

INGRID FALQUE

Meditation and Imagination in Geert Grote's *De quattuor generibus meditabilium**

In the late Middle Ages (as well as in many other times and places), images and imagination occupied a predominant place in spirituality, or more precisely in the various ways individuals, social or religious groups lived their relationship to God. Indeed, religions are based on a set of gestures, practices, rituals involving material objects and mental representations that shape and nourish spiritual experiences, whether individual or collective. Yet, for a long time, the history of Christian spirituality as a field of research has privileged the study of spiritual texts and authors, leaving aside its visual and material components (such as religious paintings, sculptures, engravings, illuminated books, rosaries but also mental images...) and therefore an important part of spiritual experience as it was lived.

Taking as a point of departure this necessity to reconsider the role of sensory elements within the ways spirituality was thought, lived and expressed, I propose in this essay to investigate the 'experience of imagery'—that is how spirituality was lived with and through imagery and imaginative practices.¹ Following Frédéric Cousinié's terminology, by the notion of 'imagery' I refer to the various types of images (material, mental and verbal) used not only in spiritual experience itself but also in the discourses that attempt to describe or theorise this experience and to the illustrations of these discourses.² This experience of imagery involves a set of practices informed by an intellectual (philosophical and theological) framework and encompasses all aspects of visibility. This is why in this essay I propose to explore the role of the imagination and its products (i.e. mainly mental images, or *phantasmata*, but also material images) as expounded by Geert Grote, the founder of the *Devotio moderna*,³ in his treatise entitled *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* ('On Four Classes of Subjects suitable for Meditation').⁴

¹ This essay is conceived as a specific case study of a larger project, funded by the F.R.S.-FNRS and dedicated to the "the idea and practice of imagery in late medieval and early modern spirituality and visual arts of the Low Countries". I would like to express my gratitude to the participants of the workshop *Religious imagination in the late medieval Low Countries* (Leiden Lorentz Center, January 2024) for their feedback, and especially Kees Schepers and Anna Dlabáčová, as well as Aline Smeesters and Agnès Guiderdoni.

² Frédéric Cousinié, *Images et méditation au XVIIe siècle* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007), p. 190.

³ Born in 1340, Geert Grote was a member of the Deventer bourgeoisie. He first attended the Latin grammar school of the collegiate chapter of St Lebuinus of Deventer before going to the university of Paris where he graduated as a master in the arts at the age of seventeen in 1357 and received his *licentia ubique docendi* in 1358. We do not know much of his life as a cleric between 1358 and 1374, the year of his 'conversion,' which led him to write his *Resolutions*. On Grote's life before his conversion, see Rijcklof H.F. Hofman and Marinus van den Berg, ed., *Gerardi Magni, Opera Omnia*, Pars ii.2. *Scripta contra simoniam et proprietaries*, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis, 235A (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), pp. 38-49. After a retreat at the charterhouse of Monnikhuizen, he decided to devote himself entirely to his spiritual life, but outside a monastic order. He transformed the family home into a shelter for poor and/or devout women and gave up his benefices. In 1379 he obtained a license to preach in the diocese of Utrecht. At a synod in 1383, he was invited by the bishop to preach to the clerics of the diocese, which he did, adopting a critical stance in the face of what he felt were abuses on their part. He was then banned from preaching and later appealed against this decision to Rome, but died of the plague in 1384, before receiving an answer on his appeal. On Geert Grote's life and works, see: Theodore P. van Zijl, *Gerard Groote, Ascetic and Reformer (1340-1384)* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1963); Georgette Épiney-Burgard, *Gérard Grote (1340-1384) et les débuts de la Dévotion moderne* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1970); C. C. de Bruin, E. Persoons, and Anton Weiler, ed., *Geert Grote en de Moderne Devotie* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1984). See also: John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life. The Devotio Moderna in the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), esp. pp. 11-13, 45-48.

⁴ The first edition of the treatise, based on a single manuscript is: Albert Hyma, 'Het "Tractatus de quatuor generibus meditationum sive contemplationum. Sermo de nativitate Domini" door Geert Groote', *Archief voor de Geschiedenis van het aartsbisdom Utrecht*, 49 (1924), 296-326. The authorised edition is currently: *Gerardo*

What is at the core of this treatise, as we will see, is 'imaginative meditation.' Written *c.* 1382-83⁵ and informed by a solid philosophical background, this text explores the different kinds of subjects suitable for meditation and offers a glance of how its author understands the place of the products of the imagination during the meditative process. I will first give a brief presentation of the nature of meditation and meditative treatises in the late Middle Ages, in order to show the peculiar nature of Geert Grote's text, which can be understood as a kind of theorisation of meditation and its cognitive process. I will then focus on the place Grote grants to the imagination and its products in this process. In order to do this, I will draw on studies dedicated to medieval meditation and imagination in an attempt to offer a renewed vision of this important text in the history of spirituality of the Low Countries.

IMAGE-BASED MEDITATIONS IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES. AN OVERVIEW

In the introduction of the volume *Meditatio – Refashioning the Self. Theory and Practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern Intellectual Culture*, Walter Melion and Karl Enenkel offer a good overview of the different types of meditational programmes produced in that time. According to them, meditation was then conceived as "a self-imposed disciplinary regime, consisting of mental and physical exercises that allowed the practitioner to engender and evaluate his self-image and thence to emend and refashion it. In practice, meditation often consisted of internal exercises that mobilized the sensitive faculties of motion, emotion, and sense (both external and internal) and the intellectual faculties of reason, memory, and will, with a view to reforming the soul." Perhaps more importantly here, they continue by explaining that "techniques of visualization were frequently utilized to engage the soul's mediating function as *vinculum mundi*, its pivotal position in the great chain of being between heaven and earth, temporal and spiritual experience. Indeed, it might be right to claim that meditation was a process enabling the soul to discern its lineaments, for the purpose of self-amendment, self-reformation, and self-refashioning."⁶ Such a definition of meditation could also be summarized briefly by saying, with Jeffrey Hamburger, that meditation is "a process of internalization, of conforming oneself to Christ."⁷

In the late Middle Ages, the meditative process was usually considered to lead from visual perception of material images to the creation of mental images in the votary's mind, which were then processed by the faculties of the soul (and notably by the imaginative faculty) in order to lead toward contemplation of God (although this was considered an almost inaccessible state in mortal life), and in this process, imagination and its products were very often considered as playing a crucial role. Indeed,

Groote. *Il trattato "De Quattuor generibus meditabilium"*. Introduzione, edizione, traduzione e note a cura di Ilario Tolomio (Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1975). All quotations from this edition will be cited by line number. For the English translation, see: John Van Engen, *Devotio moderna. Basic Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 98-118. All quotations from this translation will be cited by page number. In several passages, I have chosen to make some modifications to Van Engen's translation.

⁵ The circumstances of the text's creation are unknown, and its dating has therefore not been established with certainty. Ilario Tolomio situates the redaction in 1379, while Jan van Herwaarden offers an overview of all the debates on the dating and suggests more convincingly a date around 1382-83: *Gerardo Groote. Il trattato*, p. 9; Jan van Herwaarden, 'Geert Grotes traktaat over meditatie: *De quattuor generibus meditabilium*', *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 59 (1985), 130-141: pp. 137-139. In her monographic study on Grote, Georgette Épiney-Burgard does not take a stance on this question: Épiney-Burgard, *Gérard Grote (1340-1384)*, p. 258. On the philosophical background, see also: Albert Ampe, 'Speculatieve achtergronden van Grote's gebedstheorie', *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 51 (1977), 20-27; Jan van Herwaarden, 'Geert Groote's Tract on Meditation: *De quattuor generibus meditabilium*', in *Between Saint James and Erasmus. Studies in Late-Medieval Religious Life: Devotion and Pilgrimage in the Netherlands*, ed. by Jan van Herwaarden (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 3-14: pp. 6-7.

⁶ Karl Enenkel and Walter S. Melion, 'Introduction: Types and Functions of Meditation in the Transition From Late Medieval to Early Modern Intellectual culture', in *Meditatio – Refashioning the Self. Theory and Practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern Intellectual Culture*, ed. by Karl Enenkel and Walter S. Melion (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 1-23: p. 1.

