quality.

However, smells were the marketplace's most distinctive feature: cereal, wine vats, vegetables, oil, eggs, and poultry, among other products. The variety would even increase in fairs, with the addition of livestock and spices. After all, it should be noted that, although exclusive products such as spices could only be afforded by a few customers, in the marketplace everyone could experience some of the intense sensations they caused; a situation exemplified by the twelfth-century French satirical tale of the

peasant who carried a cartload of manure through the market of Montpellier and ironically fainted due to the strong smell of spices.

In stark contrast to pleasure, the second main block of this volume is devoted to fear: the fear of Muslims, who yearned to earn a place in Paradise (Chapter 5); the fear of Jews, afraid of trespassing against the limits imposed on the relations between men and women (Chapter 6); and the fear of the women accused of witchcraft due to a more or less unwarranted bad reputation that their neighbours held against them (Chapter 7).

In Chapter 5, Josep Suñé analyses the Muslim warriors' fear of dying in battle, the promise of an eternal life that moved them, and especially the houris—the eternally young virgins awaiting the martyrs in Paradise—through a manual on jihad written between the tenth and eleventh centuries by Faqī Ibn Abī Zamanīn. According to this Andalusian author, lack of sincerity, hypocrisy, and not following the precepts dictated by Muhammad and his followers could lead not to Paradise, but to eternal damnation in Hell instead.

After analysing Ibn Abī Zamanīn's brief work as well as earlier witnesses' accounts, Suñé reviews the political and military context of the time in which this opuscule was written. Contrary to what it might seem at first glance, Ibn Abī Zamanīn's work was not written during a period of Muslim military failure with numerous casualties, but rather at a time when the many victorious expeditions provided numerous captives that were sold in the slave market.

It was precisely these slaves, and more specifically the female captives, who could distract Muslims from the ideal attainment of Paradise. Therefore, the purpose of Abī Zamanīn was to raise moral awareness among fighters, and to frighten and warn them in case they lost their way.

From the reality of the Muslim battlefield, Chapter 6 moves on to the everyday life of Jewish communities. Through the analysis of the *Pirkei Avot*, one of the main Jewish didactic and moral texts, Albert Lizandra addresses the limitations imposed on the relations between men and women. These restrictions, based on the idea that women were a bad influence, were mainly aimed at preventing men from straying from their obligations, that is, studying the Torah and curbing sexual desire. Lizandra's analysis is based not only on the aforementioned text but also on the commentaries on it that were produced by two Iberian intellectuals

in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Maimonides—a Cordovan philosopher who was exiled in North Africa from a very young age—and Rabbeinu Yonah ha-Gerondi—from Girona, in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula.

While sexual pleasure is an important part of the Jewish religion, provided that it happens within marriage, men's social interactions with women are strictly limited. All those who read the *Pirkei Avot* knew that talking too much with their own wives or the neighbour's wife could lead them to sin. But this text could have very different interpretations, which the rationalist Maimonides and the traditionalist Rabbeinu Yonah ha-Gerondi discussed at practically the same historical moment.

The last chapter of this block is authored by Pau Castell and focuses on the role of hearsay and reputation in the witch trials of fifteenth-century Catalonia. Through a thorough documentary research, the author addresses the importance of what was said in the condemnation of men and—mostly—women, for witchcraft, which superseded material and testimonial evidence.

Castell discusses the concepts of hearsay, *fama* and witchcraft in this context and goes on to describe the judicial procedure in cases of witchcraft. The key point of Chapter 7, however, is the questioning of witnesses not so much on what they themselves had been able to see but rather on what they had heard or knew about the matter. Their answers were more the result of rumours and the (bad) reputation of the accused than of factual reality.

Far from standing frightened and defenceless before these accusations, the women accused of witchcraft defended themselves by means of physical or verbal confrontations with the instigators of the rumour, filing complaints for slander, and seeking the aid of mediators. These were the only possible strategies to counter the unsubstantiated accusations, and sometimes they were even successful. In contrast, absconding, the last resort to escape conviction, would only consolidate the rumour against the accused as well as their bad reputation.

