Alone at the Summit: Solitude and the Ascetic Imagination at the Sacro Monte of Varallo

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Knowledge of the divine requires that vision be tested. At the Sacro Monte of Varallo Christ's miraculous transformation from incarnate flesh to immaterial light takes place high above the pilgrim who kneels at a wooden viewing screen [Fig. 1]. The screen frames and controls the revelation at the same time as it withholds its image from the viewer. This difficulty is augmented by an enormous representation of Mount Tabor that confronts the visitor from behind the screen. Christ is presented at the highest point of the stucco mountainside on the upper rear wall of the vast chapel interior: rather than facilitating access to divine presence, Mount Tabor complicates visual apprehension of the miracle and even undermines efforts to verify its proof [Fig. 2]. Traditional associations of the mountain as a liminal place between heaven and earth are emphasised in the *Transfiguration* at Varallo while, paradoxically, contact and communion with the divine are made increasingly difficult. In fact, Christ's retreat from vision in the *Transfiguration* only serves to heighten the sense of withdrawal already raised by the narrative recounted in the Synoptic Gospels.[1] The Transfiguration begins when Christ takes Peter, John, and James up a mountain to pray. Departing from the crowds and

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[1] If not otherwise indicated all translations are my own. *Matthew* 17:1–9; *Mark* 9: 2–9; *Luke* 9: 28–36. My analysis is indebted to a recent discussion of visibility and epistemology put forth by Pierre Antoine Fabre: Fabre P.A., "Sleep of the Flesh: The Agony of the Visible at the Limits of the Frame in the Iconography of the Prayer of Christ in the Garden of Gesthemane", in Falkenberg R.L. – Melion W.S. – Richardson T.M. (eds.), *Image and Imagination of the Religious Self in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: 2007) 163–194. This interpretation departs from scholarship that emphasises the full revelation of truth and knowledge. See for example Cranston J., "Tropes of Revelation in Raphael's *Transfiguration*", *Renaissance Quarterly* 56, 1 (2003) 1–25.

followers that accompany him during his ministry, Christ's relative solitude is a seeming precondition for divine revelation. Yet the slumber of the three disciples signals a concomitant oscillation between separation and witness that is reinforced by the uncertain presence of Moses and Elijah, including their abandonment of Christ to his earthly fate following God's aural verification of his son. Finally, before their descent to the earthly realm Christ commands the disciples not to discuss what they beheld. An uncertain truth must be held within each witness alone.

Ascending from the wooded valley where Christ's life and ministry are represented, the pilgrim approaches the *Transfiguration* by way of a steep path and set of stairs to the highest hillock of the entire complex [Fig. 3]. This bodily act is compounded by the visual ascent demanded by the enormous scale of the stucco mountain inside. In this way the *Transfiguration* demands a performative and imaginative re-enactment of the narrative on the part of the pilgrim for whom the vertical axis along which they seek knowledge is interrupted by the screen. Body and mind, earthly and divine are interwoven here. Neither perfect solitude nor solidarity is made possible by Varallo's Mount Tabor, where a number of sculptural groups in the foreground of the chapel confront the visitor with the crowds Christ left behind. At the base of the mountain, the possessed boy is depicted falling down when a disciple fails to heal him; apostles preach and gesture toward the Law; contemporary pilgrims look out towards the viewer [Figs. 4 and 5]. None of these figures – figures that are most immediately visible to the viewer and which mediate their access to the rest of the chapel – are aware of what is taking place above. In this way Christ's body is spatially distanced from the viewer by the mountain, while the very idea of solitude is tested by the literal foregrounding of more

communal procedures of doubt and belief from which Christ had retreated.

The *Transfiguration* at Varallo draws attention to the unreliability of vision in order to mobilise a more self-reflexive, imaginative experience. This essay investigates the limits of solitude solicited by the representation of Mount Tabor and argues that pilgrimage is fundamentally transformed, and perhaps even challenged, by the representation of the sacred summit. In the context of the problematic status of images and pilgrimage after the Reformation – both of which were under immense ecclesiastical scrutiny in northern Italy at this time – the Sacro Monte offers an intriguing site of experimentation. As we will see solitude became an increasingly important principle during the last quarter of the sixteenth century under the direction of the Bishop of Novara, Carlo Bascapè (1550–1615), who insisted that the Sacro Monte was a place of solitary contemplation. Solitude would have been a particularly fraught endeavour at Varallo, which increasingly fostered a close communion between pilgrim and image in the seventeenth century. With this in mind I argue that the growing desire for solitude at the Sacro Monte of Varallo belies a deeper concern towards not only communal pilgrimage, but the concomitant uncertainty of vision and the imagination inherent to new modes of individual devotion to images.