⁷ Jeffrey Hamburger, 'In *gebeden vnd in bilden geschriben*: Prints as Exemplars of Piety and the Culture of the Copy in Fifteenth-Century Germany', in *The Woodcut in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, ed. by Peter Parshall (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2009), pp. 155-189: p. 161.

imaginative and visualization techniques are frequently recommended by authors of late medieval meditative programmes, such as Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi*, the sixteenth-century *Grote evangelische Peerle* or Gerard Zerbolt's van Zutphen's *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* to cite only a few examples.⁸ Some of them also invite their readers to use pictorial images (whether book illustrations, religious paintings or sculptures) as supports of their meditative practices.

The practice of meditation enjoyed important developments in the Middle Ages.⁹ The first systematic presentations and characterizations of meditation appeared in the twelfth century, as attested by Hugh of Saint-Victor's *De meditatione* or Guigo II the Carthusian's *Epistola de vita contemplativa*.¹⁰ As Leclercq showed in his seminal work, in the Middle Ages, monastic meditation is intimately linked to *lectio divina* and prayer. It is a matter of "reading a text and learning it by heart in the strongest sense, that is, with one's whole being: with one's body, since the mouth pronounces it, with the memory that fixes it, with the intelligence that understands its meaning, with the will that wishes to put it into practice".¹¹ Medieval authors regularly have recourse to the concept of rumination (*ruminatio*) to describe this activity: meditating is like chewing the Holy Scriptures in order to memorize them and nourish oneself spiritually. Geert Grote and his first followers are strongly dependent to this scheme.¹² Florens Radewijns and Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen in particular describe meditation by resorting to this notion.¹³ In the chapter entitled *De modo meditandi* of his *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, Zerbolt explains that *meditacio vero dicitur qua ea que legisti vel audisti, studiosa ruminacione in corde tuo pertractas, et per ea affectum tuum circa aliquod certum inflammas vel illuminas intellectum* ('Meditation means to ponder in your heart in studious rumination those things you have read or heard, and through this you will ignite your feelings about a specific matter and you will also enlighten your intellect').¹⁴ This rumination (usually on the life of Christ) is therefore directed towards attaining virtues and purity of the heart, or in other words to reform the soul. In the second half of the fifteenth century, especially in the circles of the *Devotio Moderna*, one can observe the development of methods of meditation aiming at guiding the votaries in their meditation. In the course of time, the description and schematization of the different steps of the meditative process

⁸ Walter Melion has investigated the visualization techniques in the *Vita Christi* and the *Peerle*: Walter S. Melion, 'Introduction: Meditative Images and the Psychology of the Soul', in *Image and Imagination of the Religious Self in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Reindert Falkenburg, Walter S. Melion, and Todd Richardson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 1-36. One should also note that the tone can be very different from one programme to another. For instance, the *Peerle* is more 'mystical' whereas Zerbolt's *De Spiritualibus* is more 'devotional'. On the visual dimension of this last text, see also: Rudolf van Dijk, 'Thematische meditatie en het beeld: visueleit in *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* van Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen (1367-1398)', in *Geen povere schoonheid. Laat-middeleeuwse kunst in verband met de Moderne Devotie*, ed. by Kees Veelenurf (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2000), pp. 43-66.

⁹ For an overview, see Emmanuel von Severus, Aimé Solignac, Mathias Goossens, and Michel Sauvage, 'Méditation', in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique*, vol. 10 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980), col. 906-927.

¹⁰ See Hugues de Saint-Victor, *Six opusculs spirituels. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par Roger Baron* (Paris: Cerf, 1969); Guigo II le Chartreux, *Lettre sur la vie contemplative. L'échelle des moines, suivi de Douze méditations. Introduction et texte critique par Edmund Colledge et James Walsh. Traduction par un chartreux* (Paris: Cerf, 1970).

¹¹ Jean Leclercq, *Initiation aux auteurs monastiques du Moyen Âge. L'amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 1957), p. 23 (my translation).

¹² See notably Thom Mertens, 'Lezen met de pen. Ontwikkelingen in het laatmiddeleeuws geestelijk proza', in *De studie van de Middelnederlandse letterkunde. Stand en toekomst*, ed. by Frits van oostrom and Frank Willaert (Hilversum: Verloren, 1989), pp. 187-200.

¹³ On meditation as conceived by the first authors of the *Devotio moderna*, see notably: Leonardus Antonius Maria Goossens, *De meditatie In de eerste tijd van de Moderne devotie* (Haarlem: Gottmer, 1952); R. R. Post, *Modern Devotion. Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), pp. 322-325; Luke Rohan Tucker, *Devotio Moderna: Confrontations with Scholastic University Culture* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Sydney, 2021), pp. 91-94 and 174-181.

¹⁴ Gerard Zerbolt de Zutphen, *La montée du cœur. De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, ed. by Sr Francis- Joseph Legrand (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), p. 284 (my translation).

tended to become more and more complex, as exemplified in the treatises of Wessel Gansfort and Jan Mombaer for instance.¹⁵

The common feature of most late medieval and early modern approaches to meditative practice is that the spiritual exercises they entail appeal to imagination (as a faculty of the soul) and make intense use of and invite to produce mental images,¹⁶ even in the case of treatises which are not illustrated (or initially not illustrated). During this period, the image in all its modalities (i.e. mental, verbal, pictorial) therefore holds an intrinsic importance in meditative processes and practices for two main reasons. The first one is anthropological: the soul has a mimetic condition in relation with God. The goal of meditation, which is transformative, is to refashion the soul in the image and likeness of God, by conforming itself to Christ, the *imago Dei*.¹⁷ The second reason is the importance of visualization in meditative programmes. Spiritual authors do not hesitate to recommend to their readers to visualise the object of their meditation; this feature of meditational practice is evoked in Grote's treatise, as we will see later on.

To summarize, in the late medieval and early modern period meditation usually consists of spiritual exercises to be practiced on a regular basis in order to purify the soul, reform its faculties and attain contemplation, but there are not one, but many programmes and approaches to meditative practices and methods, all of them granting an active role to the imaginative faculty.¹⁸ Melion notably distinguishes between speculative and spectacular meditative treatises: "Speculative meditation tropes the process of mirroring to encourage the soul's conformation to Christ,"¹⁹ as is the case in the *Grote evangelische Peerle*, while spectacular meditations (like Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi*) focus "on images rich in narrative action and descriptive circumstance that bring Gospel history to life: such images resemble vivid, affective, and convincing pictures, that invite the soul to identify with the holy persons and sacred events observed."²⁰ As we will see later on, the meditative process that Geert Grote describes and analyses in his *De Quattuor generibus meditabilium* pertains to this kind of meditation. But let us first focus on the peculiar nature of this treatise on meditation and its subjects.

DE QUATTUOR GENERIBUS MEDITABILUM, AN ATTEMPT TO THEORISATION OF MEDITATION AND ITS MATERIALS?

Geert Grote's *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* occupies an unusual place in the landscape of late medieval meditational treatises. Admittedly, its philosophical background has been highlighted and attempts to understand how Grote conceives the meditative process have been undertaken. However, scholars have perhaps not emphasized enough the peculiar nature of this little text. Indeed, most late medieval treatises on meditation present to their readers meditative programmes and offer them advice and contents to meditate upon (i.e. mostly the life and Passion of Christ). By contrast, the *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* presents a different tone and stands out for giving less advice. Furthermore, whereas other Devotionalists such as Radewijns and Zerbolt present meditation as a practice aimed at reforming the faculty of memory, Grote does not address this issue. Instead, he focuses on the cognitive process at work, and on the place of imagination and its products within it. Indeed, according to a medieval conception, meditation induces a mental process based on memory and

¹⁵ These are usually considered as the forerunners of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual exercises*, the most influential early modern meditative programme, which served as the model for many others. On Mombaer's *Rosetum*, see Thor-Oona Pignarre-Altermatt's contribution in the present issue (with bibliography).

¹⁶ On this aspect of meditation, see notably Agnès Guiderdoni, 'Figures de l'âme pèlerine. La méditation emblématique aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles', *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa*, 41 (2005), 695-723.