In sum, the present volume aims to look into the Pleasure, Fear, Desire, and Pain experienced by medieval women and men from different cultures and social backgrounds, who often lived in very distant contexts. Therefore, our purpose is not so much to offer conceptual views on each of these feelings, but to explore them, celebrating their complexity and

showing them for what they are: fragments of the past of individuals who felt different emotions and were in turn defined by them.

SETTING THE STAGE: ON PAIN AND DESIRE

CHAPTER ONE

BLOOD AND PLEASURE IN CHRIST: PRIVATE DEVOTION AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE IN LATE MEDIEVAL FRANCISCAN UMBRIA

PABLO ACOSTA-GARCÍA

Angela, Mary, and Textual Pain

One of the greatest experts in Angela of Foligno's *Memoriale* called it the first European 'auto-hagiography'.[1] Indeed, this late thirteenth-century work records a daily dictation in which a Franciscan tertiary recounted her inner story to her confessor; a story whose textual genesis can be found in the pilgrimage Angela made to Assisi around 1291.[2] In the course of this journey, in Angela's own words, the Holy Spirit joined her, spoke to her during the ascent to the Colle del Paradiso, and finally left her.[3] In later years, a long series of allocutions, visions, and all kinds of ecstatic phenomena would add to this first experience. Angela narrates them all with a psychological richness that is unparalleled in the documents of her time. One of the most appealing features of her account is that it is Angela herself who structures her experience (and therefore the book) following the model of the *scalae coeli*.[4] Therefore, the *Memoriale* consists of two sequenced, ascending, and parallel schemata: the first one is made up of thirty steps or stages, although it appears truncated in the twentieth, whereas the second one is complete and includes seven degrees.[5]

In the following pages, I will approach these two inner paths trying to elucidate the meditative practices that could lie behind some of the experiences narrated in the *Memoriale*.[6] My analysis will start with the identification of the moments of devotional interaction that Angela shares with different figures of the Passion, whom she sees both with her own eyes and with the eyes of her mind. In particular, I will focus on her

relationship with Mary as an affective link in different evangelical scenes. To this purpose I will study how she presents her identification with Christ's mother in the text and how this is used to develop a direct relationship with Christ himself.[7] The main aim here is to study the perceptive ambiguity with which Angela recounts her connection with these figures. In other words, is this Umbrian tertiary speaking about material images or does she refer to mental elements present during meditation? This chapter will mostly be centred on discussing the possibility of reconstructing devotional dynamics on the basis of visual materials whose features can be restored by placing the texts within a broader context. I will thus compare certain steps of the *Memoriale* to different contemporary Umbrian works and discuss their contribution to the interpretation of Angela's experiences.

Before I begin my analysis, I would like to note that although Angela recounts different mystical experiences in which the Virgin appears to her—for example, visions of Mary in glory and allocutions[8]—here I will only comment on those passages whose frequency makes it possible both to study them as a homogeneous material and to establish comparisons between them. Specifically, I will address the moments when Angela refers to the mother of Christ in her capacity as intercessor. First, some passages reveal a hierarchy among the figures that possess this power of intercession. Let us look at an example:

> … her soul was in a state of languor. What she wanted to see and feel was God, and not any creature. She did not speak nor could she make any words come out, but her soul spoke inwardly and cried out to God not to leave her languishing in such a death, for she regarded life as death. She also first called upon the Blessed Virgin, and then invoked and beseeched all the apostles to accompany her in kneeling before the Most High and implore him not to make her suffer this death, namely, the present life, but to enable her to attain the one she was feeling. She similarly invoked and cried out to blessed Francis and the Evangelists.[9]

