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Seeing in Imagination: Visual Representation and Spiritual Contemplation in the Ascetical Treatises of Juan Eusebio Nieremberg

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Abstract

The once famous Spanish Jesuit Juan Eusebio Nieremberg engages the readers of his ascetical treatises *De la diferencia entre lo temporal y eterno* (1640) and *De la hermosura de Dios* (1641) in seeing in their imagination a seemingly contradictory set of images of the material world: one in contempt, the other in wonder. However, the images serve the same purpose of fostering a greater appreciation for the eternal. This paper examines how Nieremberg's visually descriptive narrative relates to the ways in which painters of the Spanish Golden Age—Valdés Leal, Sánchez Cotán and Murillo—display items on their canvases, but also explores its connection to the method of imaginative contemplation, specifically the “composition of place,” in the *Spiritual Exercises* (1548) of Ignatius Loyola. In doing so, this paper shows how visual representation, both textual and pictorial, related to Jesuit spiritual and pedagogical practices in seventeenth-century Spain.

The Jesuit author Juan Eusebio Nieremberg (1595–1658) published his most famous treatise *De la diferencia entre lo temporal y eterno* in 1640. In it, he employs a rhetoric of scorn and disdain to speak of the temporal world. His disturbing imagery creates a perspective in which one ought to envision, or contemplate, the world in contempt: “para formar más vivo concepto de la bajeza de las cosas” (36). Yet in another treatise, *De la hermosura de Dios y su amabilidad* (1641), Nieremberg portrays the world in terms of beauty and harmony. This imagery engages the reader in contemplation of the “things” of the temporal order, which are staged in a visual drama meant to reveal a higher perfection: “amplísimo espectáculo de toda esencia” (305). But if at first these sets of images seem incompatible, Nieremberg's two visual perspectives ought to be seen as complementary. They urge the reader toward the same goal: a truer knowledge and a more balanced appreciation of the temporal domain and the things it has to offer.

This paper seeks to examine the different ways of looking at and interpreting the world in the ascetical treatises of Nieremberg and how they, as literary works, relate on the one hand to the display of items in *vanitas* and *bodegón* painting in seventeenth-century Spain, and on the other hand, to the Jesuit method of spiritual contemplation. I will begin by comparing the rhetoric of contempt Nieremberg develops in *De la diferencia* with the macabre portrayal of worldly goods in the *Jeroglíficos de nuestras postrimerías* (1672) of Juan de Valdés Leal (1622–1690). Next, I will explain how the the portrayal of beauty and harmony in *De la hermosura* relates to the pictorial representation of foodstuffs in *Membrillo, repollo, melón y pepino* (1600) of Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627). I will then examine in more detail the parallels between Nieremberg's texts and Golden Age painting, more specifically his *Práctica del catecismo romano* (1640) and *La cocina de los ángeles* (1646) of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1682), by placing them in the devotional and spiritual context of Counter-Reformation Spain. In doing so, I aim to explore how the ima-

gery in Nieremberg's treatises also relates to the Jesuit method of imaginative contemplation in the *Spiritual Exercises* (1548) of Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556).

Juan Eusebio Nieremberg

Born of German parents in Madrid, Nieremberg –like the literary giants Francisco de Quevedo and Pedro Calderón de la Barca– received his education in the Colegio Imperial of the Jesuits.¹ He then went to Salamanca as a university student, but only briefly. Finding himself once again under the tutelage of Jesuits, the young Juan Eusebio made a retreat by following Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and entered the Society of Jesus in 1614, which eventually led to his becoming a fully professed member of the order. Nieremberg would spend the rest of his life both in the Society and in the same Colegio, where he taught classes in Sacred Scripture and natural philosophy, served as royal confessor, and where, writing some seventy-five books in Spanish and Latin, he also came to be known in his own right as a literary giant of spiritual and devotional literature. Nieremberg is most remembered for *De la diferencia entre lo temporal y eterno*, which was printed in numerous editions and translated throughout Europe and abroad.² Both this treatise and his widely disseminated catechism, *Práctica del catecismo romano*, were used for public readings and the delivery of homilies, so much so that people commonly referred to one or the other more simply as the “Eusebio.” Although he seems to have been more of an ascetical recluse, by these two books and his massive literary production Nieremberg came to be a household name of sorts in Spain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³