¹⁷ Walter S. Melion, 'Introduction: Meditating on Picture', in *Ut pictura meditatio. The Meditative Image in Northern Art, 1500-1700*, ed. by Walter S. Melion, Ralph Dekoninck, and Agnès Guiderdoni-Bruslé (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), pp. xxxiii-xxxvii: p. xxxiv.

¹⁸ Melion and Enenkel notably distinguish between exegetical meditations (as the *Glossa ordinaria et interlinearis*), emblematic meditations (as Benito Arias Montano's *Humanae salutis monumenta*) or discursive meditations (that is, with an itinerary, as in the *Pelerin de Lorete* of Louis Richeome). See Enenkel and Melion, 'Introduction', pp. 5-17.

¹⁹ Walter S. Melion, *The Meditative Art. Studies in the Northern Devotional Print, 1550-1625* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2009), p. 14.

²⁰ Melion, *The Meditative Art*, p. 15.

imagination, in which figurative productions play a central role. It is precisely this process that Grote sets out to describe and analyze. More precisely, Grote examines the nature of the subjects that can be used as a support for this practice. Another hint at the peculiarity of Grote's approach to meditation is that while he understands meditation as a spiritual exercise rooted in the (re)reading of the biblical text, he barely uses the traditional image of rumination, as Zerbolt or Radewijns do.²¹ All of this indicates that his aim was to focus on the effects produced by the act of meditation on the human mind and its faculties, including the imagination rather than on the practice of meditation itself (and when he does so, it is mainly to show how to use imagination while meditating). Grote's treatise can thus rather be considered as a discourse on (imaginative) meditation than as a meditative programme (although this kind of text regularly contains an – implicit – discourse on how to meditate), or to put it in another way, rather as a 'theoretical' text than a practical guide. In this regard, it deserves a particular attention as this is an exception (at least to my knowledge).

Geert Grote initially conceived his *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* as a sermon on the Nativity (as the first lines of the text indicate) and expanded it later into a proper treatise.²² As he explains, he did so *quia multos devotos in his errare conspexi et quia mihi in his cogitationem versari inutile non credidi* ('because I have noticed that many devout folk err in these things [i.e. meditative practices] and I thought it might not be unprofitable to reflect on them').²³ The text indeed contains a few practical pieces of advice on how to meditate properly on the life and Passion of Christ, but more importantly, its core consists in a refined philosophical treatment of the meditative process, in which the products of the imagination play a crucial role, according to him.²⁴

Opening his treatise with a reference to the Nativity is an occasion for Grote to emphasize that spiritual progress and the exercises it entails are a learning process requiring time and application, and in which one grows slowly like a child. He then distinguishes four different classes of materials suitable for meditation: the birth, life and Passion of Christ as recounted in the Holy Scriptures (*de Christi nativitate, vita vel morte in canonica Scriptura*), the same subject as revealed to certain saints (*sanctis aliquibus de eisdem sunt vel dicuntur postea revelata*), the teachings of the doctors (*assertio doctorum*) and, finally, the products of the imagination (*imaginata et ficta*). The second and third classes are, in fact, barely analyzed by Grote by the end of the treatise. By contrast, most of the text is devoted to the first and fourth classes, which he first presents briefly, explaining how to comprehend and approach them, before focusing on how the mind processes them.

Grote begins with the fourth class, the *imaginata et ficta*, pointing out their usefulness and justifying their use in meditation by the fact that during his earthly life, Christ had recourse to them, as documented in the Bible. He then explains that not all these figures (*figmenta*), parables (*similitudines*) and other forms and fictions (*fictiones seu formationes*) used by Christ or God should be considered as having literally occurred. Instead, using the authority of Pseudo-Denys, Grote justifies such a use of corporeal and sensible things as a means to reach the invisible. He then proposes the same analogical reading of the first class of subjects, drawing a distinction between the New and Old Testaments. As he explains, *illa de Veteri Testamento, quibus quaedam de Apocalypsi connumeranda puto, de Christo et suis meditanda sunt* ('the Old Testament—to which, I think, should be added certain things from Revelations—must be meditated upon as if treating of Christ and his deeds').²⁵ In other words, their

Commenté [A1]: No 'actibus' after 'suis'?

Commenté [A2R1]: I checked: it's correct as it is.

²¹ Indeed, Grote uses the verb *ruminare* only once in his treatise (*Gerardo Groote. Il trattato*, l. 715).

²² The *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* has been preserved in four manuscripts (Cambrai, BM A 415, Ghent UB 1745, Cologne HA GB 4° 249, Utrecht UB 1585); three other versions are documented but are now lost or missing. These were preserved in the charterhouses of Zelem and Herne, and in the convent of the Canons Regular of Windesheim. See: Rudolf van Dijk, ed., *Prolegomena ad Gerardi Magni Opera Omnia*, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis, 192 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), p. 467.

²³ *Gerardo Groote. Il trattato*, l. 57-59; English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 99.

²⁴ Van Engen considers these two aspects as two levels of understanding the text, one addressed to the 'ordinary devout' and the other to 'more learned readers': Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 43. According to Épiney-Burgard, Grote's audience consisted of religious people or clerics who had a philosophical background: Épiney-Burgard, *Gérard Groote*, p. 259. Given the complexity of the text and its use of Latin, I tend to favour the second hypothesis. See also: Van Herwaarden, 'Geert Groote's Tract', p. 8.

²⁵ *Gerardo Groote. Il trattato*, l. 264-66; English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 104.

spiritual meaning must be brought out to reach their fullness through an exegetical process.²⁶ Grote's approach to the New Testament is different, since *aliter enim ea quae in Novo Testamento de Christo et suis actibus praedicantur sumenda sunt; quia pure et simpliciter, secundam litteram, pie et firmiter credenda sunt et credendo meditanda* ('those things that are preached about Christ and his acts in the New Testament are to be taken differently, since they must purely and simply, according to the letter, be believed piously and firmly and faithfully meditated upon').²⁷ Christ's teaching must thus been considered literally. Nonetheless, Grote specifies that some episodes of the New Testament, like the miracles of Christ, must also be understood spiritually, with the goal of leading towards humility. To illustrate his points effectively, Grote does not hesitate to use examples. In the case of the necessity to interpret Old Testament passages figuratively, he refers to Isaiah (19:1) to affirm that the fall of the idols must be understood as a spiritual fall and not a material one. Such remarks, that Grote illustrates with examples, point to his pedagogical aim: he wants to teach his readers how to meditate properly on the life and Passion of Christ, with different types of material that can be called upon. And he does so because the trick is to do it with care, according to faith and in order to attain purity of the heart.

The *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* displays meditation as a process of abstraction, during which, following an anagogical pattern, the recourse to perceptible forms is necessary to attain the invisible.²⁸ This has led Georgette Épiney-Burgard to claim that for Grote, images (*phantasmata*²⁹) must be eliminated during this gradual process of abstraction in order to gain a purely spiritual kind of knowledge, and that he therefore advocates for an aniconic ideal of contemplation.³⁰ Grote nonetheless recognizes the need to have recourse to the products of the imagination during meditation because the human mind cannot function properly without them.³¹ It is however also true that he emphasizes the

²⁶ On the relationship between meditation and exegesis and on how Grote fits in with a tradition that understands meditation as a "lecture biblique qui engage, sinon une exégèse – question de sens –, du moins un approfondissement du texte vers sa spiritualité – question de pratique spirituelle", see Guiderdoni, 'Figures de l'âme pèlerine', pp. 696-709 (quotation p. 709).

²⁷ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 261-64; English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 104.

²⁸ During this process, the abstraction of *phantasmata* leads to the figural sense. On this issue, see Guiderdoni, 'Figures de l'âme pèlerine'.