The Sacro Monte as a Place of Solitude

The Sacro Monte of Varallo was founded in 1486 by the Fransciscan Fra Bernardino Caimi (ca. 1425–1500) following his return to Italy after a period spent as custodian of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. On a rocky bluff in the Sesia river valley, Caimi's architectural chapels replicated the sacred shrines of the Holy Land, which were

arranged to precisely mimic the topography of key pilgrimage sites. Carefully positioned as a scaled-down version of the actual sacred geography, this 'topomimetic' site – literally a *replica of a place* – demanded bodily navigation to activate the surrogate space. Following its initial construction, the Sacro Monte was transformed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Eventually the pilgrimage site would include roughly forty-five large chapels depicting Christological narratives in strikingly illusionistic multi-media *mise-en-scènes*. After this time the pilgrimage site offered a narrative percorso of Christ's life and death, denying much of the spatial and embodied experience instituted under Fra Caimi. Foregrounding the experience of visual images in this way, the Sacro Monte dramatically altered the experience of pilgrimage in a period of Catholic reform.

Even while the image came to dominate the Sacro Monte, earlier forms of replication remained and would continue to provide a moving experience. The subtitle of Francesco Sesalli's *Descrittione del Sacro Monte di Varale di Val' Sesia* draws the reader's attention to this conjunction of resemblance and representation: 'Where, like in a New Jerusalem, there is a Sepulchre similar to the one of Christ, with many places like it in imitation of those in the Holy Land, with marvelous statues and paintings'.[2] This hybrid proposition is unique to Varallo and posed a problematic and complex experience for the pilgrim. The preface to a 1613 edition of an earlier guidebook explicitly foregrounds this epistemological challenge:

> All men, the Philosopher says, naturally seek knowledge, and even more so when they are given external objects that excite their intellect. The devotees who visit

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[2] Sesalli Francesco, *Descrittione del Sacro Monte di Varale di Val'Sesia* (Varallo, Pietro and Anselmo Ravelli: 1589) 1: 'Dove, come in una nova Gierusalem, è il sepolcro simile a quello di N.S. Giesu Christo, con infiniti luoghi pij, ad imitation di quelli di Terra Santa, con statue e pitture maravigliose'.

the Sacro Monte of Varallo experience this while looking at the mysteries of its making, providing their first taste of what is shown to them, of knowledge, which is truth, and what they represent.[3]

Seeking new possibilities for pilgrimage and images, the chapels at Varallo could not guarantee the pilgrim access to the literal presence of the divine through a holy relic, icon, or miraculous image. Rather, images confronted visitors with ever more visual representations of the mysteries. The centrality of illusionistic images at the Sacro Monte after 1570 compounded anxieties towards pilgrimage and it is during this time that patrons attempted to control both visual and embodied experience by advocating for a more individual focus.

Clearly the shift to solitude that I am tracing here cannot be separated from anxieties towards pilgrimage in the post-Tridentine period. Condemned by reformers as idolatrous and superstitious, leading to the worship of false objects and images and licentious and profane activities, pilgrimage was the subject of much debate.[4] The extra-liturgical and collective aspect of pilgrimage was central to these concerns, offering as it did the possibility for new social formations outside the bonds and controls of social order. Rather than take up a particular position in anthropological debates about the unity or contestation made possible through *communitas* I shift attention to the productive responses to this threat. Rather than merely reaffirm previous models of pilgrimage, Catholic reform in the late sixteenth century initiated experiments that would transform

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[3] Ferrari Giovanni Giacomo, *Brevi Considerationi sopra i Misteri del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (Varallo, Pietro Revelli: 1613) n.p.: 'Ogni huomo, dici il filosofo, naturalmente decidera di sapere, e tanto piu quando da esteriori oggetti e cio eccitato l'intelleto suo. Esperimentano questo ancora quei divoti, che visitano il Sacro Monte di Varallo, mentre mirando i misteri, che in esso si veggono fabricati, provano, che il primo appetito, che da essi vien loro mostro, e di sapere, che cosa siano in verita, e che effetti rappresentino'.

[4] Eire C.M.N., *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: 1986) 43–45.

the experiences solicited from individual pilgrims. Certainly late medieval practices of

virtual pilgrimage suggest continuity with the past, as opposed to clear rupture. The

dramatic increase in printed guidebooks to Varallo would have revived this tradition to a

certain extent. However, following Laura Gelfand, I seek to blur the distinction between

active and virtual pilgrimage by emphasizing the jointly performative and imaginative

labour of pilgrimage that physically and emotionally engages the subject in an active

mode of inner transformation.[5]

In response to Protestant reform, Catholic authorities struggled to discipline the

unruly movements of the body through new practices that sought to re-direct the faithful

through carefully orchestrated spaces and practices.[6] Efforts at reform were particularly

intense in northern Italy under the Archbishops of Milan and Bologna, Carlo Borromeo

(1538–1584) and Gabriele Paleotti (1522–1597).[7] Both sought to legislate popular

theatre, festivals, plays, and pilgrimage as more mobile, popular religious dramas were

replaced by organised procession during the Lenten season. Pilgrimage was made

increasingly linear as well through Borromeo's institution of a fixed itinerary of seven

pilgrimage churches in Milan. Concerns regarding pilgrimage were specifically addressed

by Borromeo in a Provincial Council 'On Religious Pilgrimage' held in Milan in 1576 by

enforcing adherence to strict itineraries, legislating the use of representation and images,

[5] Gelfand L., "Illusionism and Interactivity: Medieval Installation Art, Architecture, and Devotional Response", in Blick S. – Gelfand L.D. (eds.), *Push Me Pull You: Imaginative, Emotional, Physical, and Spatial Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Leiden: 2011) 88.