De la diferencia entre lo temporal y eterno

The main purpose of *De la diferencia* is to dissuade the reader from the allure and trappings of the material world by portraying its ephemeral and corruptible nature in contrast to the realm of eternal life in heaven as the true end, or goal, of the human journey. Accordingly, the passing phase of the temporal world is represented throughout the treatise as lowly and worthless. Nieremberg paints a picture of earthly life in dark and ominous tones, for he sees it as an obstacle for eternal salvation. This explicit scorn for the temporal domain forms a sustained rhetorical device in the treatise. The author's display of shocking imagery is intended to serve the purpose of a didactic program for spiritual discernment, one that visually engages readers in a process of conversion. Readers must consider, or discern, the value of temporal things in accord with the true end in human existence and reform their lives.

The opening line of the treatise clearly states this objective to conceptualize the physical and perishable world solely in the grander scheme of eternity: “Para el uso de las cosas ha de preceder su estima, y a su estimación, su noticia, la cual es tan corta en este mundo, que no sale fuera de él a considerar lo celestial y eterno, para que fuimos creados” (3). In order to achieve this goal Nieremberg addresses three points regarding created things: “noticia,” the knowledge of them; “su estima,” how they are valued; and thirdly, “el uso,” the possession and use of them. Knowledge of these things and the value placed in them, “su estimación,” will determine how

¹ For more on the personages of literary fame who studied in the Colegio Imperial, see Simón Díaz 1: 23–26, 46–47.

² Regarding the dissemination of the treatise, see Iparraguirre 427. For more on Nieremberg's vast literary production, see Sommervogel 5: 1725–66.

³ A complete autobiographical account on Nieremberg can be found in Didier 45–54. Regarding Nieremberg and his Jesuit life, see Hendrickson 17–20. For more on the two “Eusebios,” see Hendrickson 51–52, 131.

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they are to be identified and handled.⁴ Here, at the outset, Nieremberg indicates a deficiency regarding the appropriate knowledge, or “noticia,” of these “things”: “la cual es tan corta en este mundo.” The treatise therefore serves a didactic purpose meant to bring about the experience of *desengaño*. It seeks to address what the author considers to be a faulty understanding of “las cosas” in the temporal order. Instead of our being deceived by the *engaño* of the appearances, the author reiterates the urgent need to understand the lack of value worldly things have: “Dejemos la apariencia y superficie pintada y miremos lo sustancial y verdadero de las cosas, y hallaremos que todo bien temporal es muy pequeño, [...] que el poco conocimiento y memoria de la eternidad es la causa del engaño” (5). In reassessing the value that ought to be placed in temporal goods, the reader can then begin to assess the true destiny of humans: “lo celestial y eterno, para que fuimos creados.”

To illustrate this “noticia” Nieremberg uses the biblical image of manna to represent all things perishable. The spiritual significance of the manna as something good and worthy of praise would not be lost on Nieremberg as a teacher of Sacred Scripture, for it was meant to provide nourishment and sustenance for the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land.⁵ Yet he concentrates instead on its perishability and describes the heavenly bread according to a more limited register of meaning. He recalls how it became foul and began to spoil because it was only earthly food:

El maná que dio nuestro Señor a los hebreos mientras peregrinaban en el desierto hasta llegar a la tierra prometida, entre otras misteriosas significaciones que tenía, una era símbolo de los bienes de esta vida [...]. Por eso se pudría y corrompía luego, durando muy poco, como lo hacen todas las cosas de este mundo. (4)