²⁹ That is mental images. In his treatise, Grote mainly uses the term *phantasmata*, and sometimes the words *imaginata* and *figurae* to speak of mental images. Sometimes also called *species* by late medieval authors, *phantasmata* are the products of imagination. Since they are located at the level of the inner senses, these mental images keep a certain materiality, by contrast with the intelligible *species*. More precisely, they are stored in the internal senses and form a reserve of mental images (either in the memory or in the imagination, depending on the model) on which the intellect carries out a process of abstraction. See notably: Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and 'Imagination – Phantasia', in *Clavis scholastica. Clés scolastiques pour la théorie des lettres et des arts des 16e et 17e siècles*, ed. by Ralph Dekoninck, Agnès Guiderdoni, Hélène Leblanc, and Aline Smeesters (forthcoming in 2025). It should also be noted here that spiritual authors tend not to characterise precisely the type of image they are talking about, making their discourse sometimes ambivalent. This is notably the case of Henry Suso, who, uses the term *bild* in his *Exemplar* in a deliberately ambivalent way (see Ingrid Falque, 'Daz man bild mit bilde us tribe: Imagery and Knowledge of God in Henry Suso's *Exemplar*', *Speculum*, 92/2 (April 2017), 447-492, esp. pp. 455, 463). In the case of Grote's treatise that concerns us here, the vocabulary is less ambiguous and the focus is mainly on mental images, although it does occasionally mention material images. Furthermore, Grote's advices on how to apply imagination during meditation can be applied to both mental and material images.

³⁰ Georgette Épiney-Burgard, ed. *Gérard Groote, fondateur de la Dévotion moderne. Lettres et traités* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), p. 216 and pp. 260-65. On the idea that Grote advocates an aniconic ideal of meditation and that images are only useful or necessary during the initial stages of the process, see also: Tolomio (ed.), *Gerardo Groote*, pp. 26-32; Van Herwaarden, 'Geert Grotes traktaat', pp. 132-135; Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, pp. 43-44; Jessica Buskirk, 'Hugo van der Goes's *Adoration of the Shepherds*: Between Ascetic Idealism and Urban Networks in Late Medieval Flanders', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, 6/1 (2014), DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2014.6.1.1. It has been shown that this idea could be revised and Grote's discourse on image-based meditation can be understood more subtly: Ingrid Falque, *Devotional Portraiture and Spiritual Experience in Early Netherlandish Painting* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 245-251.

³¹ He is referring here to several authorities, including Pseudo-Denys. See Ampe, 'Speculatieve achtergrond', p. 22.

dangers involved by the use of images.³² To prevent his readers from falling into these traps, he provides a detailed and complex analysis of this process and of the crucial role of imagery within it: since one cannot attain spiritual knowledge without having recourse to them, images and sensible things are the matter, the support of meditation. The meditative process must consist in eliminating the particular elements of *phantasmata* in order to keep only the universals.³³ Grote further characterizes this abstractive process by adding two clarifications: it is long and gradual, and it is not the consequence of human effort. In other words, it does not result in a complete and voluntary evacuation of images, but it does lead the votaries to perceive things in a new way, as a well-known passage of the text shows:

Et sicut hoc quartum genus meditabilium simpliciter finaliter recedit, sic haec sensibilia phantasmata licet non praecipitanter, licet non ex propria praesumptione nec propriis viribus, non subito sed paulatim eliminanda et evacuanda recedunt, vel potius transformatur in spiritualem quandam armoniam, ut tam homo interior quam exterior, tam ingrediens quam egrediens, ut ait Christus pasqua inveniatur; et animalia, id est animales motus et sensus, sequantur, ut in visione Ezechielis, stent et eleventur simul cum rotis intellectualibus, id est cum motibus animae, quos dicit Dionysius circularibus capitulo quarto De divinis nominibus [...].

And just as this fourth class of objects for meditation in the end simply disappears, so also these images of sensible things are to disappear by elimination, not precipitously, not on our own will or strength, and not suddenly; yet gradually they recede or rather are transformed into a certain spiritual harmony, so that the interior man as well as the exterior, the one coming in as well as the one going out, as Christ says, will find pasture (Jn 10:9). Animals too, that is animalic motions and senses, will follow: as in the vision of Ezekiel (chap. 1), they will stand and be elevated together with the intellectual wheels, that is the motion of the soul, which Denys calls circular in the fourth chapter of his book *On Divine Names*.³⁴

The meditative process therefore results in a 'transformation' of the mind, a 'certain spiritual harmony' (*in spiritualem quandam armoniam*). Grote illustrates this by referring to Ezekiel's vision (Ez. 1:4-24) and a passage of Pseudo-Denys' *On Divine Names*, which enable him to specify the nature of this harmony: the sensitive part of the soul models itself on the intellective part, whose movements are circular and divine.³⁵ Sensitive and intellective faculties of the soul therefore intervene in the meditative process, and conform to each other, forming a *continuum* and leading towards mystical knowledge.³⁶

³² For Grote, the main reason for abandoning images during meditation is the danger of using them. More specifically, he identifies two dangers: if the mind is too dependent on images, there is a risk of confusion as to whether the thing represented is actually there or not (the image of Christ is not Christ himself, to put it briefly). A second danger stemming from the first is the sin of pride, when a person who thinks they are looking at Christ in person, when in fact it is a pure figment of their imagination. See: Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 216-239. English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 103.

³³ Kees Waaijman, 'Image and Imagelessness. A Challenge to the [Modern] Devotion', in *Spirituality Renewed: Studies on Significant Representations of the Modern Devotion*, ed. by Hein Blommenstijn, Charles Caspers, and Rijklof Hofman (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), pp. 29-40: p. 34.

³⁴ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 836-47. English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 116.

³⁵ See: Waaijman, 'Image and Imagelessness', pp. 36-37.

³⁶ The allusions to Pseudo-Denys and to Jn 10:9, which is a direct and obvious reference to Jan van Ruusbroec's *ghemeine leven* (i.e. the outcome of mystical transformation as a mixture of active and contemplative lives) clearly confers a mystical tone to this passage. I am deliberately leaving aside here this reference to Jn 10:9, as this has already been well studied. According to Guido de Baere, this process of 'desimagination' (*ontbeelding*), as he calls it, thrives on the image in order to go beyond it: Guido de Baere, 'Het Ghemeine leven bij Ruusbroec en Geert Grote', *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 59/2-3 (1985), 172-183: p. 179. It has been shown that Grote applies Ruusbroec's *ghemeine leven* to the cognitive process at work during meditation in order to show that the person who has access to spiritual maturity attains a balance, a 'harmony' between the spiritual activity (coming in; the dimension of the inner self) and the sensible activity, that is the use of images (going out; the dimension of the outer self) during meditation. Falque, *Devotional Portraiture and Spiritual Experience*, pp. 211-226 and 249-251. Furthermore, scholarship often asserts that the authors of the *Devotio moderna* are mostly concerned with purely ascetic or devotional issues. However, many texts from this movement clearly possess a mystical

Most research on the *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* to date has focused on this process of abstraction and its outcome, inspired by Ruusbroec's *ghemeine leven*, paying attention to the place occupied within it by mental images. By contrast, the role of the imagination, as a faculty of the soul, in meditative practices has been somewhat neglected until now. In the final section of this essay, I propose to take a closer look at this issue.

IMAGINATION AND MEDITATION IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Today, imagination is recognized above all for its power of invention. However, in the Middle Ages with its prevailing scholastic psychology, imagination is above all a faculty of the soul which stores sensory data in the mind and plays an active role in the acquisition of knowledge, by allowing a transition from the sensible to the intelligible.³⁷ Located in the sensitive part of the soul, alongside the other internal senses of common sense, estimation and memory, imagination acts as an intermediary between the senses and the intellect. This intermediary position has led to a contrasting understanding: the imaginative faculty is sometimes praised, sometimes denigrated; both its indispensable nature to any act of cognition and the dangers and errors it can provoke are emphasized when this faculty of the soul is discussed.³⁸ As we will see later on, these two approaches of the imaginative faculty can be found in Grote's treatise but as for now, it is important to call to mind that the Middle Ages can be seen as an "age of imagination."³⁹ Indeed, under the Aristotelian influence, the development of the psychology of the soul and its faculties then allowed the imagination to gain importance and this had an impact on spirituality and its practices, including meditation.