[6] Lavin M., "Legacies of the Counter Reformation and the Origins of Modern Catholicism", in Bamji, A. – Janssen G.H. (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Counter-Reformation* (Farnham – Burlington: 2013) 452–3.

[7] Bernardi C., "Il tempo profano: l'"Annual Ricreatione". Il carnevale ambrosiano nel seicento", in Cascetta A. – Carpani R. (eds.), *La Scena della Gloria: Drammaturgia e Spettacolo a Milano in età Spagnola* (Milan: 1995) 545–583; Burke P., *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: 1979) 305–6; Cascetta A., "La Scena Della Gloria: Il teatro a Milano nell'età borromaica", in Biscottini P. (ed.), *Carlo e Federico: la luce dei Borromeo nella Milano Spagnola* (Milan: 2005) 101–108.

and forbidding inappropriate behaviour.[8] These decrees suggest, in fact, that images could be powerful agents in the regulation and control of pilgrimage when properly legislated. Moreover, the control of body was intimately connected to the control of the mind.[9]

Even if these sixteenth-century reforms could never fully control the experience of pilgrimage, the decrees would become influential at the Sacro Monte in the seventeenth century. Carlo Borromeo had made several well-known pilgrimages to the site in the 1570s and 1580s, during which the devout Archbishop undertook prolonged nocturnal meditation at the chapels practicing the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.[10] Borromeo also arbitrated disputes regarding the future of the site that were emerging at this time. Disagreements were prompted in part by an extensive reorganization program proposed by architect Galeazzo Alessi (1512–1572) in a manuscript called the *Libro dei Misteri,* produced between 1565 and 1569 and commissioned by a local *fabbriciere* Giacomo d'Adda (d.1580). The *fabbricieri* were elite noblemen elected to oversee the maintenance of the site, but d'Adda's and Alessi's more narrative aims for the Sacro Monte clashed with the Franciscan custodians who favoured the principle of spatial replication enacted by its Franciscan founder. A generation after Alessi's *Libro* was produced, Borromeo's former secretary and biographer, Carlo Bascapè, was given administrative control at the Sacro Monte through a papal bull and appointed Bishop of Novara (1593–1615). Like Borromeo before him,

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[8] These decrees are found in a chapter titled 'De religiosis peregrinationibus'. See: Longo P.G., "Il Monte e l'Itinerario nel Sacro: Prospettive di storia religiosa del Sacro Monte di Varallo nei secoli XVI-XVIII", in Pellizzari P. (ed.), *1º Convegno Internazionale sui Sacri Monti* (Quarona: 2009) 65.

[9] De Boer W., *The Conquest of the Soul: Confessions, Discipline, and Public Order in Counter-Reformation Milan* (Koln: 2001).

[10] Stoppa A.L., "I quattro pellegrinnaggi di San Carlo al Sacro Monte di Varallo", in *Da Carlo Borromeo a Carlo Bascapè: la pastorale di Carlo Borromeo e il Sacro Monte di Arona* (Novara: 1985) 57–83.

Bascapè was called upon to ease conflict between the Franciscan monks and the *fabbricieri*. Unlike Borromeo, however, Bascapè actively initiated and oversaw renovation and reorganization projects that were frequently based on Borromeo's and Alessi's earlier suggestions.[11]

Under Bascapè's direction the Sacro Monte was more fully transformed from a topomimetic site to a more complex place of images that would prioritise the individual experience of the pilgrim. In letters written to the *fabbricieri,* Bascapè repeatedly and insistently referred to the Sacro Monte as a 'sacred place' and a 'place of solitude and of contemplation'.[12] Bascapè's attempts to circumscribe exactly what kind of 'sacred place' one would find at Varallo were accompanied by his concern with what kinds of activities would be pursued by its visitors. His letters and other correspondence express concern toward the lack of devotion on the part of visitors, the incorrect ordering of chapels, and the potential confusion of the dogma and biblical teaching of the Gospels.[13] The control of inner vision and individual experience was cause for concern at Varallo, as Carlo Bascapè's changes suggest.[14] Pilgrimage requires self-control perhaps even more when its labour is imaginative; attempts to deploy and regulate more interior forms of devotion could not eliminate anxieties toward pilgrimage, but shifted the concern from the body to the mind.[15] Interiorised practices of devotion and pilgrimage could be directed toward

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[11] Gentile G., "Gli interventi di Carlo Bascapè nella regia del Sacro Monte di Varallo", in *Carlo Bascapè sulle orme del Borromeo: coscienza e azione pastorale in un vescovo di fine Cinquecento* (Novara: 1994) 429–430.