Nieremberg stresses how the Israelites were confused and did not understand the significance of the manna. Some gathered too much for keeping, while some overate and became ill, and others went without. In a similar way, the hoarding and poor use of temporal goods leads to vice and sin. It is through this lens of moral corruption that Nieremberg envisions the temporal domain. With two verbs in the imperative (*pensar* and *hacer*) and through the descriptive power of his vocabulary, he engages the reader in an imaginative exercise of visual distortion whereby the smallest invisible particles of matter become embodied and take on monstrous form: “piensa que todos cuantos átomos en el aire, arenas en el mar, hierbas en el campo y estrellas en el cielo son unos monstruos y cuerpos feísimos, y de todos ellos haz un monstruo y una fealdad” (252). In comparison to things eternal, Nieremberg qualifies objects from the earthly domain as “corruptibles,” “feos,” “deformes,” and even “asquerosos,” and they are exemplified by the heavenly bread: “Todas estas condiciones hallaremos dibujadas en el maná; [...] su corrupción era tan breve, que no pasaba un día sin que se llenase de gusanos y se corrompiese de todo” (4). These characteristics are “dibujadas en el maná” in order to present a more shocking image of the temporal domain.

The result of Nieremberg’s disdain is a visual lesson in *desengaño*. Jeremy Robbins defines *desengaño* as an experience in “the profound, almost existential, realization of the absolute vanity of human values and possessions,” one that results in seeing the world with new eyes: “It always implies a moral stance of detachment and distance, not necessarily a desire to withdraw from the world, but rather a desire to view it in the correct perspective” (17). In *De la diferencia*,

⁴ See Hendrickson 136–37. “Noticia” is defined as “el conocimiento de alguna cosa,” see Covarrubias 831.

⁵ The biblical account of how God gave manna to the Israelites and how they were instructed to collect and consume it can be found in chapter 16 of Exodus.

anything that may seem beautiful, ordered, or harmonious instantly fades and withers when measured against the compass of eternity, as everything is subject to a worm-eaten destiny: “Por ventura, la hermosura momentánea, ¿no se marchita primero que florezca?” (116). Even readers must view themselves in this way: “Mira, pues, a quién regalas; a un cuerpo que puede ser que dentro de cuatro días sea comido de gusanos asquerosos” (59). Nieremberg insists that any investment in worldly possessions, goals, and pursuits are, therefore, futile, “Importa mucho que nos persuadamos de esto para desengaño de las cosas;” it is a lesson that readers must apply to their own lives: “Mirémonos en este espejo, y reformemos nuestra vida” (88, 266). On a deeper level, the rejection of vice and sin is meant to bring about the spiritual conversion of readers as they look toward their true celestial end in eternity.

Jeroglíficos de nuestras postrimerías

Nieremberg’s descriptive technique is not dissimilar to the visual arts of the century, and his emphasis on *desengaño* resembles the macabre *vanitas* paintings of Valdés Leal. The *Jeroglíficos de nuestras postrimerías* in the Hospital de la Santa Caridad in Seville are, according to Jonathan Brown, “gruesome” depictions meant to “evoke the terror of death and decay” (*Painting in Spain* 219). Like Nieremberg’s treatise, the two paintings (*In ictu oculi* and *Finis gloriae mundi*) portray the limited scope of earthly possessions, titles and honors. Moreover, the second painting, *The End of Worldly Glory*, depicts the rotting remains of three men who in life exercised ecclesiastical and civil authority (figure 1). The symbols of their offices now mean nothing, as bugs and worms feast on their decomposing bodies. Even the leather covering on the richly adorned and gilded coffin of the bishop is peeling away as if to expose a truer knowledge and a more accurate assessment of its value. Dark and ominous tones predominate in this painting as the hand of Christ brings forth the scales of judgment. On one side of the scales the words “ni más” indicate that nothing more than worldly possessions and pursuits are needed for perdition, while on the other side the words “ni menos” express how nothing less than prayer and devotion are required for salvation (218).⁶ The painting is more than an illustration meant to shock viewers into seeing the processes of bodily decomposition; the presence of the scales underlines the moral message of the picture and invites viewers to reflect and to make the right choices.