As mentioned above, meditation consists in shaping one's soul and conforming it to Christ in order to attain spiritual perfection. In the Aristotelian tradition, the imaginative faculty plays an important role, for it contributes substantially to this process by enabling the votaries to mentally picture the life and Passion of Christ and then to conform to him. This is why the affective dimension of the imagination in meditative practices has long been stressed.⁴⁰ This faculty certainly enables the votaries to imagine themselves in the presence of Christ and to provoke emotions that facilitate the process of

dimension and should be studied in this light. On this topic, see notably: Rudolf van Dijk, 'Ascensiones in corde disponere. Spirituelle Umformung bei Gerhard Zerbolt von Zutphen', in *Kirchenreform von unten. Gerhard Zerbolt von Zutphen und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben, Tradition—Reform—Innovation*, ed. by Nikolaus Staubach (Frankfurt: Lang, 2004), pp. 287-305: p. 302; Guido de Baere, 'De Middelnederlandse mystieke literatuur en de Moderne Devotie', *Trajecta*, 6 (1997), 3-18; Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350–1550)* [Vol. V of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*] (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012), pp. 96-124; see also Rudolf van Dijk's introduction to Thomas van Kempen, *Navolging van Christus: naar het oorspronkelijke handschrift (1441) vertaald en toegelicht door Rudolf van Dijk* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2008), pp. 12-13 and Rudolf van Dijk, 'De structuur van de *Navolging*', in *Nuchtere mystiek. Navolging van Christus*, ed. by Kees Waaijman and Rudolf van Dijk (Utrecht: Ten Haven, 2006), pp. 35-50, in which he presents the *Imitatio Christi* as a mystical text.

³⁷ The bibliography on the imaginative faculty in the Middle Ages is rich. See among others: Murray Bundy, *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Mediaeval Thought* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1927); Katherine Park, 'The Concept of Psychology', in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. by C. B. Schmitt, Q. Skinner, E. Kessler, and J. Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 455-463; Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*; Marta Fattori and M. L. Bianchi, ed., *Phantasia/Imaginatio. V Colloquio internazionale del Lessico Intelletuale Europeo* (Firenze: Edizioni Dell'Ateneo, 1988); Maria Pacheco and José Meirinhos, ed., *Intellect et imagination dans la philosophie médiévale. Actes du XIe congrès international de philosophie médiévale de la Société Internationale pour l'Etude de la Philosophie Médiévale (S.I.E.P.M.). Porto, du 26 au 31 août 2002* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006); Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 23-110; Dominic Perler, 'Faculties in Medieval Philosophy', in *The Faculties. A History*, ed. by Dominic Perler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 97-139.

³⁸ 'Imagination – Phantasia'.

³⁹ Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ On this topic, see notably: Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion. Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) and Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

imitation. However, as Michelle Karnes has shown, imagination plays a more complex role—at least in the Gospel meditations of Bonaventure and others inspired by him—precisely because of its intermediary status allowing a contact with the divine. As I will argue, Grote's text can be situated in this framework of thought, which is why it; that is why it is worth dwelling a bit into her argument.

In her book *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, Karnes proposes to link the Aristotelian philosophy of imagination which was then so influential to the literary genre of meditations on the Passion of Christ (or Gospel meditations as she calls them) in the Bonaventuran tradition. As she explains, scholarship has tended to limit Gospel meditations to an affective practice related to the devotion to Christ's humanity, without taking into consideration his divinity, and the cognitive dimension of imaginative meditative practices. More precisely, she explores the hypothesis that imagination is a cognitive faculty which plays a predominant role in Gospel meditations, in the sense that "the purpose of imagining Christ's life was, after all, to know him as well as to love and desire him."⁴¹ As she shows, this tradition begins with Bonaventure, who applied the Aristotelian philosophy of imagination to his Gospel meditations (notably his *Lignum vitae*) and in so doing, he made the act of imagining Christ's life and Passion much more powerful and conferred cognitive power on the imagination.⁴² More precisely, this cognitive power enables the votaries to be conformed to Christ in his dual nature, human and divine. Meditation thus becomes a journey towards God, a mental and spiritual ascent. As she explains, "imagined, meditative closeness to Christ thus confers spiritual closeness as it provides a pathway to God in Heaven."⁴³

The belief in this "unusual efficacy of imaginative meditation" can be traced back in other Gospel meditations like the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, James of Milan's *Stimulus amoris* or Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi*. These texts, as Karnes shows, lead their readers through their imaginative work, from the sufferings of Christ to his divinity, but they also offer them a method on meditation in which imagination must be trained and used consciously.⁴⁴ The pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes* notably encourages the use of "invention, detail, mental labour, emotion and rational deliberation. Their ultimate effect is to create imaginative vivacity, which in turn makes imagination capable of the substantial spiritual accomplishments ascribed to it."⁴⁵ This insistence on the training of the imaginative faculty is particularly interesting and resonates with Grote's emphasis on the mental process at stake during meditation.

GROTE ON THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION AND ITS PRODUCTS IN THE MEDITATIVE PROCESS

Geert Grote's view on how to meditate on subjects of the Old Testament—namely by relating them to Christ's deeds and interpreting them figuratively—indicates clearly that *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* is not only a kind of theoretical treatise on meditation, but more specifically on meditation on the life and Passion of Christ, as he states quite clearly in the beginning of his text.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Grote's text is concerned with imaginative meditation (just like the meditative treatises discussed above), that is meditative exercise in which the votaries are invited to draw on their imagination and pictures Christ's life and to imagine themselves participating in it. It thus appears relevant to submit it to Karnes's hypothesis, which precisely involves this kind of meditational programme.

Geert Grote's first mention of the imagination as a faculty in the *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* appears logically in the very first pages of the treatise, when he describes the fourth class

⁴¹ Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition*, p. 18.

⁴² According to Karnes, Bonaventure's work appears as a synthesis that attempts to reconcile Augustinian (divine illumination) and Aristotelian (abstraction) theories of knowledge, and in so doing augments the cognitive power of the imagination and turns the cognitive work into a contemplative path. See Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition*, esp. chap. II.

⁴³ Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition*, p. 137.

⁴⁴ Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition*, pp. 141-178.

⁴⁵ Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition*, p. 177.

⁴⁶ "Cumque omnis animi excitatio a meditatione oritur et meditatione perficitur, ideo quaedam communia, quae meditationes desideria tam circa navitatem quam vitam et mortem Christi rectificant et dirigunt, necessarium duxi ante omnia praesenti sermone vel tractatu discutere" (). *Gerardo Groote. Il trattato*, l. 49-53. English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 99.

of subject of meditation, namely the products of the imagination. Speaking both of himself and of his readers who would embark on meditation, he asserts that these *imaginata* and *ficta* should be taken seriously, *non quod talia esse credantur sed quia sic imaginari iuvat nostram imbecillem phantasiam, quia hoc et mentem parvulam lacte Christi fortius et aptius nutrit et ad Christi amorem reducit tenacius* ('not because they are believed true as such but rather because our feeble imaginations are thereby helped, our childish minds more potently and suitably nourished with the milk of Christ and more surely brought to his love').⁴⁷ His initial comments on this faculty and its products are therefore fairly restrictive: the products of the imagination should not be considered true, even if they are useful. He then recommends the necessary detachment from images⁴⁸, before stating that God endows spiritual things with a sensible form so that "those unable to imagine anything other than corporeal realities [are] not shut out from Scriptures." In the pages that follow, Grote develops this idea further:

Attende, si placet, angelorum formas leonidas, bovinas, pecudales, aquilinas, rostra, alas, currus, thronos, turibula. Attende rursus et Omnipotentis quas de se nobis expressit fictiones seu formationes igneas, aereas, aqueas, terreas, aureas, humanas et pecorinas; immo indecentes actus assumens : Deum potatum, inebriatum, crapulatum, iratum, turbatum, concupiscentem, cum ventre, capite aliisque membris lineatum diversisque instrumentis operantem Scriptura commemorat, et universaliter spiritualibus corporalia et informibus formas circumponit. Sic ecclesiae, sic viribus animae, sic virtutibus, sic vitiis membra humana vel aedificiorum partes circumducit. Cur hoc? Certissime et benignissime propter nos visu et mente parvulos suo lacte nutriendos.

