
Original Article

Manual thinking: John Mombaer's meditations, the neuroscience of the imagination and the future of the humanities

Sara Ritchey

Department of History, University of Louisiana, Lafayette, Louisiana

Abstract This essay uses recent findings in the neurosciences, particularly the notion of human brain plasticity, as a model through which to understand the goals of later medieval meditative practices. Instructors of meditation, it shows, sought to provide scripts through which a pupil might come to incorporate the subjectivity of another – another person, such as Christ or the saints, or another object, such as a text. These acts of meditative incorporation, of association, were designed ultimately to lead to new ethical, emotional and physical dispositions. The essay examines in particular the instructional works of John Mombaer, Thomas of Cantimpré, Berengario of Donadio and Ludolph of Saxony in order to recommend a rethinking of the pedagogy and research methods practiced in contemporary humanistic disciplines.

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In 1494 John Mombaer published the *Rosetum exercitiorum spiritualium et sacrarum meditationum* ('Rosary of Spiritual Exercises and Sacred Meditations'), a training manual consisting of mental and physical exercises that he devised to assist the canons of Agnietenberg in deepening their devotions. Among the exercises were fairly basic diagrams and word clusters such as the

scala meditationis, a ladder of ascending meditations, the *cantichordium*, a musical corollary to vowels, and the *chiropsalterium*, a hand-diagram for reciting the Psalter. These schemata were not designed with a solely mnemonic purpose, as aids to the memory for the recollection of words to psalms or sermons. Rather, Mombaer taught that through the practice of these exercises his text should be wholly incorporated into the practitioner. According to Mombaer, the meditant should experience a fundamental alteration, a new constitution of self, as a result of the proper practice of these meditations.

Mombaer designed his *Rosetum* as a script – that is, a textual means of achieving intimacy with, and thus knowledge of, the internal constitution of another (McNamer, 2009, 1–24). *Meditationes* provided intimate scripts through which a pupil might come to enact the life and perspective of another person; they were guidebooks, mental training manuals, designed to enable students to incorporate new ethical and emotional dispositions. In this way, the practice of meditation as it was taught in later medieval schools and religious houses (Bestul, 1996; Carruthers, 1998; McNamer, 2009) was a means of interpreting and comprehending a text through experiencing it. Such an affective means of interpretation and understanding has since lost its place of importance in contemporary humanistic programs of study which have instead, following the Humboldt University research model, which unified teaching with dispassionate social scientific research, promoted a distanced, measured hermeneutics that advances the creation and transmission of knowledge through ‘research’ as its ultimate goal (Anderson, 2004). The research university, particularly in America, has adapted the Humboldt model to the demands of late capitalism, promoting a consumerist approach to reading through pedagogy, the structure of tenure and authorship. Paul Griffiths has argued that scholars, as a result of the American university’s emphasis on production of numerous texts (scholarly capital), as opposed to production of an ethically aware student body, have tended swiftly to extract necessary information, consuming texts in the process of constructing their own (Griffiths, 1999, 58–59).

Recent neuroscientific models of the plastic brain, however, demonstrate the very real changes that occur through attentive reading of texts. When humans deeply engage a text in a pensive search for meaning and relation, as opposed to reading for the sake of information-acquisition, their brains, bodies and overall constitutions are profoundly altered (Schutte, 2006; Dehaene, 2009, 312–315). With these results of recent brain science studies in mind – culminating in the suggestion that our constitution depends upon the kinds of reading experiences, the kinds of texts we select – I wish to consider how some medieval models of meditation might offer a productive method of making meaning in the humanities today. My primary goal, then, is not to promote consilience, or integration of scientific methods with textual analysis (Wilson, 1998; Gottschall, 2008). I do not read these texts through the lens of twenty-first



century science. Rather, I heed the evidence of twenty-first century neuroscience in order to urge the institutional valuation of the kinds of meditative experiences that medieval practitioners advised.