While these graphic pictures have been noted for their shocking depiction, according to Brown they can only be fully appreciated as the first images in a larger program of decorative iconography in the hospital church. From the darker *Postrimerías* in the shadowed entrance of the church, viewers pass into the brighter nave where they see several thematic paintings depicting the works of mercy painted by Murillo in gradually lighter tones. The eye then rests on the final scene above the main altar, a sculpture designed by Simón de Pineda (1638–1702) and completed by Pedro Roldán (1624–1699) of the *Entierro de Cristo* (1674), which evokes the triumph over death and eternal salvation. Those who commissioned the iconographical scheme were members of the Brotherhood of Charity, which was formed to practice one of these works of mercy, the burial of the dead—in this case, paupers. In viewing the *Entierro de Cristo*, members of the Brotherhood would find consolation for their service in the teaching of Christ: “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt. 25.40).

According to Brown, the visual display was designed as an iconographic program intended

6 For more on the *Jeroglíficos*, see Thompson 231–33; Brown, “Hieroglyphs of Death and Salvation” 270–71; and Guichot y Sierra 34–36.

to portray a lesson.⁷ The sequence moves from encouraging viewers to reorder their priorities given the inevitability of death, to the practice of Christian virtue in this particular form, to the burial of Christ himself as showing the extent of God's plan for humanity and the resurrection that is to come. Together, the paintings suggest the reassessment of earthly life in comparison to the hope of salvation in the hereafter. Similarly, Nieremberg's treatise purports a didactic message by which readers envision mundane objects through the lens of moral corruption, "la bajeza de las cosas." Although his tone is bleak, his perspective is not necessarily the rejection expressed in *contemptus mundi*, but a realignment of priorities in which he places all things against the backdrop of human salvation, "el fin para que fuimos creados."⁸

De la hermosura de Dios y su amabilidad

In the next treatise, *De la hermosura de Dios y su amabilidad*, published in the following year, the purpose is the same. Nieremberg portrays the created world of the temporal domain so as to point toward a more perfect eternal existence, but his technique is opposite to the one used in *De la diferencia*. He focuses instead on the beauty of things, and he represents perishable objects in light of their divine creator: "¿Quién no queda atónito, cómo siendo Dios tan grande, y estando tan admirablemente en todas las cosas?" (436). Both treatises seek to portray the magnificence of God through images of the temporal world, but while *De la diferencia* speaks through negation, an ascetic counterpart to apophatic spiritual theology, *De la hermosura* is rooted in a more positive or cataphatic spiritual theology, and reveals the divine through an affirmation of the created order.

Considering the use of things and discerning how to value them in *De la hermosura* is therefore centered on noticing and admiring the light of the divine in the created order. All things reveal a higher perfection, and one must learn how to see, or discern, this truth which, though it is omnipresent, must be deciphered: "Este resplandor de Dios en las criaturas no sólo descubre su grandeza, sino su bondad y amor; el cual no es sólo luz, sino llama; ni sólo llama, sino incendio, [...] que estando en medio de la luz no veamos, y rodeados de llamas no nos abrasemos" (366). Nieremberg's perspective is now described in terms of beauty and proportion, and if in *De la diferencia* he speaks of that passing, or fleeting, instance of beauty in the physical world that is only a mere flash in time compared to eternity, "la hermosura momentánea," in *De la hermosura* he seizes that moment and subjects it to an exegesis by which he is able to admire the ingenious plan of creation. In turn, readers are invited to see themselves in the same picture, bathed in divine light and aflame with God's love: "en medio de la luz" and "rodeados de llamas."

Viewing the world through the lens of beauty and proportion, Nieremberg situates himself in an established ascetical tradition in Spanish devotional literature, in particular that of his predecessor from the previous century, Fray Luis de Granada (1504–1588). In *Introducción del símbolo de la fe* (1583, 1585), Granada describes the physical world according to the biblical notion of creation and explains how it ought to be read like a book. The different parts of the world not only reveal the Creator, they articulate the qualities of grandeur, beauty, and perfection as a reflection of the Creator: "para venir por ellas al conocimiento de él y de la grandeza y hermosura de sus perfecciones" (110). In *De la hermosura* Nieremberg reads the world in the same way. He concentrates on created things and how they represent a spark of the divine for the reader, or viewer:

7 Brown, *Images and Ideas* 128–46.

8 For more on the iconographical display, see also Hendrickson 145–50.

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¡Qué proporción en los elementos! ¡Qué disposición tan admirable de la naturaleza! ¡Qué hermosura en todo el universo! [...] Mucho nos admiramos, [...] de la composición de los cielos, del orden de los elementos, de la multitud de los animales, de la variedad de los colores, [...] de la armonía de los cuerpos, de la forma y gracia de los rostros de los hombres. (365)

The properties of proportion and harmony are the hermeneutical keys for the discernment of beauty. This visual exercise is repeated throughout the treatise. Accordingly, Nieremberg sets the larger scene by describing the composition of creation, the skies and the heavens, the earth and the natural world, but then passes to focus on the much smaller details of individual items. The effect, therefore, seems to suggest that the world is a sacred space, one that is host to a continual display of a carefully choreographed liturgy:

¿Quién no se pasma de ver este mundo como un hermoso templo [...], los cielos colgados de lámparas, y con sus luces brillantes están haciendo señas a los hombres para que vayamos allá? La tierra sacrifica sus frutos [...], levantándolos en alto en las aras y altares naturales de sus mismos troncos, procurando cuanto puede acercarlos al cielo, cuyo camino nos está como con el dedo mostrando. (377–78)

As we have seen in its predecessor, *De la hermosura* presents a spiritual interpretation of the world, one that speaks of a higher order, the perfection of the divine. Likewise, Nieremberg's imagery is not void of the more tangible and mundane features of the physical world, and his descriptions capture the realism of the more common things of life. Here the discerning eye is meant to extract beauty beyond the surface appearances by looking into the interior of that which is ordinary, and imagining the extraordinary. For example, Nieremberg now performs this type of exercise on the pomegranate:

Así como una granada, que está cubierta con su corteza, que encierra todo lo interior, tiene sus divisiones de casillas y varios apartados divididos con su pielecilla, en que encajan muchos granos, a este modo contiene a toda la naturaleza el espíritu de Dios. Y de la manera que un grano de la granada está cercado de su corteza no pudiera ver, aunque tuviese ojos, lo que está fuera, ni a quien la tiene en la mano, así también ninguno de este mundo puede ver al que le tiene en su mano, que es Dios. (378)

The same sort of technique is used for looking into the true reality of things beyond their surface appearances as in *De la diferencia*, only now in order to increase the viewer's sense of wonder at the beauty of divine creation even in the humblest of objects.⁹ Nieremberg asks the reader to view the pomegranate from the inside out in order to discern a deeper meaning, for it is a method by which the reader may be able to see, or imagine, the unseen. In *Introducción del símbolo de la fe*, Luis de Granada employs a similar technique for interpreting the world through the eyes of faith: "De manera que nuestro pensamiento ha de romper los muros de los cielos, y pasar adelante y no contentarse con saber solamente lo que se ve, sino también lo que no se ve" (131). Nieremberg seeks to prove the divine order through the realism of the natural world, yet beyond the detail of the rind and the seeds of the pomegranate. He penetrates the object and

9 Concerning the literary development of wonder (*admiratio*) in early modern Spain, see Riley 3: 173–83; for more on Nieremberg's use of *admiratio* for reading the "book of nature," see also Hendrickson 110–17.

puts it on display so that readers might begin to contemplate a more perfect world.