[12] Longo P.G., "'Un luogo sacro ... quasi senz'anima' Carlo Bascapè e il Sacro Monte di Varallo", in *Carlo Bascapè sulle orme di Borromeo: coscienza e azione pastorale in un vescovo di fine Cinquecento* (Novara: 1994) 369, 397: 'sacro luogo' and 'luogo solitario e di contemplatione.'

[13] Longo, "Un luogo sacro" 369, 397, note 2; Göttler C., "The Temptation of the Senses at the Sacro Monte of Varallo", in de Boer W. – Göttler C. (eds.), *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden – Boston: 2013) 441.

[14] Longo, "Un luogo sacro" 369–370.

[15] Williams W., *Pilgrimage and Narrative in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: 1999) 73.

images – whether in the Spiritual Exercises or at the Sacro Monte – in an attempt to fix and contain the imagination.[16]

To this end, Bascapè initiated extensive renovations in pursuit of a growing concern toward the devotional focus of the individual visitor. Galeazzo Alessi's project for a separate upper urban zone was loosely adopted and a series of large architectural commissions were initiated around 1600. These included the Square of Tribunals, which brought together the chapels of Christ's trials in a single piazza, and Pilate's Palace where the pilgrim would witness the torture and final trials.[17] According to Pier Giorgio Longo Pilate's Palace was exemplary of Bascapè's new emphasis on individual experience: '[i]t was essentially and exclusively the 'sacred place' of the mysteries, constructed more for a search for solitude and reflexive and interior communication with the soul of the beholding pilgrim.'.[18]As a kind of structuring mnemonic device that grouped together the moving narratives of Christ's Passion, Pilate's Palace sought to found a 'sacred place' that might control and contain this interior experience. Moreover, the architecture of this new upper area was to be vacated of any living quarters and devoted solely to the devotional purpose function through the prohibition of eating, drinking, and selling goods.[19] This architectural intervention and the delineation of an urban zone was one answer to Bascapè's concerns, but within specific parameters as the

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[16] Clark S., *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: 2007) 165; Göttler C., *Last Things: Art and the Religious Imagination* (Turnhout: 2010) 1–30.

[17] See documents transcribed and translated in Longo, "Un luogo sacro" 412-416. On Bascapè's plans for the Passion area see also: Gentile, "Gli interventi" 451–461. On the architectural plans see: Stefani Perrone Stefania, "I Sacri Monti come 'città ideale'", in Maltese C. (ed.), *Centri storici di grandi agglomerati urbani* (Bologna: 1982) 55–66; Stefani Perrone S., "Giovanni d'Enrico urbanista e architetto al Sacro Monte di Varallo in Valsesia", in Marani P.C. (ed.), *Fra Rinascimento, manierismo e realtà. Scritti di storia dell'arte in memoria di Anna Maria Brizio* (Florence: 1984) 129–141.

[18] Longo, "Un luogo sacro" 369. "Era essenzialmente ed esclusivamente il 'luogo sacro' dei misteri, costruiti sempre più nel rispetto della ricerca di solitudine e di comunicazione riflessiva ed interiore con l'animo del pellegrino risguardante."

[19] Longo, "Il Monte e l'Itinerario" 72, note 12.

urban area could not be a lived city. At the same time, the visitor was to actualise the space and thus enact an interior transformation.

Even more important to Bascapè's emphasis on individual experience was his determination that visitors were no longer to be guided around the Sacro Monte in groups led by the Franciscan custodians.[20] Instead, each visitor should visit the chapels alone. This stood in stark contrast to the initial phase at the Sacro Monte when the Franciscan monks led groups of pilgrims around the shrines following the order and itinerary undertaken in Jerusalem.[21] Given Bascapè's dismissal of this more closely controlled and collective encounter it is not surprising that the ban corresponded with other strategies of bodily discipline to mediate the experience of the sculptural tableaux. Chief among these, of course, was the installation of viewing screens carried out at this time, which also followed Alessi's scheme [Fig. 6]. Similarly, the proliferation of guidebooks and large printed illustrations between 1560 and 1680 speaks to a contemporary desire to order and contain the uncertain experience that was now to be primarily the burden of the visitor alone [Fig. 7].[22]

The *Transfiguration* and the Ascetic Imagination

Carlo Bascapè's description of the Sacro Monte as a 'solitary place of contemplation' coincided with the commissioning of new chapels such as the *Transfiguration*. Largely overlooked in the literature on the Sacro Monte, the *Transfiguration* offers an intriguing site where the transformation of pilgrimage depended on the sense of visual withdrawal.

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[20] Longo, "Un luogo sacro" 369–370.