I begin, then, with a meditation by John Mombaer, whose *Rosetum* urges a certain form of cognition through meditative reading (Debondnie, 1927, 87–123).¹ John Mombaer (Johannes Mauburnus) was a canon of the Windesheim house of Agnietenberg, near Zwolle, where he first drafted the meditations, taking shape from his *rapiarium*, or personal collection of inspirational readings, around 1485 (Scheepsma, 2004, 91–92). He first printed parts of the *Rosetum* in 1491 as a manual of brief meditational exercises (the *Exercitio*). The completed *Rosetum*, in turn, was printed in 1494, and was followed by three successive printed editions, in 1504, 1510 and 1620. Two years later, Mombaer took up French residence in order to initiate reforms in the houses of St. Victor, Notre Dame de Livry, and Saint Callixte de Cysoing, taking his meditations with him. It is also worth noting that two of the 13 Windesheim convents possessed the 1510 Paris edition, demonstrating its use by both the sisters and brothers of the Common Life (Scheepsma, 2004, 107–108).

Mombaer taught that, through meditation on a text, one absorbs understanding, and is thereby ethically and emotionally transformed, adapted in some way to the narrative presented in the text (Schupisser, 1993, 207–208). His goal for the canons for whom he wrote was to increase attentiveness, to quicken the liturgy by internalizing the intentions (literally, *ad sensum vero* [the sense] and *ad finem* [the end] of the words uttered) (Mombaer, 1620, 183).² His *Rosetum* is dedicated to *simul attentus devotus in horis* (devoted and complete attention to the Hours) as a means to internalize and fulfill the text of the office (Mombaer, 1620, 96). To this end he contrived a number of cognitive materials, devices for focusing the meditant's attention (Figure 1).

Within the *Rosetum*, Mombaer's *chiropsalterium*, or hand-psalter, was a means of internalizing through meditation the emotional and ethical intentions of the Divine Office. He directed users of the *chiropsalterium* consistently to apply pressure with the right thumb to various points on the left hand while chanting the Office. By massaging a certain region on the left palm, the meditant automatically unleashed a proliferation of mental associations. For example, the thumb, the origin of the meditation, captures the good will of the meditant (*captatio benevolentiae*) through a series of strokes (Woods, 2010, 53–56). Initiating the meditation at the base of the thumb, the meditant must work to excite a deep sense of gratitude (*gratiarum actio*); next, she works toward the knuckle, where her imagination opens up to *admiratio* (wonder); and finally, she pauses at the tip of the thumb, to focus her mind on adoration of all that is outside the self (Mombaer, 1620, 188).

Proceeding to the index finger, we find an imaginative 'play' with time, which seeks to cast the proper ethical disposition to the present in terms of the meditant's emotional reactions to the past and future. Here, the tip of the finger

1 One excerpt, found in another Windesheim convent, also includes a ritual for the investiture of female canons. A manuscript, believed to be of Dutch provenance, is currently held in Paris by a private collector.

2 There is no modern edition of Mombaer's *Rosetum*. For the purposes of this essay, I will refer to the 1620 edition, available in a scanned, digitally searchable format available via Google Books. All translations are my own.