As we can see, the text first (*primo*) points to the Virgin Mary and then (*postea*) to the apostles, Francis, and the four evangelists as supporting pillars in a situation of deep life crisis. This order of appearance could be attributed to her stumbling dictation (which Brother A., the transcriber, so often mentions) and not to a chronological order that would betray Angela's preference for the figure of Mary over others, but other textual data confirm the devotional pre-eminence of the Virgin in Angela's mind.[10] The main evidence for this is that, leaving aside the members of the Trinity, Mary is the figure that most often appears in the *Memoriale*

and the one that grants the largest number of gifts to its author. To cite but a few examples: she blesses her alms, grants Angela the grace of her Son so the tertiary is not deceived by diabolical speeches, revives her from the death of sin and, finally, is set as an example in terms of behaviour.[11] In spite of this variety of Marian gifts, it could be said that the most important present that Angela receives from Mary is her grief and suffering at Christ's Passion. In order to fully grasp the implications of this statement, let us analyse the first thirty-step ladder in which Angela and her companion initially decided to organize their experience.[12]

It is not possible to discuss in depth here the historical semantic reach of this graphic structure that graduates Angela's inner life.[13] However, as Giovanni Pozzi taught us, several important elements intersect in the design of this interior pilgrimage.[14] On the one hand, the road begins with pain, which accompanies Angela from the very first moment and up until at least the fourteenth step—where 'joy', *letitiam*, is mentioned—or, undoubtedly, until the nineteenth step, where she speaks of "primam consolationem magnam de dulcedine Dei" (the first great sensation of God's sweetness).[15] This omnipresence of pain in Angela's internal evolution clearly places her spirituality within a penitential framework.[16] Hers is an ascetic path made up of prayer, spiritual exercises, and meditation. Not without reason does Brother A. note between the fourth and fifth steps:

> I, brother Scribe, declare that in all these steps I have not written about the remarkable penances which the faithful follower of Christ performed, for I learned about them only after I had written the aforesaid steps. She had only been telling me, at this point, what was necessary to distinguish one step from another. For my part, I did not want to write down one single Word which was not exactly as she had said it. I even omitted many things which were simply impossible for me to write down properly.[17]

This annotation, whose characteristics make it seem more like an added comment than part of the original wording, gives a fundamental hint to complete the silences that can be found in this first series of twenty steps. Events have been summarised, prioritizing a roadmap that, as is known, served as a manual for spiritual development to various audiences over the centuries.[18] Therefore, it could be said that Angela's testimony details effects rather than causes, that is, the account specifies her accomplishments—in the book's own words, how her soul *mutates*[19]—but the process through which she gets there is largely omitted.

Pilgrimage: Angela and the Umbrian images

Mary appears in the sixth step of the aforementioned itinerary, marking a fundamental turning point in the journey of the female mystic. Giuseppe Pozzi also emphasized this watershed, although he omitted the allusion to the Virgin: "Una linea di divisione può essere aprossimativamente tracciata tra il quinto e il sesto passo, dove infittisce la presenza del verbo chiave 'illuminare'."[20] Indeed, the panorama outlined between the first step—the acknowledgement of sin—and the fifth one—where the soul acquires self-knowledge—is completely different from the articulation presented from the sixth step onwards. As the lexicon shows, the first five steps are marked by self-mortification and its effects. In each of them we find either the term 'pain'—for example, in the second step, "... et not sentit amorem sed sentit *dolorem*"—or a conjugated form of *plangere*—for instance, *plangit*.[21] In contrast, the illumination of the sixth stage together with the intercession requested of Mary lead not to a denial of pain, but to its transformation. The seventh step gives way to a landscape centred in the cross of the crucified Christ, which appears here for the first time and will be developed through a sort of markedly passional devotional features—that is, related to the Passion—in the steps that follow.[22]

Thus, the cross is the visual focus through which the steps following the sixth make up a path that has to do with the transformation of the initial suffering. Whereas the initial journey was centred on the mortification of one's own soul, Angela's discovery at this point turns to the learning of *com-passio*, the human and divine pain of others on the edge of redemption. The elements that appear as the marrow of this set of steps are easily recognizable images, typical of the late medieval meditations focused on the suffering of Christ.[23] Their detachment from a broader evangelical context reveals the characteristic fragmentation of meditative instruments that were already widely used in Angela's time.[24] As the textual descriptions highlight, throughout this series of images there is an allusion to both their mental representation and the visionary experiences in which a given element or character simply 'appears' to the author. In other words, in most cases Angela seems to be using these images—or coexisting with them—through her inner senses.[25] For instance:

> In the fourteenth step, while I was standing in prayer, Christ on the cross appeared more clearly to me while I was awake, that is to say, he gave me an even greater awareness of himself than before. He then called me to place my mouth to the wound in his side. It seemed to me that I saw and

> drank the blood, which was freshly flowing from his side. His intention was to make me understand that by this blood he would cleanse me. And at this I began to experience a great joy, although when I thought about the passion I still filled with sadness.[26]

The syntax of the first clause, in which an abrupt apposition—"michi vigilanti" (while I was awake)—cuts off what would be the normal rhythm of the sentence, suggests the desire of the author to place the image of the cross in the waking plane of consciousness as opposed to a possible dream state.[27] The following scene, in which Christ invites her to place her mouth on the wound of his side and suck, is commonplace both in the female mendicant religious experiences of the time and in the iconographic motif of the *ostentatio vulneris* as an extension of the cult of the Five Wounds.[28] This kind of contiguity between certain 'artistic' motifs and Angela's visionary-erotic experiences is not only apparent in the *Memoriale*, but other details also suggest that some of her penitential exercises were related to the use of images as meditative devices. Thus, the step towards the feeling of *com-passio* seems to have been motivated by an image of Mary and John the Evangelist before the Crucifixion:

> In the thirteenth step, I entered into the sorrow over the passion suffered by the mother of Christ and St. John. I prayed that they would obtain for me a sure sign by which I might always keep the passion of Christ continually in my memory.[29]

The main doubt cast about the interpretation of this passage is the kind of image Angela is talking about when she refers to the "mother of Christ and St. John." As J.F. Hamburger has emphasized, it is common in the mystical texts of this period to use a deliberate ambiguity that blurs the border between the device on which the meditation is based—here perhaps a painted cross, a miniature, or a fresco—the mental impression created by it, and the somatic experiences derived from devotion.[30] This is one of such cases, because whether Angela "intravi" (entered) this step thanks to a devotional image or through meditation or reflection on holy figures remains unknown. At any rate, in this phase Angela seeks pain following the models of Mary and John not only to *understand* it, but to *contain* the Passion "in memoria," that is, to revive it within herself. Another passage reads:

> Then my soul cried out loudly: 'O holy Mary, mother of the afflicted one, tell me something of your Son's pain which no one else but you can possibly recall. For you saw more passion than any other saint; and, as I perceive it, you not only saw it with your bodily eyes, but also pictured it with your imagination, and out of the continual ardent devotion that was

yours toward the one you loved.' At this point, my soul cried out in extreme pain: 'Is there any saint who can tell me something of this passion which I have not yet Heard spoken or related, but which my soul has seen, which is so great that I find no words to express it?' My soul saw such suffering![31]

Here we find some of the features of both the cults and the forms of meditation of the late Middle Ages. The most characteristic of these is probably Angela's second person interpellation of the Virgin. It is precisely this trait that defines what Hans Belting understands as 'devotion'.[32] What leads the author to speak to the Virgin in this context? She claims to have seen in her soul—"quam anima mea vidit," that is, inwardly—an unheard-of Passion ("de ista passione de qua non audio loqui vel referri verbum") and therefore requires an authoritative explanation for it. Mary is needed here as a contemplative model. In principle she is related to the external senses ("cum oculus capitis") and then to the inner ones ("et cum imagination"). Finally, the central motif of all meditation on the Passion is also mentioned, the pain felt by its characters ("pro zelo quem habuisti continue de isto tuo amore"). This transition from outer to inner contemplation defines the mechanism of the devotional instruments par excellence, images, and pain represents the link between the world of the devotee and that of whom he or she worships.