[21] Panzanelli R., "Pilgrimage in Hyperreality: Images and Imagination in the Early Phase of the 'New Jerusalem' at Varallo (1486–1530)", PhD dissertation (University of Los Angeles: 1999) 140.

[22] Longo P.G., *Memorie di Gerusalemme e Sacri Monti in epoca barocca Vincenzo Fani, devoti "misteri" e "magnanime imprese" nella sua Relatione del viaggio in TerraSanta dedicata a Carlo Emanuele I di Savoia (1615-1616)* (Crea: 2010) 80–84.

The chapel thus shifts attention from the more communal aspects of pilgrimage toward individual transformation through penitential practice. Drawing on and transforming existing biblical and exegetical understandings of the mountain summit as a site of ascetic withdrawal and retreat, the *Transfiguration* ultimately conjoins the bodily experience of pilgrimage to more visual and imaginative devotional practices that depended on the self-reflection of the individual. Perhaps chief among the new chapels, then, the *Transfiguration* raises the tension between earlier Franciscan ideals of bodily emulation and communal, guided experience, and Bascapè's emphasis on – and legislation of – the individual's navigation of the site. Changes instituted by Bascapè indicate that knowledge of the divine had come to demand a new relationship between bodily and mental labour, especially when knowledge is acquired through pilgrimage to a place of images.

The problem of a truth manifested through the immateriality of divine light would be compounded by the difficulty of representing such effects in an emphatically material image. As I argued at the outset of this essay, the enormous stucco mountain and the narratives included in the foreground of the chapel suggest that the *Transfiguration* complicated the already uncertain visual proof of Christ's transfigured body. This difficulty is raised in relation to *The Transfiguration* by Raphael (1483–1520) in an important art treatise with links to Varallo: the 1584 *Trattato dell'Arte della Pittura, Scoltura, et Architettura* by Gian Paolo Lomazzo (1538–1600) [Fig. 8].[23] In line with my own account of Varallo's *Transfiguration*, and building on Lomazzo's consideration of Raphael's similar composition, I want to suggest that the mystery of the Transfiguration

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[23] Lomazzo Gian Paolo, *Trattato dell'Arte della Pittura, Scoltura, et Architettura* (Milan, Paolo Gottardo Pontio: 1584).

complicates a neat division between immaterial divine truth and embodied experience, or

between the visionary and the visual.[24] In Book Seven, Chapter Two, Lomazzo mentions

Raphael's *Transfiguration* in a section on the different methods of representing the Holy

Spirit. For Lomazzo, Raphael's representation of Christ's luminous body exemplifies

how the knowledge of an immaterial God can be accessed through images that represent

miraculous light.[25] It is not surprising, therefore, that the same painting is discussed in

relation to the representation of light in Book Four. Lomazzo defines light in Chapter

Four: 'Light, then, is quality without body[...]'.[26] This primary kind of light is further

divided into three categories: light that hits the corporal body; the luminous divine body;

light from external sources such as fire. Images of Christ's Transfiguration and the

Pentecost reveal the challenge of representing the second kind of light according to

Lomazzo:

> This same divine light that we are considering spread over the Apostles when the
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> Holy Spirit illuminated them in the form of tongues of fire; it is how it was
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> beautifully expressed by Gaudenzio [Ferrari] in a painting at Vigevano [...] This
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> primary [kind of] light is also maintained in the great splendour that surrounded
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> Christ [...] when he transformed on Mount Tabor, to give pleasure, and
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> knowledge of heavenly bliss to three of his disciples, Saint John, Saint Peter, and

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[24] Kleinbub C., "Raphael's *Transfiguration* as Visio-Devotional Program", *Art Bulletin* 90 3 (2008) 393, note 133. My argument extends from Kleinbub's although it moves in a slightly different direction in order to question the clear distinction between the visible and the visionary.

[25] Lomazzo, *Trattato* 531.

[26] Lomazzo, *Trattato dell'Arte* 217: 'Lume adunque è qualità senza corpo[...]'. Neo-platonic philosophy is discussed in more detail just prior to this section, in Book III of Chapter 4. Although not unrelated to my discussion of visibility and epistemology, a detailed discussion of Lomazzo's neo-Platonic metaphysics of light is outside the purview of this discussion of solitude; instead, I raise Lomazzo's writing on light in order to investigate contemporary conceptions of the Transfiguration and the co-involvement of the body in its representation. For a thorough discussion of Raphael's *Transfiguration* in relation to perception and devotional experience see Kleinbub, "Raphael's *Transfiguration*" 367–393.