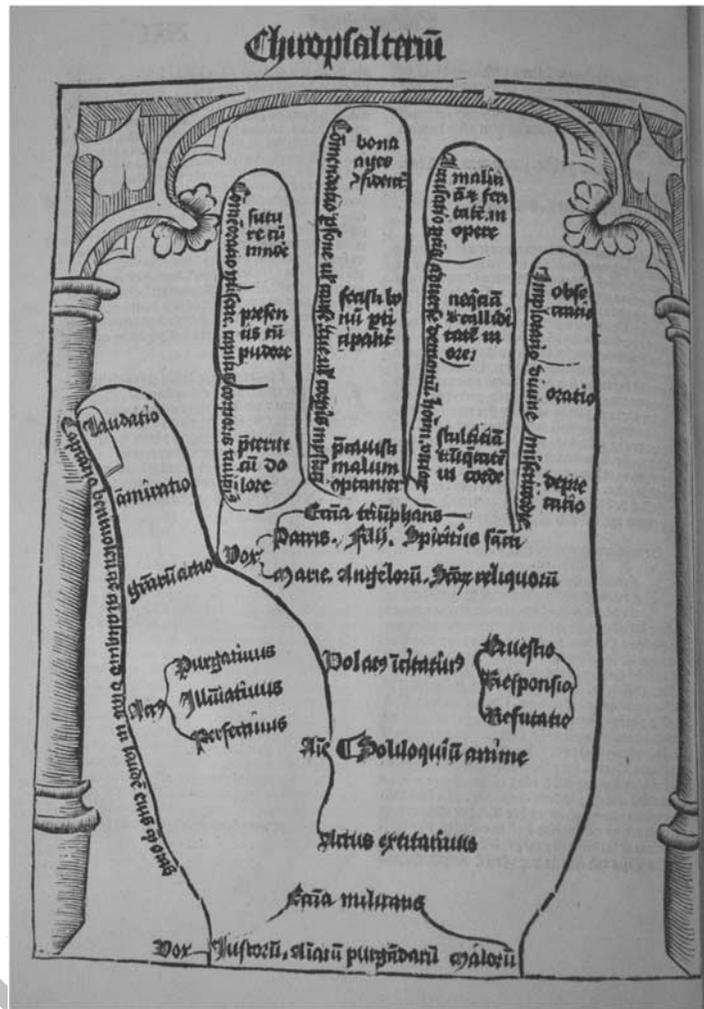


Figure 1: Photo courtesy of rare books and special collections division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

forces an engagement of woefulness upon contemplation of the future, with its promise of apocalyptic destruction (Mombaer, 1620, 189). The present, at the knuckle, should activate the meditant's shame, and at the base of the finger, sorrow, as the meditant confronts the atrocities of sacred history, of the passionate suffering of God's son and the failure of humanity to reverse sin (Mombaer, 1620, 189). Ultimately, this meditative journey on the index finger should convert the practitioner to repentance. The remaining three fingers, briefly, inculcate specific emotional dispositions and provide the appropriate narratives for their arousal. Justice and good actions are urged by the middle



finger. Evils are exorcised from the heart, the mouth and deeds by the depression of stations marked on the ring finger, while the little finger petitions forgiveness for what character is left unaffected, unmoved by the meditation.

As the meditant traveled from the periphery of the hand in the fingers toward the heart of the hand in the palm, she unleashed ever more vigorous emotions such as jubilant exaltation and vehement longing. For Mombaer, the goal was permanently to link the physicality of the hand to cognitive dispositions so that, ultimately, the expert meditant would discard the intermediary of the *Chiropsalterium*, possessing an immediate continuity between the body and the imagination, an automatic manual thinking by which a mere brush of the palm could conjure the desired emotional state. In this way, meditation was for Mombaer a means of forming character, of internalizing and reshaping the self according to an instructive text: ‘Oportet autem omnes actus hos, ex inflammato prodire affectu & agi vivace corde’ (Mombaer, 1620, 194) [‘It is right, moreover, that all these acts produce affection from inflammation and enliven the heart’]. Attentive meditation produced an empathetic education, transcribing into the meditant through direct witness the emotional contours of other lives. For Mombaer, the skilled meditant does not approach a text as an outside observer or interpreter. Rather, the skilled meditant literally embodies a text as *really a part of it* so that the narrative is incorporated into the practitioner. The goal, for him, was to adapt the self through textual encounter. Mombaer sought through meditation to prolong and extend a consciousness of others – the emotions of other people, the direct experience of times past, and the ethics of necessary response to need, to pain, to calling. In doing so he sought to envelop the subjects of meditation thereby refashioning or adapting the self through textual encounter.

Yet John Mombaer’s meditation was only the terminus of a tradition of premodern meditation designed in this way to discipline the consciousness of the meditant. As a means of reimagining our disciplinary goals in the humanities, I propose to think through some of Mombaer’s predecessors using the filter of recent neurobiological research and theory. I wish to demonstrate how the brain’s newly acclaimed ‘plasticity’ in many ways returns us to a past that our present disciplinary expectations have labored desperately for us to relinquish.

