CHRIST’S CASE AND JOHN DONNE, “SEEING THROUGH HIS WOUNDS”: THE STIGMA OF MARTYRDOM TRANSFIGURED

Anselm Haverkamp

Christ’s Case

Martyrdom and stigmatization\(^1\) are two motives interwoven in religious representation, related but opposed in a shared logic of manifestation, the one quite literally soaked in the experimentum crucis, the other mystically withdrawn but nevertheless involved in an “expressism” of what seems to amount to the same literal blood. The former, martyrdom, enjoys an ongoing political actuality; the latter, stigmatization, surfaces from secretive hiding and challenges the political service of the former through a virtuosity of its own.

One of the crucial questions raised by the proliferation of martyrdom is its religious and, more problematic, Christian character. Is it a religiously motivated strategy, most efficiently exploited by the first Christians and gathering a new momentum in the early modern period of religious wars, that finds itself secularized, generalized, globalized? The possible purposes of martyrdom in general are as unclear as the question from where it comes and how much it carries, in the very crypt of its saints, the secret of its motif, the motif that is—but is it?—self-sacrifice. Like most rhetorical devices, martyrdom works without begging the question, by sheer evidence. The martyr performs by suffering, by submitting him or herself actively to that passion called martyrdom, or blood-witnessing. The paradox, and the secret, in fact, of a performance of passion, modelled upon Christ’s performance, on the cross, of salvation is—in a second paradox that turns out to be proliferating like a racing metonymy—followed, or imitated, in an imitatio Christi, by witnessing the performance of deliverance; in adding, that is, to the evidence of what is to be witnessed.

\(^1\) The following train of thought was developed in contributions to a series of conferences organized by the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis and the Postgraduate Program on Representation, Rhetoric, Knowledge of the European University Viadrina on “Martyrdom” (1999), “Stigma” (2000) and “Political Theology” (2001). Burcht Pranger’s expertise was important on all occasions.
In adding to the evidence, the secret of the performance is sheltered rather than explained: it is encrypted, and the crypt is painted with the evidence of witnesses, their blood; it is reiterated, re-instituted as a crypt and re-inscribed with a renewed narrative in blood. Christ’s cross has been called a triumph of representation, and the martyr’s cross is a dramatic reenactment of his passion’s paradoxical performance. Witnessing the witnesses, we come to witness in the martyrs’ performance a strange splitting of the witness, a doubling pretty close to heresy. The martyrs’ testimony splits, even rivals, the authorized mode of representation as it finds itself instituted by Christ’s own word in the instituting moment of the mass; it strips the secret of the institution of its sublime veil. The martyr jumps to a conclusion that comes, in Christ’s case, only after the word has been spoken and the New Testament established, on the cross.

The *martyrium* of the martyrs following Christ reads the sequence of word and act backwards, upside down. The martyrs’ blood turns the transubstantiated *corpus* back into the matter that had been left behind in bread and wine, before the cross was literally erected and Christ’s literal blood literally spilled. The martyrs literalize what had never been intended as a literal end in itself; but they do so on purpose, in order to make use of the performative force hidden in the literal event of the *martyrium*. It is the imitation of Christ that invests the event with its originary force in bringing this force out into the open. The singularity of the unbelievable event that is salvation, its salvific potential, becomes palpable only through the representation of a non-palpable presence. In short, the representational logic of this dialectic is a result of Greco-Roman rhetoric and no Judeo-Christian feature; it replaces, or invests, the New Testament *kerygma* with Greco-Roman rhetoric. What we have to add to the success of Christian martyrs—of what not-yet-Christians may have found attractive and persuasive in martyrdom—is the rhetorical supplement, or supplementary logic, operative in the Christian triumph of representation and its narratology.

The late, decidedly post-religious, name of this supplementary structure is sadomasochism, a signifier as universal and global as martyrdom. Taken at its most basic, structural level, both sadomasochism and martyrdom are the result of superimpositions of an analogous pattern-formation. The martyr rests on the Christian, more precisely the Greco-Roman interpretation of the fulfillment of Jewish history, an interpretation which leaves behind its founding moment by superimposing the universalizing rhetoric of the Greco-Roman empire on the singular event of some non-rhetorical—not in the same Greco-Roman sense rhetorical, though not necessar-