Saint James. This mystery is represented in the large altar [painting] in St. Peter

Montorio in Rome, at the hands of the wondrous Raphael.[27]

It is significant that Lomazzo draws attention to the epistemological codependence

between embodied presence and incorporeal light in his writings, despite his claim that

light is 'without body'. Rather than institute a clear separation between the truth of

immaterial light and the imperfection of sensual world, Lomazzo allows for their close

connection. It is also notable that Raphael's *Transfiguration* is called upon as exemplary

of the 'knowledge of heavenly bliss' considering that it includes similar compositional

difficulties in the foreground figures that would later be found at Varallo.[28] With its

representation of the apostles on the left, and the depiction of the possessed boy on the

right, Raphael's canvas reinforced both an earthly, bodily experience and a more

communal search for knowledge taking place at the same time as Christ's mysterious

metamorphosis.

The Transfiguration could demand new forms of bodily and imaginative

engagement, particularly when the epistemological claims of images were under scrutiny.

As Sven Dupré has recently shown, the epistemic challenge posed by Johannes Kepler

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[27] Lomazzo, *Trattato dell'Arte* 219: 'Questo istesso divin lume habbiamo da considerare che si spargesse sopra gl'Apostoli, quando lo Spiritosanto in forma di lingue di foco gl'illuminò; si come lo ha benissimo espresso Gaudentio sopra una tavola à Vigevano … Questo lumo primario è parimenti tenuto per quel gran splendore che circondava Christo … quando si transformò nel monte Tabor, per dar gusto, e saggio della beatitudine celeste à trecari suoi discepoli, à Santo Giovanni, Santo Pietro, è Santo Giacobo. Delqual misterio n'è fatta la gran tavola in Santo Pietro Montorio in Roma, per mano del mirabile Rafaello'.
[28] The apparent gap or split between the heavenly and earthly in Raphael's composition poses a philosophical challenge that is registered in art historical reception of the painting. Philosopher Gary Shapiro summarises this literature including discussions of the painting by Hegel as well as twentieth-century art historians. See: Shapiro G., *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying* (Chicago – London: 2003) 93–5, 405 footnote 11. My own analysis follows Shapiro who draws attention to Friedrich Nietzsche's eventual complication of the split between heaven and earth: Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision* 104.

(1571–1630) in his 1604 *Optics* was met with ambivalence by Jesuit mathematicians.[29] Kepler undermined the cognitive basis of Catholic image theory with his assertion that the *pictura* was 'an image formed by the refraction of light only'.[30] The ability to attain spiritual knowledge from images is fundamentally challenged without the *species* to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from the senses to the faculties.[31] In response, the retention of the concept of the *species* signals the continued importance of the material image in Jesuit spirituality according to the hierarchy of the senses and the ultimate goal of soul's ascent to its original source in God.[32] Much like the Jesuit interlocutors of Kepler's *Optics*, Lomazzo responded to the epistemic difficulty of knowing the Divine through images, although the *Trattato* endeavoured to uphold this possibility. In fact, Lomazzo's concern with light and interest in the Transfiguration echo the epistemic concerns of the Jesuit mathematicians responding to Kepler's new image theory. Clearly images and their sensual apprehension carried high stakes for the soul of the beholder, as images could still be made to allow for the ascent to spiritual knowledge.

The shifting relationship between mind and body that is raised by the narrative of Christ's Transfiguration would be particularly charged at Varallo as the embodied spatial experience of Caimi's New Jerusalem was eventually replaced. It is not surprising, therefore, that the *Transfiguration* was implicated in this transformation. Its construction sparked controversy between the Franciscan custodians and the *fabbricieri* when the latter destroyed the existing *Ascension* and razed the knoll on which it was installed to

[29] Dupré S., "The Return of the Species: Jesuit Responses to Kepler's New Theory of Images", in de Boer W. – Göttler C. (eds.) *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden – Boston: 2013) 473–487.
[30] Dupré, "The Return of the Species" 474–475.
[31] Dupré, "The Return of the Species" 474–475.
[32] Dupré, "The Return of the Species" 476–477.

make way for the *Transfiguration*.[33] The *Ascension* was one of Caimi's original topomimetic chapels and had replicated the domed shrine that marked the site of Christ's Ascension on the Mount of Olives; its location in relation to existing chapels replicated the sacred topography in Jerusalem.[34] After its removal, the Alpine topography would no longer be remade as a spatial replica of Jerusalem. Rather, the mountainous terrain would bring the pilgrim to a dramatic representation of a mountain. As the embodied experience of the local terrain is replaced with the visual apprehension of an image of sacred geography, the ascetic exercise prompted by the mountain summit is replaced as well.