The neuroplastic brain paradigm is rapidly supplementing the model of brain as machine, which has dominated neuroscience since the early twentieth century (Doidge, 2007). The machine model projects a vision of brain function as composed of specific parts with correlated duties – motor cortex located in one area of the brain and devoted strictly to movement, while somatosensory cortex is located in another region and devoted to registering touch, visual cortex in yet another area, auditory cortex and so on (Toga and Mazziota, 2000). Neuroscientists first began to add nuance to the ‘hardwired’ brain-as-machine model of neuroanatomy as early as 1923, when Karl Lashley began mapping the motor cortex of rhesus monkeys. Lashley noted that each time he mapped the

monkeys' brains, the cortical map differed, demonstrating a fundamentally different brain, one that changed as its owner developed new patterns of movement. He described this changing brain as 'plasticity of neural function.' By midcentury a psychologist named Donald Hebb, explaining Lashley's findings, showed that plasticity begins with the release of a neurotransmitter from a presynaptic neuron, implying that the brain physically changes according to its owner's experiences (Begley, 2008, 26–48). Jerzy Konorski, observing these studies, coined the term 'neuroplasticity' in 1948 to indicate the 'permanent functional transformations' of the brain, caused by environment, by experience (LeDoux, 2002, 137). But the scientific establishment all but ignored Lashley, Konorski and Hebb until the 1970s, when Michael Merzenich and Jon Kaas began further experiments in neuroplasticity. Cutting the medial nerve of adult owl monkeys, they sought to examine how the deprivation of sensory input affected monkeys' brains. They were shocked to discover that the somatosensory cortex – which according to the hardwired machine model should have been silenced after severing the medial nerve – began demonstrating neuronal activity as it received signals from other parts of the hand (Begley, 2008, 26–48). The brain's penchant for cortical reorganization was further tested by Mriganka Sur, who demonstrated that ferrets with blocked auditory nerves processed sight in their auditory cortex – the auditory cortex became the visual cortex; in 2005, a research team led by Alvaro Pascual-Leone showed that human brains exhibit the same compensatory capacity for dynamic change in response to sense deprivation (Pascual-Leone, 2005). This discovery of use-dependent cortical reorganization set the final groundwork for the revolution in what is now called neuroplasticity (Begley, 2008). It demonstrated in clinical populations experiencing major changes (resulting, for example, from trauma, a stroke or tumor) that certain regions of the brain are not, in fact, dedicated strictly to specific functions, but that the brain can adapt, reorganize, in order to compensate for deprivation. It is only very recently, perhaps most monumentally with the 2008 publication of Daniel Lord Smail's *On Deep History and the Brain*, that scholars in the humanities have begun to draw out the implications of neuroplasticity for cultural studies more generally (Smail, 2008). Smail, for example, posits that 'cultural practices can have profound neurophysiological consequences,' adapting our moods, cravings and motivations through chemical modifications. The door is open, then, to reimagine the artistic, literary, religious and political past as an ongoing process of modifying brain states.

It was precisely meditation's mode of constructing a knowledge position through an intimate experience within the self that the sixteenth-century curriculum of humanistic study would seek to excise in order to assert its modernity, replacing meditative reading with a mode of authorization outside the self, subject to rules of articulation and formal distancing from the object of investigation (Grafton and Jardine, 1986; Latour, 1993, 13). Certain 'premodern' methods of meditation, I would like to argue, were premised upon



an understanding of relationality – wherein the meditating subject and the textual object on which s/he focuses seek intimacy – that we are only now coming to appreciate (Latour, 1993, 136–145). These meditative practices sought explicitly to exploit human adaptive capabilities, our ‘plasticity,’ to use the neuroscientific parlance. Their goal, as Mombaer’s meditation exemplifies, was to create, through an intimate reading of a text, a new identity, to link through the exercise of the imagination, to another being, another time, a new emotional and ethical disposition. Medieval meditative practices were designed to enlarge, to intensify, the cognitive effects of attentive reading that empirical studies are only now beginning to corroborate (Oatley, 1994; Oatley *et al*, 2009). Here I will turn to three separate episodes, three clusters of texts that offer for our consideration how premodern modes of meditation sought to create adaptation by engaging with the emotional lives of others through the medium of texts.