Note, if you will, the forms taken by angels: lions, cattle, sheep, eagles, beaks, wings, chariots, thrones, incensors. And again the forms and fictions by which the Almighty has expressed himself to us: fire, air, water, earth, gold, human, and animal. Indeed he sometimes even took the form of indecent acts: God as drunk, gluttonous, angry, confused, desirous. Scripture describes him with a stomach, head, and other members, and as using various tools; and throughout it imposes the corporeal upon the spiritual, form upon formless. Thus it portrays churches, faculties of the soul, or vices and virtues with human members and parts of buildings. And why this? Most certainly and most beneficently to nourish us children in our inner sight and minds with his milk.⁴⁹

This passage is an allusion to the pedagogical value of images, a commonplace in medieval theology of images, but it also evokes quite clearly the potency of imagination and figurative thinking. Grote goes further on by convoking the examples of the figurative language of the Old Testament and Christ's use of parables in his teaching, as we have already seen, before concluding on the fourth class of subjects by drawing a parallel with sculpted images:

Nec est mendacium in his, si non inhaereat mens, sed est quaedam assumptio iuvantium imaginibilibus, sicut ad extra assumimus imagines ligneas ad lucrum meditationum nostrarum, quibus praesentialius gesta ostenduntur. Non enim differt quo vel quomodo significetur, dummodo id quod vere est significetur. Tales imagines non nisi pro signis assumuntur et ad significationem diriguntur rerum praeteritarum, ut praesenti praeteritum significetur et fortius imprimatur.

Nor is there any falsehood in them so long as the mind does not cling to them but rather presumes them to be only something helpful and imagined—much as we take up wooden images to further our meditations, using them to render the deeds more present. It does not matter how or by what means something is signified so long as what is signified is true. Such images should be taken for nothing other than signs and directed toward the signification of past events, so that the past might be represented to and more forcefully impressed upon the present.⁵⁰

As these lines indicate, the meditative practice analyzed in the *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* belongs clearly to the field of 'imaginative meditations,' as Karnes calls them, or to 'spectacular meditation,' to use Melion's terminology. Indeed, Grote alludes several times to the fact that

⁴⁷ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 73-76; Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, pp. 99-100.

⁴⁸ This can notably be found in an explicit manner in: Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 432-438 and l. 507-514.

⁴⁹ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 94-106. English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 100.

⁵⁰ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 171-179. English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 102.

meditating consists of making oneself present to episodes of Christ's life. This mental and imaginative exercise is a necessary and useful practice, as we shall see later, but he also stresses the fact that one must not grant more importance to these mental representations than is necessary in order not to be disappointed when they disappear. So, he recommends using imagination intensely but carefully:

Sed tunc, cum quis se praesentem Christo vel actibus suis configit, non est inutile aliquid negans Christi praesentiam aliquando iuxta ponere, quod nos, ne phanstasmate cadente ad oculos decipiamur, mente ab actuali Christ praesentia et actu suorum aliquater revocet. Licet namque sicut figuras et formas et sicut actus et instrumenta Christo secundum humanitatem et suis actibus humanis plura quam scripta sunt vel alia quam scripta sunt, dummodo non contraria, non veremur ascribere mente tenus; immo omnia quasi ad praesens tempus et ad nostram quasi praesentiam, quasi ipsum et sua facta videremus et audiremus loquentem, audemus reducere. Hoc nos parvulos beatus Bernardus, Bonaventura alique sancti et devoti docuerunt. Sic nam possumus nos semper ei reddere praesentes faciemque eius et sanctorum figuram et staturam confingere; colloquium, consilium, quaestiones secum et cum sanctis constituere; sibi et eis nos familiares serviles obsequiosos praebere, et quasi obsequiis et servitiis eorum insistentes auxilia et desideria postulare; immo quasi in una domo cum Christo et Maria habitare et cum peregrinantibus peregrinari, 'flore cum flentibus et gaudere cum gaudentibus' et compati cum patientibus.

But when a person places himself imaginatively in the presence of Christ and his deeds, it is good at times to juxtapose something contrary to Christ's presence that may serve to recall us mentally for a moment, lest we become deceived in our actual sight by some image. For just as we endow Christ's divinity with forms and figures, deeds and instruments, so we need not fear to ascribe to his humanity and human deeds in our minds things more and other than, though never anything contrary to, what has been written. Indeed, we should dare to bring it all into our own presence and time, as though we saw him and his deeds and heard him speaking. This is the teaching of the blessed Bernard, Bonaventura and several other saints and devout men for us children. For thus we are always in a position to place ourselves before him and to construe his face as well as the figure and stature of the saints; to take up conversation, seek counsel, and put questions to him and the saints; to offer ourselves to him and them as obedient domestic servants; and while faithful in this our service and obedience also to seek help and out desires; indeed almost to live in the same house with Christ and Mary and to go on pilgrimage with the pilgrims, to weep with the weeping and to rejoice with the rejoicing (Rom 12:15), and to suffer with the suffering.⁵¹

This passage from the treatise is a good illustration of Grote's stance on imagination, a position that may seem ambivalent. While he first invites the votaries to make a clear distinction between real and imaginative presence of Christ and the saints, Grote also offers a positive vision of this imaginative act. For him, the imagination and its products enable the person who meditates to establish contact with the divine. Imagery then acts as an intermediary between the visible and the invisible, between the terrestrial and celestial worlds. Here, Grote discusses the mental process he would like his readers to apply when meditating. He is thus dealing with mental images and imaginative acts. Nonetheless, in the conclusion of his treatise, Grote reiterates this idea of the image as "a kind of sensible conversation and direct communication with the saints", but this time using the terms *sensibilia et phantasmata* and therefore enlarging his perspective.⁵² In all likelihood, *sensibilia* indeed refers here to material images and *phantasmata* to mental ones, and they both appear as a bridge between the visible and the invisible and can genuinely be understood as a means of communication with and transportation to the heavenly sphere.

In other words, using imagination while meditating on Christ's life and Passion entails an anagogical dimension for Grote. Such an approach is reminiscent of the Bonaventuran tradition

⁵¹ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 148-170. English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, pp. 101-102.

⁵² "Ex his colligitur quod necessaria sunt sensibilia et phantasmata nobis, immo in primo genere meditabilium et similiter in quarto in quo quasi tota res est phantastica, immo quasi sensibilis quaedam cum sanctis conversatio et communicatio praesentialis" (from all this it is clear that sensible things and images are necessary for us, especially in the first class of objects for meditation, but also in the fourth which consists almost entirely of images; indeed, it represents a kind of sensible conversation and direct communication with the saints). Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 835-836. English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 116. Van Engen translates *sensibilia et phantasmata* by "sensible things and images", which does not express clearly the fact that Grotes seems to make a distinction between (and therefore a clear allusion to) material/sensible and mental images.

studied by Karnes. Just like in Bonaventure's *Lignum vitae*, meditation as conceived by Grote consists in using either the Scriptures or the products of the imagination pertaining to Christ's life as a subject to meditate in order to live the life of Christ in word and deed, and *cum eo vel resurgere vel ad caelos ascendere* ('to rise with Him and ascend into the heavens').⁵³ In both cases, meditation is a spiritual ascent in which imagining Christ is a crucial activity leading toward contemplation and spiritual knowledge.⁵⁴

In this respect, it is interesting to note that Karnes argues for a crucial evolution at the end of the Middle Ages of the role of the imagination. At that time, Gospel meditations would lose the analogical dimension of imagining oneself present at Christ's side in favour of a conception limiting the imagination to the realm of the sensible, to his humanity and sufferings. Karnes demonstrates her hypothesis using two texts intended for a wider audience at a time when lay piety was flourishing: Nicholas Love's *Myrroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ* and the anonymous *Prickynge of Love*, which are respectively vernacular translations of the *Meditationes* and the *Stimulus Amoris*.⁵⁵ According to her, these texts reflect a declining interest in theories of cognition and the power of the imaginative faculty typical of the late Middle Ages.⁵⁶ They would also have a more narrative and performative dimension, centred only on the earthly life of Christ, without imagination presented as a means of achieving contemplation.