The attempt to conjoin the penitential labour of the body to the interiority of the imagination would be a difficult proposition, as the scale of the mountain and the inclusion of narrative scenes in the immediate foreground suggest. It is significant that Galeazzo Alessi's proposal for the *Transfiguration* did not include an enormous mountainside or any additional narrative episodes at its base [Fig. 9]. In the text that accompanied his drawing Alessi writes:

> Here I have made the drawing of the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ to increase the knowledge of those who have to follow the[se] plans. In the middle I would like to artificially elevate a little of the mount in imitation of that real mount Tabor where this mystery happened, to be surrounded on each side by the

[33] Debiaggi C., "La cappella della Trasfigurazione", *Il Sacro Monte di Varallo* 61, 6 (1985) 3–6; Pomi D., *La parola si fa arte: luoghi e significati del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (Milan: 2008) 97–8.
[34] Debiaggi C., "Le cappelle dell'Ascensione, dell'Apparizione di Gesù ai discepoli, e l'originaria topografia del Sacro Monte di Varallo", *Bollettino storico per la provincia di Novara* 2 (1978) 56–81; Panzanelli, "Pilgrimage in Hyperreality" 12, 120.

viewing screen, and entered through four doors from each side the devout can

contemplate this mystery.[35]

The viewing conditions described by Alessi for the *Transfiguration* suggest a

contemporary concern with the status of vision and the experiential aspects of pilgrimage

to the Sacro Monte.[36] Alessi proposed that the chapel should be viewed in the round from

below on all four sides [Fig. 10]. This spatial configuration inverts the architect's

proposed conditions of viewing *Purgatory*, *Limbo* and *Hell* that were to be constructed

outside the walls of the Sacro Monte in the 'Valley of Jehosephat'.[37] As the illustration of

the chapel of *Purgatory* shows, Alessi's chapels of the Last Things would position the

viewer above the chapel interiors [Fig. 11]. Standing on a raised platform around the

circular *vetriata* pilgrims could converse and engage with fellow visitors as they indulged

their curiosity from a position of mastery above these theatrical scenes of suffering souls.

Recalling that Bascapè would later insist that the Sacro Monte was a purely 'sacred

place', it is significant that Alessi used the term 'curiosi' to describe the visitors to these

chapels outside the walls of the Sacro Monte and the term 'devoti' to describe the visitors

within its walls.[38] This stands in striking contrast to the experience of viewing the

Transfiguration from a kneeling position in front of pre-ordained openings in the viewing

screen. As Alessi's drawing of the '*vetriata*' for the *Temptation* demonstrates, this was a

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[35] Alessi Galeazzo, *Libro dei misteri: Progetto di pianificazione urbanistica, architettonica e figurativa del Sacro Monte di Varallo in Valsesia (1565-1569)* ed. S. Stefani Perrone (Varallo, n.p. 1565–9; Bologna: 1974), 90v: 'Quivi all'incontro ho fatto il disegno de la Trasfiguratione di N[ost]ro S[ignore] Jesu Christo per maggiore intilligentia di questi che haveranno a eseguir l'opera impero che io vorrei che in mezzo a esso si facesse artifitiosamente elevare un poco di Monticello ad imitation di quel vero monti Tabor dove successe questo misterio, il quale fusse cinto d'ogni intorno de la sua vetriata et in esso s'entrasse per gratto porte, accio da ogni lato potressero le denoti persone contemplar detto misterio'.

[36] On the dangers of curious vision in pilgrimage to the Sacro Monte see: Göttler, *Last Things* 101–110.

[37] Göttler, *Last Things* 89.

[38] Göttler, *Last Things* 89–90.

more static and individual viewing experience that was in line with Carlo Borromeo's contemporary reform of confessional screens.[39]

When the *Transfiguration* was built the chapel retained Alessi's circular design, but viewing took place from only one side. Kneeling behind the viewing screen at the *Transfiguration*, the pilgrim was spatially constituted below Christ's miraculous transformation to encourage awe rather than curiosity, encouraging a more solitary viewing experience. However, the visibility of the central narrative and the height of Mount Tabor continued to be a topic of concern. In 1671 Giovanni Battista Fassola describes the chapel at length, including problems encountered by *fabbricieri* with regard to the size of the mountain:

> Inside is the mountain that represents Sinai, but [designed] to be rather high, the Congregation of *fabbricieri* have ordered it lowered, so that it will be more pleasurable to the eye.[40]

The possibility of lowering the mountain is associated here with less difficult viewing, in contrast to the usual associations of mountains with bodily struggle and the labour of ascent. The more 'pleasurable' experience could undermine such ascetic connotations, which are central to more traditional penitential conceptions of pilgrimage. When completed, of course, the mountain was not lowered, and the desire for a more immediate encounter with the image of Christ's divinity is not only frustrated by the mountainside that distances Christ from the pilgrim, but also by the foregrounded figures who

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[39] Göttler, *Last Things* 95–96. Göttler notes that Borromeo's concern with the architectural control of the body also retained the public display of bodily discipline. In this regard the comparison to the confessional screens offers an interesting tension with the more solitary experience being solicited at Varallo.