Both treatises espouse a neo-Platonic understanding of the temporal world. Nieremberg cites ancient sources, such as Plato and Plotinus, as well as St. Augustine and other Patristic authors who adopted the philosophical principles of their predecessors and translated them into Christian language and thought. He speaks of creation as a painting or a reflection, a shadow of the more perfect existence that is the heavenly world. In *De la diferencia*, his focus is on how to avoid the trappings of the material world, “así son las cosas del mundo, que a los que tienen poca luz y conocimiento del Cielo los engañan, pareciéndoles muy hermosas y grandes” (156).¹⁰ But in *De la hermosura* beauty and perfection must first be observed or even experienced in the temporal world. In order to do this, Nieremberg casts a special light onto what he perceives to be a form of theatrical representation or display in which the items of the temporal world become props or even protagonists in a staged performance: “Y no hay duda sino que sería éste un teatro admirable si viésemos, transformarse en luces todas las cosas, las aves, los animales, los árboles, las hierbas, las piedras, los elementos” (363). By this conception of the world, the divine creator is both the Author and the Actor who places and represents harmony and beauty in nature: “En Dios se encierra toda maravilla; Él es teatro de toda admiración, amplísimo espectáculo de toda esencia, montón de perfecciones y bienes” (305).

Membrillo, repollo, melón y pepino

By casting items in a special light and staging them in a type of theatrical production or spectacle to be observed, Nieremberg’s narrative resembles the display of items in seventeenth-century still life painting, a genre that was to achieve its highest acclaim in Spain during Nieremberg’s time. At the beginning of the century Sánchez Cotán established himself as the master of the *bodegón* in Toledo, and other artists soon copied his style. *Membrillo, repollo, melón y pepino*, considered to be Sánchez Cotán’s masterpiece, portrays these four common foodstuffs in a seemingly realistic manner (figure 2). According to Peter Cherry, they appear to have been placed in a window or in a storage space called a *cantarero*. Some of the items hang from string, which reflects the common practice of storing some types of food in the seventeenth century (89). Sánchez Cotán captures this and other details, including the bruises on the quince and the browning of the edges of the cabbage leaves. The melon has been sliced, but not neatly, and the surface of the cucumber is suitably rough. Cherry considers such accuracy noteworthy, and describes these realistic markings as “important rhetorical details which further convince the viewer that this is an honest portrayal of the real world” (84). Yet what is curious is the manner in which the items are on display. The foodstuffs are bathed in light from an unseen point of origin in strong contrast to the exaggerated black paint which constitutes the background against which they are displayed (90). They are also arranged in the form of a curve, or parabola, and they appear to complement each other in harmonious proportion. These mundane objects, placed in a “fictive space” that in reality is neither a window nor an ordinary *cantarero*, entice the viewer to examine them by the beauty of their presentation (93). Cherry adds: “The everyday and sometimes humble foodstuffs are transfigured by the artist’s representational skill, the alchemy of transforming something ephemeral, banal and of little value into something of lasting beauty and great value” (95).

Using a pictorial technique not unlike Nieremberg’s narrative, the artist captures the realism

10 More on the presence of neo-Platonic thought in Nieremberg’s works can be found in Didier 184–90.

of the objects, and arranges them, according to Cherry and William Jordan, in a “great visual drama” (28). Cherry also explains how examples like this one attract the eye through use of a staged representation, an exercise of “illusionistic naturalism of the earthly register,” similar to the aim of Nieremberg in *De la hermosura* (88). He presents mundane objects in a compelling spectacle, which, according to Robbins, was a technique shared by writers and painters in the seventeenth century:

Beauty arises from the proportional harmony found or created between the constituent elements of an object [...]. Although Nieremberg is discussing physical beauty, the precept of proportion embraced all the arts. In effect, proportion was the key point in all artistic and literary theorizing. (102)

The penetrating gaze of such objects, however, directs readers-viewers beyond the objects themselves. They are enticed to behold them in further consideration, much in the same way the peeling leather on the coffin catches the eye in Valdés Leal's *Jeroglífico* and invites the onlooker to reflect on its deeper meaning.