The first cluster of premodern meditational methods I would like to explore involves the ethical and emotional construction of the self through empathetic response. In 2002 neurologist Stephanie Preston and psychologist Frans De Waal proposed that empathy is an internal, cognitive process that is triggered through ‘mirror neurons’ (Preston and De Waal, 2002). Their study showed that mirror neurons replicate within the subject’s brain the emotional coordinates of another emoting person. Mirror neurons are active when a person registers certain emotions such as disgust or joy. But mirror neurons are *also* activated when a perceiving subject observes an object, another person or animal, undergoing such an emotional state. The presence of mirror neurons then might enhance our reflections on the bodily transformations of Lutgard of Aywîères, a candidate for sainthood after her *vita* was composed shortly after her death in 1246. Lutgard was said to fall violently ill with feverish compassion when she ministered to the sick and impoverished of Liège. Her spontaneous ailments were the result of her empathetic response, according to her hagiographer, Thomas of Cantimpré. She adapted in her own body the physical conditions of those for whom she cared. In the same manner, Thomas instructs his readers that those who *observe* Lutgard aggravated with pain, transformed by the suffering of others, should likewise be moved to such empathetic response by her own body, her own life, her very story. He asks them to meditate upon her limp body as a means of affecting compassion within themselves (1:12). In this way, Thomas constructs the *saint* Lutgard as inspiring among her cult a willed adaptation.

To be sure, in making this correlate between Preston and de Waal’s study and a medieval hagiographical tale, I do not wish to use cognitive science to ‘explain’ what occurs in some of these difficult, rather extraordinary thirteenth-century texts. I consider their own explanations as rather more agreeable because they illustrate how they worked *for them* and thus exemplify the ends for which these texts were composed. Thomas himself, for example, insists of

- 3 *Acta sanctorum*, 16 Junii (1867). Extant copies of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century *Vita Lutgardis* reside in Brussels, B.R. MSS 7917, 8609–8620 and 1770–1777; Dijon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 661; Cambrai, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 844; Trier, Stadtbibliothek, MS 1170; and Vienna, Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Series nova, MSS 12706–12707.
- 4 See Romanone's preface, 9–12, in Bérenger (1939–1941). For the impression of the marks of Christ's passion on Clare's heart, see Bérenger (1939–1941, 35, 175).
- Lutgard's adaptive abilities that, 'Ex intellectuali enim consideratione mentis interius, similitudinem traxit corpus exterius' (2:23) ['From the interior consideration of her mind, her body's exterior drew its likeness'].³ For Thomas, Lutgard's body is a site for instruction in compassion. He explicitly coaches his audience to read her body and her book in a certain way – in a way suggesting that our autoconstitution depends on our willingness to adapt, and that we must therefore choose to whom, and to what, we wish to yield. Like the mirror neurons that in part compose our brain matter, we respond both consciously and subconsciously to what we see, read and experience (Malabou, 2008, 71).
- The second cluster of medieval meditational goals I would like to address involves the phenomenon of 'split-brain perception' and the narrative foundations for human cognition. The research of Michael Gazzaniga and Joseph LeDoux has sought to demonstrate a physical need to generate narrative, to produce a verbal explanation, in order to confront impasse, to heal, by making meaning through storytelling (Gazzaniga and LeDoux, 1978; Charon, 2010, 1897). Turning to the healing stories of yet another thirteenth-century female wonder-worker, Clare of Montefalco, we are confronted with a striking pattern. Each of the healing miracles recorded by her hagiographer, Berengario of Donadio, has a similar construction – they require the ailing petitioner to remove his or her doubt and to refashion a self-narrative as holistic, communal, capable of healing through faith. For example, the opening tale of her miracle collection relates the narrative healing of a local man of Montefalco, Romanone, who had been afflicted since birth with unbearable pain in his left leg rendering him unable to walk without a severe limp. Upon learning of Clare's death, Romanone felt nothing but contempt for the pilgrims who flocked to her monastery to view her body, particularly her heart, which was reportedly imprinted with the cross and other marks of Christ's passion (Bérenger of Saint-Affrique, 1939–1941, 175).⁴ Later that night, while Romanone overhears priests discussing the miraculous marks, he has a vision in which he drinks along with other citizens from a bubbling fountain in her monastery and then sees Clare literally skinning his leg and, thereby, absorbing his pain (Bérenger of Saint-Affrique, 1939–1941, 446–447). That is, he envisions his communal participation, the removal of his skepticism, and his own conversion. By rewriting his underlying narrative, Romanone enables the healing process to begin. He imagines wholeness, participation, belonging to and with others, and in doing so, his body is able to accommodate for transformation, for healing. Premodern modes of meditation were tied in this manner to healing changes in the self by providing new narratives (Kleinman, 1988, 252). Meditating upon the imprinted body of Clare enabled Romanone to bring about both an inner, embodied experience and also a physical transformation. Romanone emotionally changed in order to accommodate a new narrative, whereby he underwent a physical transformation, a healing. In this way, Berengario's discussion of the miracle presents ethics as a matter of



lived narrative. One should live according to appropriate stories, he suggests, where the *most* appropriate is the most holistic, the narrative constructed to accommodate change, to consider greater varieties of perspective.