[40] Fassola Giovanni Battista, *La Nuova Gerusalemme o sia il Santo Sepolcro di Varallo* (Milan, Federico Agnelli: 1671) 93: 'Di dentro ha il Monte, che raffigura il Sinai, mà per essere alquanto alto, la Congregazione da Fabriceri ha ordinate d'abbassarlo, acciò sia più godibile dall'occhio'. Fassola's elision of Sinai and Tabor is not accidental, although further discussion is outside the scope of the current essay. See: Della Dora, V., *Mountain: Nature and Culture* (London: 2016), 42–44.

emphasise the struggles and failures of earthly doubt. Thus, the effect of viewing the miracle of Christ's Transfiguration came to depend on the active engagement of the pilgrim who was forced to visually and imaginatively traverse the expanse that lay between their location at the viewing screen and Christ's sculpted body.

Vision is central to the experience of the chapel, as evidenced by a description of the unfinished *Transfiguration* in the 1613 guidebook introduced earlier. Dedicated to Carlo Bascapè, the *Brevi Consideratione sopra I Misteri del Sacro Monte di Varallo* foregrounds the importance of vision and images at Varallo as well as a concern with solitude and communal experience. The printer's preface explicitly states that the guide will 'put all these acts in front of the eyes' of the reader.[41] The entry to the *Transfiguration* follows the strict format deployed throughout the guide: three separate sections direct the reflections of the reader and pilgrim to first 'Consider', then 'Contemplate', and finally to 'Learn'. In this way, visual description of the chapel decoration is replaced with textual clarification that circumscribes its meaning. In the first section the author asks the reader to consider the narrative itself, describing Christ's withdrawal to the mountain summit with his disciples and highlighting the transformation of incarnate flesh into immaterial, Divine light. Here, a sense of acute visual access to the miracle replaces the imperfect visibility raised by the disciples' slumber and the lack of discussion of the event after it took place. These are not the focus of the inducement to 'Consider' the Transfiguration; instead, the event is understood to have taken place 'in the presence of everyone'.[42] Communal experience is tempered in the next section:

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[41] Ferrari, np: 'postiui avanti gli occhi tutti quegli atti […]'.
[42] Ferrari, *Brevi Considerationi* np.

Contemplate, how Christ wanted to give sight of his glory to them, [he] brought

them on high on top of a mountain, ascending there, who[ever] wants to see the

Glory needs to leave the valley of earthly thoughts, [and] ascend the mountains of

celestial meditations.[43]

The goal of contemplation requires the act of withdrawal and retreat from the world.

Ascending literally and imaginatively at the *Transfiguration* actualises a metaphorical

retreat in line with the ideal of solitude set out by Carlo Bascapè. The rejection of earthly

things is invoked again in the final lines of the third section when the didactic purpose of

the chapel is revealed according to both individual and communal benefit:

Learn to keep hidden those qualities [more often] if you don't have some of those

which could make you devout and admirable in the sight of men […] that can

serve for the greater Glory of God, or for your own private good, or for the public.

Not wanting to remain so attached to the lowly things of the world, but giving

yourself now to the pious and other meditations if you want to enjoy the view of

Christ for grace in this life and glory in the other.[44]

The retention of the vast scale of the mountain suggests that the visual withdrawal of

Christ from the gaze of the pilgrim was crucial to the experience of this miraculous

Transfiguration. Paradoxically, the difficulty of vision that suggests retreat is necessary in

order to achieve communion and recognition.

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[43] Ferrari, *Brevi Considerationi* np: 'Contempla, come volendo Giesu dare a vedere se stesso glorioso a questi, gli conduce all'alto, sopra d'un monte, accendandoci, che chi vuole veder la Gloria, bisogna che lasciando le valli di terreni pensieri, ascenda I monti delle celesti meditationi.'.

[44] Ferrari, *Brevi Considerationi* np: 'Impara a tenere nascoste si il piu delle volte quelle doti, se n'hai alcuna le quali ti potrebbono rendere lo deuote, e mirabile nel cospetto de gli huomini […] cio puo servire per maggior Gloria di Dio, o per tuo bene priuato, o per il public. Non volere essere ancora tanto attacato alle cose basse del mo[n]do, ma datti tal hora alle pie, e altre meditationi se vuoi godere della vista di Giesu v per gratia in questa vita, e per gloria nell'altra.'

The rejection of the earthly world has profound implications at a pilgrimage site that leads the pilgrim to God by way of their contemplation of material images. Indeed, this essay has sought to understand the complex attitudes towards the ideal of retreat in the *Transfiguration* in light of post-Tridentine ambivalence toward the danger and potential of visual images and pilgrimage. As the image was made to do new kinds of work within existing practices of pilgrimage at Varallo, the tradition was transformed in order to demand something new from the visitor. The *Transfiguration* offers an intriguing site where post-Tridentine innovation and experiment are set into relief, demonstrating the transformation of more communal notions of pilgrimage as much as earlier exegetical ideals of ascetic retreat. The compositional withdrawal of the sculpture of Christ's luminous body far from the sight of the pilgrim underscores a new purpose for the image at Varallo: to withhold the 'external object' of knowledge from corporal vision in order to highlight the interior, imaginative labour of the pilgrim who is left without a guide and kneeling before the viewing screen, alone at the summit.

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