Dating from 1382-83, Grote's work is contemporary with these later texts studied by Karnes, but it nonetheless does not seem to fit into this late medieval tradition of Gospel meditations, limiting the role of the imagination to the affective realm and granting less importance to theories of cognition. Indeed, while *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* warns against the dangers of imagination and also anchors it in a way in the sensible realm, the treatise also takes a positive view of the act of imagining oneself present with Christ and the saints, as the last quoted passage indicates. Other elements of Grote's text invite us to situate the *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* more closely in the tradition of Bonaventuran Gospel meditations in terms of process and goal. In particular, another convergence is the fact that Grote develops a genuine theory of perception and cognition, in which he conceives of meditation as a process of abstraction in the Aristotelian tradition, leading from the sensible to the intelligible. More precisely, as already seen above, Grote understands meditation as first and foremost attached to visible things. As he states:

Luci stamen, colorum et figurarum et locorum species mentibus tenacissime adhaerent, quia omnis cognitionis intellectivae et spiritualis principia sunt et ad eam praeeparantia vias et ducentia, secundum quod ex praeeistenti cognitione sensitiva fit omnis fere intellectualis et spiritualis cognitio.

The species of light, colours, figures, and places cling tenaciously to the mind, for they are fundamental to all spiritual and intellectual cognition, preparing and leading the way, because nearly all intellectual and spiritual cognition arises out of an earlier sensible cognition.⁵⁷

Each image is a particular thing composed of universal elements on the one hand, and particular elements on the other.⁵⁸ During meditation, the mind must eliminate the particulars in order to keep

⁵³ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 40-41; Van Engen, p. 99.

⁵⁴ See Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition*, pp. 126-140, esp. p. 137.

⁵⁵ Karnes assumes that since these two treatises came after the ones she classifies in the Bonaventuran tradition (the *Meditationes* and the *Stimulus amoris*, but also Suso's *Horologium*, Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi* and Langland's *Piers Plowman*), they reflect an evolution characteristic of the late Middle Ages. However, the chronology is a bit more complex: if the *Meditationes* and the *Stimulus* date from the late thirteenth-early fourteenth century and Suso's text from 1328-30, the *Vita Christi* is dated from c. 1350 and *Piers Plowman* is contemporary of Love's *Myrroure* and the *Prickynge*.

⁵⁶ For more details, see: Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition*, p. 208.

⁵⁷ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 592-597. English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 110.

⁵⁸ In order to make his statement explicit, Grote uses the metaphor of colour: "Sicut color difficulter a non usitatis cum aliqua mora meditandi, sine declinatione ad aliquam colorum speciem, in intellectu retinetur, sic et rubedo longe difficilior sine particulari rubedine cogitatur" (Just as color is not easily retained in the intellect by those not accustomed to extended meditation except by sinking to some species of color, so redness is even more

and focus only on the universals *ut ex his intellectus credita componat, speret et amet* ('so that from them the understanding may compose, hope, and love what is believed').⁵⁹

It should also be stressed here that for Grote, achieving pure faith and spiritual knowledge is one of the central objectives of meditation. However, faith is not located at the level of the sensitive soul (where the imagination acts), but rather at the level of the intellective soul. This is why it is essential to conduct this abstractive process during meditation.⁶⁰ According to Grote, this process must be applied not only to the fourth class of subjects, but also to the first one, namely the Holy Scriptures. This appears notably in an extensive quotation from Augustine's *De trinitate* about the images of the New Testament: meditating on these materials also implies focusing on particular related elements, such as the appearance of Christ or the Virgin, which are necessary but on which one must not focus too much, since the goal of this process is to gain knowledge.⁶¹

Later in the text, Grote underlines that abstracting universals during meditation might be an easy act for those who regularly practise tropology and anagogy, but he nevertheless stresses that it is difficult for the intellect to focus on the essences of things because they have no image. This is why imagination is important in the cognitive process as he conceives it. Grote's development shows that, for him, the meditative process necessarily involves the formation of images (*phantasmata*), and the more we manage to extract universals from these images, the purer and more effective meditation becomes:

A quibus quanto quis purius se scit abstrahere diutiusque abstractus permanere ferventiusque abstracta sperare et diligere, salvo rerum pleno intellectu, tanto nativatem, vitam, mortem Christi et Scripturam sacram verius et mundius meditatur et aeternis vicinior appropinquat. Sicut enim rebus exterioribus, utputa scripturis, signis et imaginibus, diu est utendum et non nisi pure purgata fide et caritate in meditationibus reliquenda sunt, ut videlicet sensus scripturae sicut non scriptus et signatum sine signo ruminetur, quod voco relinquere scripturas vel exteriora signa.

The more a person is able to withdraw himself from such images and to persist in this abstraction and to more eagerly place his hope and love in these abstracted things, the more truly and purely—short of a full understanding of things—he meditates upon the birth and death of Christ and upon the Holy Scriptures and the more closely he approaches the eternal things. For it is necessary to make extended use of external writings, signs and images for a long time in our meditations, and they are not to be left behind until faith and love have been wholly purified, so that, for instance, the sense of Scripture can be ruminated upon as if not even written and as if signifying without signs. This is what I call leaving the Scriptures and external signs behind.⁶²

From this last passage of the *De quattuor generibus meditabilium*, two elements can be highlighted and compared with the way in which Karnes defines meditations in the Bonaventuran tradition in order to conclude: the first is that the aim of meditation as Grote conceives it is indeed to achieve spiritual perfection and to approach a solid knowledge of the eternal realities. The second is that, in this process, imagination and its products play a fundamental role and not only in the early stages of this process, as it has been assumed by some scholars. Furthermore, the mention of "the extended use of external writings, signs and images" implicitly suggests that Grote also envisions material images as supports for meditative practice, although these are not at the heart of his argument. This is important, as it is not the only place in his text where he alludes to material images as support of meditation, therefore drawing a continuum between the use of material and mental images. Indeed, as we saw above, in the conclusion of his treatise, he reminds his readers the crucial utility of imagery in meditation in order to establish a communication with the saints, and he does so by using not only term *phantasmata*, but also *sensibilia*, that is sensible or material images. If we consider the artistic

difficult to think about apart from some specific red thing). Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 685-689; English translation Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, pp. 112-113.

⁵⁹ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 437-438; English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 107. See Waaijman, 'Image and Imagelessness', p. 34.

⁶⁰ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 439-444; English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 107.

⁶¹ Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 372-376.

⁶² Gerardo Groote. *Il trattato*, l. 705-716; English translation: Van Engen, *Devotio moderna*, p. 113.

production of the late Middle Ages, this is far from trivial. Indeed, it is worth noting here that such an invitation to make oneself present to saintly events finds a material equivalent in many late medieval religious painted and sculpted images, notably those including devotional portraits. Such artworks can in some ways be understood as pictorial embodiments of Grote's recommendations.⁶³ As we can see, although Grote's discourse focuses primarily on the mental processes underway during meditation, it opens the way to a broader consideration of imagery, encompassing sensitive images as well. The *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* therefore appears as a genuine instruction for the use of imagery (be it material or mental) and as a plea for good use—that is a reasoned, reasonable, informed use—of the imagination and its products during meditation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

- Gerard Zerbolt de Zutphen, *La montée du cœur. De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, ed. by Sr Francis- Joseph Legrand (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).
- Gerardo Grootte. *Il trattato "De Quattuor generibus meditabilium"*. Introduzione, edizione, traduzione e note a cura di Ilario Tolomio (Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1975).
- Guigues II le Chartreux, *Lettre sur la vie contemplative. L'échelle des moines, suivi de Douze méditations. Introduction et texte critique par Edmund Colledge et James Walsh. Traduction par un chartreux* (Paris: Cerf, 1970).
- Hugues de Saint-Victor, *Six opuscles spirituels. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par Roger Baron* (Paris: Cerf, 1969).
- John Van Engen, *Devotio moderna. Basic Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).
- Thomas van Kempen, *Navolging van Christus: naar het oorspronkelijke handschrift (1441) vertaald en toegeelicht door Rudolf van Dijk* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2008).