The third and final meditative ‘approach’ I would like to consider returns us to the hand. In 2006, Harvard neuroscientist Alvaro Pascual-Leone examined the brain activity of two sets of novice pianists who were trained to play a simple five-finger ditty with one hand (Pascual-Leone *et al*, 1995). One group practiced a piece on the piano every day for a number of hours and afterward fMRI results showed a dramatic deepening of neuronal connections in the cortex devoted to manual differentiation. The second group of pianists merely *imagined* playing their piece for the same number of hours with devoted attention to cadence, fingering and touch. They, too, registered an equally dramatic enlargement of the cortical map. Pascual-Leone reached the conclusion that the imagination has the capacity to alter the brain, allowing it to adapt in order to accommodate new experiences, both physical and imagined.

Noting these results – the brain’s adaptive response to the attentive imagination – I would like to address the methods and promises of some of the most profound instructors of premodern meditation. I make this correlation not in order to explain premodern behavior or beliefs through twenty-first century medical or psychological theories, but rather to call attention to meditation’s role in producing ethical, emotional and physical reconstitutions of self (Harrington and Davidson, 2002). This task of the imagination, the ability to imagine the lives of others’ needs, pain and joy, I argue, seems to be underappreciated in the present construction of the humanistic disciplines.

An apt model for the imagination’s assistance of understanding comes from Ludolph of Saxony, the fourteenth-century Dominican-turned-Carthusian. In Ludolph’s exemplary meditation, the *vita Christi*, one finds a practice of the imagination that seeks to suspend time in order to relocate the meditant, in order to force an emotional confrontation to fulfill the desire for the past. Ludolph instructs:

Quamvis multa ex his tanquam in praeterito facta narrantur, tu tamen omnia tanquam in praesentia fierent, mediteris; quia ex hoc majorem sine dubio suavitatem gustabis. Lege ergo quae facta sunt tanquam fiant; pone ante oculos gesta praeterita tanquam praesentia, et sic magis sapida senties et jucunda. (Ludolphus de Saxonia, 1870, 1.7)

[However much these things are narrated as if they are in the past, nevertheless, you should meditate on all of them as if they were in the present; because without doubt you will experience greater pleasantness from this. Read, therefore, about what was done as if it were being done. Place before your eyes these past things as if they were present and thus to a greater extent you will realize delight and prudence.]

The object, for Ludolph, was to induce imaginative ‘pleasantness’ through what might be called *uchronia*, or no-time, identifying and directly experiencing in the timelessness of meditation events and persons from the distant past. Ludolph aimed to produce an empathetic education, transcribing into the meditant through direct witness the emotional contours of other lives, recommending for meditants a process of *recordatio*, dramatic visualization in the imagination, and *compassio*, an emotional response to the imagined past, to the events one imagined living. Meditation for Ludolph is thus a self-perpetuating loop of autoconstitution, an ever recurring process in which the practitioner enscripts Christic emotions by journeying through the past then redelivering the meditant to the present where, like Lutgard, her compassion attracts ever more people or, like Mombaer, the hand touching the present evokes shame and delivers the meditant back to the past to remember, to relive, the trauma of Christ’s suffering. The skilled meditant therefore does not approach historical narrative as an outside observer or interpreter looking backward. The skilled meditant literally embodies history, experiencing past events as *really a part of them* so that the narrative is incorporated into the practitioner. This kind of textual experience explains why, for example, the Spiritual Franciscan, Ubertino of Casali, recounts of his meditative practice that he does not merely read the words narrating past lives, but truly experiences those lives, inhabiting them: ‘Et nunc me afinum nunc boue nunc presepium nunc fenum super quod iacebat nunc sibi assiste famulu nunc sibi cogenitu uterinum’ [‘And now I became the ass and now the ox and now the manger, now the hay on which he lay, now his servant nearby, now his uterine brother’ (Ubertinus de Casali, 1961, Prologue, 1.3b)]. This transformation into another’s narrative, another’s past, another’s body, Ubertino urges, is ecstasy (*ex stasis*), a making outside the self. *Doing* history, for him, is ecstasy. The ecstasy generated by historical meditation in the manner prescribed by Ubertino and Ludolph, by Mombaer and Thomas and Berengario, is utterly transforming. It creates a new self.