The presence of this scene at the foot of the Cross is repeated in several steps. As I have already mentioned, a true *via crucis* starts in the seventh step, after the illumination of the sixth one. Angela then goes through the elements and characters of the Passion perfecting herself through her interaction with them.[33] Whereas in the ninth step she receives the gift of being able to ask through the Cross, in the fifteenth, after having already "entered" the pain of the Passion, she declares the following:

In the fifteenth steep, I fixed my attention on St. John and on the mother of God, meditating on their sorrow and praying them to obtain for me the grace of always feeling something of the sorrow of Christ's passion or at least something of their own sorrow. They obtained and still obtain that favour for me. Thus, one time, St. John made me feel this sorrow to such a degree that it surpassed any I had ever experienced. From the insight I received from this experience I understood that St. John had endured such great sorrow over the passion and the death of Christ and over the sorrows of the mother of Christ that I was convinced, and still am, that he is more than a martyr.[34]

In the first place, the implicit visual status of the verb 'fixed' must be emphasized. Again, Angela focuses her gaze on this scene and, at the same

time, the receiver runs into the ambiguity of the materiality of such an image. Here we can infer a cognitive process (*cogitando*) centred on a typically devotional scene: the pain of Mary and John at the foot of the Cross. Attempting to achieve *com-passio* through a direct request mediated by this image is a desire that perfectly fits the historical devotional context in which Angela lived. As Rachel Fulton puts it, the earliest textual breakthroughs in relation to the *com-passio* of the Virgin in the West took place already in the ninth century, but it is not until at least the twelfth century that we can find a fully developed verbal device to meditate on the relationship between Mary and her Son.[35] These were the different versions of the commentaries on the Song of Songs, which in the thirteenth century were replaced by meditations on the life of Christ and mystery plays.[36] On a plastic level, Anne Derbes's important study pushes backward Hans Belting's dating of affective developments in late medieval Italian iconography, tracing the turning point back to the *Duecento* and placing in Umbria the area of introduction of Byzantine forms.[37]

Both historiographic reconstructions and the data provided by her book evince that Angela was immersed in an environment in which the experience of the Passion through devices played a fundamental role. The *Memoriale* hints at such kind of scenario in various ways: in the aforementioned first series of steps, specifically in the eighteenth step, we read: "Also, whenever I saw the passion of Christ depicted, I could hardly bear it, and I would come down with a fever and fall sick. My companion, as a result, hid paintings of the passion or did her best to keep them out of my sight."[38] Several things can be deduced from this sentence, the main one being that this "passionem Christi pictam" almost certainly belonged in the private area of Angela's *casalenum*, where she lived with her companion. The fact that it can be hidden at will suggests an easy to handle, portable, and personal object. This would perfectly fit the late medieval trend of privatization of cult images which, among other things, sought to foster their use by the laity.[39] In Angela's case this would be related to the ascetic practices carried out in her house that she so often recounts, as well as the mention of periods of seclusion in a *cella* or *carcere* devoted to penitential exercises: "…for most of that day I remained in my cell where I was praying, strictly confined and alone."[40]

The entire itinerary of Angela of Foligno hints both at a direct and frequent relationship with images and at the development of a hypersensitivity towards them. Let us not forget that the first great religious crisis narrated in the *Memoriale*—which precisely contains the

seed of her writing—occurs in front of a stained-glass window still extant in the Basilica Superiore of Assisi that is described in the text and where Mary appears as *theotokos*.[41]

Fig. 1-1. Detail of the so-called "vetrata degli angeli," Basilica Superiore, Assisi. Photograph by Fr. Gerhard Ruf, Archivio fotografico del Sacro Convento di San Francesco.