Secondary Works

- Ampe, Albert, 'Speculatieve achtergronden van Grote's gebedstheorie', *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 51 (1977), 20-27.
- Bundy, Murray, *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Mediaeval Thought* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1927).
- Buskirk, Jessica, 'Hugo van der Goes's *Adoration of the Shepherds*: Between Ascetic Idealism and Urban Networks in Late Medieval Flanders', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, 6/1 (2014), DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2014.6.1.1.
- Cousinié, Frédéric, *Images et méditation au XVIIe siècle* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007).
- Baere, Guido de, 'Het Ghemeine leven bij Ruusbroec en Geert Grote', *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 59/2-3 (1985), 172-183.
- Baere, Guido de, 'De Middelnederlandse mystieke literatuur en de Moderne Devotie', *Trajecta*, 6 (1997), 3-18.
- Bruin, C. C. de, E. Persoons, and Anton Weiler, ed., *Geert Grote en de Moderne Devotie* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1984).
- Dijk, Rudolf van, 'Thematische meditatie en het beeld: visualiteit in *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* van Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen (1367-1398)', in *Geen povere schoonheid. Laat-middeleeuwse kunst in verband met de Moderne Devotie*, ed. by Kees Veelenturf (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2000), pp. 43-66.
- Dijk, Rudolf van, ed., *Prolegomena ad Gerardi Magni Opera Omnia*, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis, 192 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003).
- Dijk, Rudolf van, 'Ascensiones in corde disponere. Spirituelle Umformung bei Gerhard Zerbolt von Zutphen', in *Kirchenreform von unten. Gerhard Zerbolt von Zutphen und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben, Tradition—Reform—Innovation*, ed. by Nikolaus Staubach (Frankfurt: Lang, 2004), pp. 287-305.
- Dijk, Rudolf van, 'De structuur van de *Navolging*', in *Nuchtere mystiek. Navolging van Christus*, ed. by Kees Waaijman and Rudolf van Dijk (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2006), pp. 35-50.
- Enenkel, Karl and Walter S. Melion, 'Introduction: Types and Functions of Meditation in the Transition From Late Medieval to Early Modern Intellectual culture', in *Meditatio – Refashioning the Self. Theory and Practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern Intellectual Culture*, ed. by Karl Enenkel and Walter S. Melion (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 1-23.

⁶³ See Falque, *Devotional Portraiture*, pp. 252-269.

- Épîney-Burgard, Georgette, ed., *Gérard Grote, fondateur de la Dévotion moderne. Lettres et traités* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998).
- Épîney-Burgard, Georgette, *Gérard Grote (1340-1384) et les débuts de la Dévotion moderne* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag: 1970).
- Falque, Ingrid, 'Daz man bild mit bilde us tribe: Imagery and Knowledge of God in Henry Suso's *Exemplar*', *Speculum*, 92/2 (April 2017), 447-492.
- Falque, Ingrid, *Devotional Portraiture and Spiritual Experience in Early Netherlandish Painting* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).
- Fattori, Marta and M. L. Bianchi, ed., *Phantasia/Imaginatio. V Colloquio internazionale del Lessico Intelletuale Europeo* (Firenze: Edizioni Dell'Ateneo, 1988).
- Fulton, Rachel, *From Judgment to Passion. Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
- Goossens, Leonardus Antonius Maria, *De meditatie In de eerste tijd van de Moderne devotie* (Haarlem: Gottmer, 1952).
- Guiderdoni, Agnès, 'Figures de l'âme pèlerine. La méditation emblématique aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles', *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa*, 41 (2005), 695-723.
- Hamburger, Jeffrey, 'In gebeden vnd in bilden geschriben: Prints as Exemplars of Piety and the Culture of the Copy in Fifteenth-Century Germany', in *The Woodcut in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, ed. by Peter Parshall (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2009), pp. 155-89.
- Herwaarden, Jan van, 'Geert Groote's Tract on Meditation: *De quattuor generibus meditabilium*', in *Between Saint James and Erasmus. Studies in Late-Medieval Religious Life: Devotion and Pilgrimage in the Netherlands*, ed. by Jan van Herwaarden (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 3-14.
- Herwaarden, Jan van, 'Geert Grotes traktaat over meditatie: *De quattuor generibus meditabilium*', *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 59 (1985), 130-141.
- Hyma, Albert, 'Het "Tractatus de quatuor generibus meditationum sive contemplationum. Sermo de nativitate Domini" door Geert Groote', *Archief voor de Geschiedenis van het aartsbisdom Utrecht*, 49 (1924), 296-326.
- 'Imagination – Phantasia', in *Clavis scholastica. Clés scolastiques pour la théorie des lettres et des arts des 16e et 17e siècles*, ed. by Ralph Dekoninck, Agnès Guiderdoni, Hélène Leblanc, and Aline Smeesters (forthcoming in 2025).
- Karnes, Michelle, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- Leclercq, Jean, *Initiation aux auteurs monastiques du Moyen Âge. L'amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 1957).
- McGinn, Bernard, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550)* [Vol. V of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*] (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012).
- McNamer, Sarah, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
- Melion, Walter S., 'Introduction: Meditative Images and the Psychology of the Soul', in *Image and Imagination of the Religious Self in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Reindert Falkenburg, Walter S. Melion, and Todd Richardson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 1-36.
- Melion, Walter S., 'Introduction: Meditating on Picture', in *Ut pictura meditatio. The Meditative Image in Northern Art, 1500-1700*, ed. by Walter S. Melion, Ralph Dekoninck, and Agnès Guiderdoni-Bruslé (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), pp. xxxiii-xxxvii.
- Melion, Walter S., *The Meditative Art. Studies in the Northern Devotional Print, 1550-1625* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2009).
- Mertens, Thom, 'Lezen met de pen. Ontwikkelingen in het laatmiddeleeuws geestelijk proza', in *De studie van de Middelnederlandse letterkunde. Stand en toekomst*, ed. by Frits van oostrom and Frank Willaert (Hilversum: Verloren, 1989), pp. 187-200.
- Pacheco, Maria and José Meirinhos, ed., *Intellect et imagination dans la philosophie médiévale. Actes du XIe congrès international de philosophie médiévale de la Société Internationale pour l'Etude de la Philosophie Médiévale (S.I.E.P.M.). Porto, du 26 au 31 août 2002* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).
- Park, Katherine, 'The Concept of Psychology', in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. by C. B. Schmitt, Q. Skinner, E. Kessler, and J. Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 455-463.
- Pasnau, Robert, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- Perler, Dominic, 'Faculties in Medieval Philosophy', in *The Faculties. A History*, ed. by Dominic Perler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 97-139.

- Post, R. R., *Modern Devotion. Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).
- Severus, Emmanuel von, Aimé Solignac, Mathias Goossens, and Michel Sauvage, 'Méditation', in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique*, vol. 10 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980), col. 906-927.
- Tucker, Luke Rohan, *Devotio Moderna: Confrontations with Scholastic University Culture* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Sydney, 2021).
- Van Engen, John, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life. The Devotio Moderna in the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
- Waaijman, Kees, 'Image and Imagelessness. A Challenge to the [Modern] Devotion', in *Spirituality Renewed: Studies on Significant Representations of the Modern Devotion*, ed. by Hein Blommenstijn, Charles Caspers and Rijcklof Hofman (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), pp. 29-40.
- Zijl, Theodore P. van, *Gerard Groote, Ascetic and Reformer (1340-1384)* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1963).

ABSTRACT

The ways late medieval authors conceived the role of images in the meditative process has been a crucial question in recent scholarship. Indeed, meditative treatises often give crucial indications on how the uses of images in spiritual practices were informed by theories of the soul, but also on how these images produced and shaped the spiritual experience of their viewers. In other words, they inform us on the 'experience of imagery' in late medieval spirituality. This essay aims at contributing to this field by exploring the role of the imagination and its products as expounded by Geert Grote, in his *De quattuor generibus meditabilium* ('On Four Classes of Subjects suitable for Meditation'). On the one hand, the essay starts with a brief presentation of meditative treatises, in order to show that Grote's text can be understood as a kind of theorisation of meditation and its cognitive process. On the other, it focuses on the place Grote grants to the imagination and its products in this process, in an attempt to offer a renewed vision of this important text in the history of spirituality of the Low Countries.

Address of the author: GEMCA (Group for Early Modern Cultural Analysis), UCLouvain, Place Blaise Pascal 1, Bte L3.03.31, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve (ingrid.falque@uclouvain.be)