In *Arte de la pintura* (1649), Francisco Pacheco speaks of the importance that ought to be given to the creation of perspective and proportion, whether it is real or fictitious: “El intento y último fin del pintor no es otro que representar y fingir [...] todas las formas y figuras visibles y hacerles parecer con la fuerza del arte, en aquel modo y grandeza que según su postura, sitio, movimiento, y distancia, proporcionadamente aparecen a la vista” (75). Regarding still lifes, he then goes on to suggest how the arrangement of objects reveals the clever ability, or *ingenio*, of the artist: “muestran ingenio en la disposición y en la viveza” (132). The same can be said of Nieremberg's textual representation of created things. Even something so small as the ant represents the *ingenio* of another “Author,” the divine creator: “La fábrica de sola una hormiga es tan admirable, que sólo ella bastaba para hacer a su Autor digno de eterna honra y fama [...] Aunque no fuera tan perfecto y hermoso como es, por sólo ser Autor de obras tan perfectas e ingeniosas, debía ser conocido y reverenciado” (*De la hermosura* 303).

On another level, though, such representational skill is also meant to engage the *ingenio* of the reader. We can recall how in his portrayal of created things, he asks “¿quién no se pasma de ver este mundo como un templo hermoso?” The reaction of *pasmo* signifies the “suspensión o pérdida de los sentidos y del movimiento de los espíritus” (*Autoridades* 3: 144). If at first Nieremberg lays out an iconographical display of all that is seen in the world, he goes on to suggest how the experience of the reader ought to shift from that of an intellectual kind of wonder to one that is both affective and spiritual: “Eres [Dios] tan grande y admirable, que no sólo tu inmensidad, sino tu simplicidad, causa pasmo a los más despiertos ingenios” (463). Here we recall the author's invitation for readers to see themselves immersed in the light and surrounded by the flames of divine love.

Although Nieremberg envisions the world according to two different and seemingly antithetical hermeneutical keys of *bajeza* and *hermosura* in his treatises, his narrative style resembles similar techniques used in the visual arts during the seventeenth century. The rhetoric of disgust in *De la diferencia* negates the value of things in the temporal world in order to encourage the reader to place a higher value on the realm of the eternal, while the perspective of harmony and beauty in *De la hermosura* reveals a more positive experience of created things in order to reveal their divine origins. Both approaches, however, serve the same end. By contrasting the visual exercises of distortion and proportion, the reader—or viewer—of these distinct images must discern their true meaning and value. Like the manna given to the Israelites, temporal goods

ought to be valued and used, but as precious gifts from God.

Composición de lugar

The relationship between the imagery Nieremberg develops in his treatises and the visual arts of Spain's Baroque century is not a surprising one. As we have seen, artists and writers employed some of the same techniques, and they often drew from similar sources for their subject matter.¹¹ It is known that Valdés Leal included Nieremberg's *De la diferencia* in two of his paintings, *Alegoría de la vanidad* (1660) and *Alegoría de la Eucaristía* (c.1671).¹² The first portrays the treatise among several other books and with a skull resting on top of it, which is a fitting representation of the book's message. The second portrays the treatise near a copy of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Loyola and under the figure of Francis Borgia (1510–1572), who holds a skull in his left hand. Once the duke of Gandía and viceroy of Cataluña, Borgia became a prominent Jesuit and was known for his spiritual conversion and embrace of ascetical practices, which also pairs nicely with the contents of the book. It has also been suggested that Nieremberg's *Práctica del catecismo romano* may have been an influence in designing the decorative scheme of the church in the Hospital de la Santa Caridad in Seville, mentioned above.¹³

The subject matter of Nieremberg's catechism also coincides with part of another iconographical design again involving Murillo, this time in the Franciscan monastery of Seville. The catechism includes several stories and anecdotes to illustrate its doctrinal teachings, one of which, the account of a friar who was so taken in his prayer that he neglected his duties in the kitchen and was miraculously aided by angels in the cooking and serving of an entire meal, was reproduced by Murillo in *La cocina de los ángeles* (figure 3). According to Nieremberg, even though the friar's negligence was discovered by one of his religious superiors and his guests of noble rank, he nonetheless returned to his fervent prayerful state:

Salido el guardián, se encerró dentro de la cocina; puesto de rodillas en tierra, y encendido su corazón con centellas de devotas oraciones, y luego allí aparecieron ángeles en forma de muy hermosos mancebos, que en brevedad encendieron fuego, y aderezaron todo lo que se había de servir a la mesa. (351–52)

This episode was widely known in Spain, so much so that the Franciscans commissioned Murillo to paint the scene in one of the cloisters of their monastery, together with a portrait of the order's founder, a scene portraying an act of charity to the poor, and the death of St. Claire (*San Francisco, San Diego dando de comer a los pobres*, and *Muerte de Santa Clara*).¹⁴ While the provenance of the tale and how Murillo came to be aware of it is unclear, his portrayal of the miracle captures well Nieremberg's narration of it.