Discussing the theological implications of Mary's relationship with Christ, of Christ's connection with Francis, and of that of all three of them with the six angels would exceed the framework of the Passion, whose clarification is my main goal here.[42] What should be noted is that the textual traces of Angela's devotional use of images are so numerous that they cannot be overlooked in an interpretation of the passages in which the figure of the Virgin is interpellated as a mediator of the Passion. This fact was well understood by the organizers of a recent exhibition on our author and the plastic arts, which tried to relate the inner world of Angela of Foligno to the figuration surrounding her.[43] Let us now return to the scene of Mary and John at the foot of the Cross to analyse some examples in this regard.

In her already classic iconographic compilation, Gertrud Schiller traced this composition back to the Byzantine period.[44] The medieval examples

she notes evidence how the expressiveness of this scene underwent a process of transformation that was quite typical of Christian art. Thus, the components of the Mary-Cross-John tableau went from representing types, that is, the embodiment of a concept or an idea, to become an expression of humanized pain; in other words, they acquired an affective function.[45] Schiller precisely relates this shift to the meditative function that plastic arts adopted and to the personal participation of spectators in the depicted scene. Now, what kind of Mary before the Cross could Angela see in late medieval Umbria? And, above all, what degree of pain did that image convey?

The only reference to a specific historical object included in Angela's text is the stained-glass window she saw in her initiation pilgrimage of 1291.[46] In all likelihood, this indicates that Angela could have seen the frescoes of the crucifixions traditionally attributed to Cimabue that are preserved in the Basilica Superiore.[47]

Fig. 1-2. Cimabue, *Crucifixion* (right transept), Basilica Superiore, Assisi.

In spite of the poor conservation of the painting (and the traces of incomplete attempts at restoration), it is possible to observe that the affective elements that would develop in later decades were already present here: Christ's blood, the pathetic gestures of pain before the crucified, Francis kissing the foot of the Cross, etc.[48] Of course, John and Mary are also depicted, the latter even fainting in accordance with an also

traditional iconographic motif. In any case, the affective elements in this fresco seem rather conservative compared to Angela's perception of grief before the cross. Leaving aside the early date of this mural painting (circa 1280), we must take into account two other factors. First, both this fresco and the aforementioned stained-glass window of the angels belong in a sacred public space. Both images are in the Basilica of Assisi, a centre of mass pilgrimage even today. However, as I have tried to show, the meditative context in which Angela is immersed is surely a private, solitary, almost domestic penitential setting, where the experienced phenomena happen inwardly and are extremely vivid. Secondly, in the passages analysed above, Angela speaks of an internalization of the pain of the Passion, that is, of a direct experience she undergoes through a series of mental exercises. See, for instance, the following passage:

> Afterward, whenever I passed near a painting of the cross or the passion, it seemed to me that the representation was nothing in comparison with the extraordinary suffering which really took place and which has been shown to me and impressed in my heart. This is why I no longer wanted to look at these paintings, because they seemed to me to signify almost nothing by comparison to what really happened.[49]

The contrast between representation and experience is key to understanding devotional images as *media* through which certain ends can be achieved. The insipidity of the painted depiction becomes evident in face of the "maxime passionis" (great passion) Angela lives through, which the previous passage likens to that which Christ "facta est ei secundum veritatem" (truly suffered) and she has imprinted on her heart. In this sense, the intensification of affectivity in the instruments of meditation that would ensue in later years—for example in northern *Pietàs* or in the cult of the wounds or the blood of Christ—must be seen as a development of the great laboratory of devotional experimentation that was private piety in the late Middle Ages.[50] This is clearly shown by the following example, which will then be compared to the image below:

> "Among other things, she related to me, brother Scribe, that on that very day, in a state of ecstasy, she found herself in the sepulcher with Christ. She said she had first of all kissed Christ's breast—and saw that he lay dead, with his eyes closed—then she kissed his mouth, from which, she added, a delightful fragrance emanated, one impossible to describe. This moment lasted only a short while. Afterward, she placed her cheek and Christ's own and he, in turn, placed his hand on the other cheek, pressing her closely to him. At that moment, Christ's faithful one heard him telling her: 'Before I was laid in the sepulcher, I held you this tightly to me.' Even though she understood that it was Christ telling her this, nonetheless she