To become one with a text. To change the self. To re-educate the emotions. These were the goals of premodern meditation, which sought to reconstruct the subject through intimate association, through linking to the perspective of another. They were widely shared and practiced, circulating in monastic, university and semi-religious settings. We know that Mombaer and, indeed, many of his monastic forebears in meditative instruction, enjoyed extensive praise during his lifetime and shortly thereafter (Donndorf, 1929). His *Rosetum* was acquired by Jean Standonck, then incorporated into the curricula at the Collèges de Montaigu, Cambrai, Malines, Louvain and Valenciennes (Van Engen, 2008, 317–318). Some of the leading humanist reformers of the sixteenth century, including Desiderius Erasmus, Jean Lefèvre, Garcia Jiménez de Cisneros and Martin Luther, found influence and inspiration in his meditative techniques (Debonnie, 1927, 286–296). Erasmus, for example, wrote letters to Mombaer praising his meditational techniques (Erasmus, 1974).



At Erfurt, in fact, Luther learned to meditate by using the *Rosetum* and Cisneros adapted it to his *Exercitatorio de la vida espiritual* (Hyma, 1965, 267; Post, 1968, 12).

But although many of these reformers' teachings found their way into the developing humanistic curriculum, the meditational training of Mombaer was not among them. Part of the reason for the negligence of these premodern modes of meditation lies in the creation of new civic goals for sixteenth-century humanistic education. As Brian Stock has noted, the humanist educational program of the sixteenth century, dedicated to producing skilled and docile citizens, encountered texts as objects to master (Stock, 2001, 22). Its textual hermeneutic espoused a formal set of rules, through which the text was encountered not as an opportunity for transformation but as an object to know, to master, to research with critical distance (Grafton and Jardine, 1986, 1–28). The *meditationes* – on the lives of saints, on the life of Christ – had no stable role for the formalized production and transmission of knowledge. The effect of turning away from meditational methods in humanistic education was a larger cultural devaluation of meditative encounters with texts (Griffiths, 1999, 186–188).

This excise of the imagination, of meditation, from the humanistic curriculum is due for reconsideration. And perhaps this most recent research into our neuroplasticity and neural regenerativity is only beginning to affirm, rather than to explain, what Mombaer instructed in his treatise: that the imagination renders real change in the world and therefore requires careful cultivation. The entirety of our humanistic educational program in the West has been aimed at the production of certainty through a personal distancing from our objects of encounter, from what we seek to know, and appears to have forgotten the degree to which ourselves and our interpretations are radically altered by the encounter itself. Now that our humanities programs have finally witnessed the long-impending arrival of the 'Crisis of the Humanities' (Fish, 2010) it may be time to rethink Mombaer's proposal, and to return to meditative practice as a means of valuing adaptation, of risking the self to transformation as the very launching point for true understanding.

About the Author

Sara Ritchey is Assistant Professor of European History at the University of Louisiana. Recent articles have focused on ecocritical readings of later medieval incarnational theology and spirituality, such as 'Rethinking the Twelfth-Century Discovery of Nature' in *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (2009) and 'Spiritual Arborescence: Trees in the Medieval Christian Imagination' in *Spiritus* (2007). She has just completed a book manuscript, *Refiguring Nature: From Metaphor to Materiality in Later Medieval Devotion*. Her current research project explores meditative pedagogies in the schools affiliated with the



Day (Modern Day Devout) and uses cognitive science studies of meditation and narrative healing in order to reevaluate the contemporary construction of the humanistic disciplines. As part of this larger project, she is at work on reconstructing the manuscript and print history of Mombaer's earliest version of the *Rosetum* (E-mail: ritchey@louisiana.edu).

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