It is well documented how from the middle of the sixteenth century Counter-Reformation Spain and the rest of the Catholic world embraced the visual arts as a form of catechesis and to encourage piety and devotion in the faithful. The Council of Trent may have come to an end in 1563, but the teachings it promoted, such as the decree on the use of sacred images for cateche-

11 For more on the relationship between literature and painting in seventeenth-century Spain, see Arredondo Sirodey 151–68.

12 The book's identification in the painting is found in Kinkead 155, 199, 445; Valdivieso 117; Du Gué Trapier 30–33; and Nordström 135–37.

13 For more, see Guichot y Sierra 34–36; and Brown, "Hieroglyphs of Death and Salvation" 270–71.

14 Regarding the episode and commission of this and the other paintings, see Angulo Íñiguez 1: 239–63; 2: 15–17.

tical purposes (“De invocatione, veneratione, et reliquiis sanctorum, et de sacris imaginibus”), began to take root and grow in the seventeenth century: “Bishops should teach with care that the faithful are instructed and strengthened by commemorating and frequently recalling the articles of our faith through the expression in pictures or other likeness of the stories of the mysteries of our redemption” (Concilium 2: 775). The visual passages in *De la diferencia* and *De la hermosura* –as well as *Práctica del catequismo romano*– and the message Nieremberg intends to impart in them share this Tridentine goal of instructing and strengthening the faithful through the use of images and stories.¹⁵

But Nieremberg’s membership in the Society of Jesus also merits attention. The Jesuit order was founded in 1540, and its rapid expansion gave it and its spiritual and pedagogical practices a place of prominence throughout Europe. Jesuit spirituality rests on the method of prayer Loyola designed in the *Spiritual Exercises*. The contemplations found within it are divided into four thematic parts, or weeks. The first centers on original sin, while the second, third and fourth focus, respectively, on the life, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ. Practitioners of the *Exercises* are invited to contemplate the biblical narratives surrounding these events in the light of their true human destiny, which Loyola states in his introduction to the method, the “Principio y fundamento”: “solamente deseando y eligiendo lo que más nos conduce para el fin que somos criados” (§23). As we have seen, Nieremberg instructs readers to do the same in *De la diferencia*, “a considerar lo celestial y eterno, para que fuimos creados.”

In beginning the *Exercises*, practitioners are also encouraged to engage the visual imagination, to contemplate things both visible and invisible, and to apply the meaning of the scenes to their own lives. In the first week, Loyola instructs them to envision a real place “con la vista de la imaginación,” but then to imagine something unseen, such as the state of sinfulness: “en la invisible, como es aquí de los pecados, la composición será ver con la vista imaginativa y considerar mi ánima ser encarcelada en este cuerpo corruptible” (§47). Throughout the *Exercises* Loyola repeats this technique, now more commonly called the “composición de lugar.” For example, in his instructions to contemplate the birth of Christ in the second week, he states: “composición, viendo el lugar, será aquí con la vista imaginativa ver el camino desde Nazaret a Belén, considerando la longura, la anchura, [...] asimismo mirando el lugar o espelunca del nacimiento” (§112). The contemplation is then enhanced as practitioners are instructed to engage the imagination more vividly by inserting themselves into the particular scene:

Ver las personas, es a saber, ver a nuestra Señora y a José y a la ancila y al niño Jesús, después de ser nacido, haciéndome yo un pobrecito y esclavito indigno, mirándolos, contemplándolos y sirviéndolos en sus necesidades, como si presente me hallase, con todo acatamiento y reverencia posible; y después reflectir en mí mismo parar sacar algún provecho. (§114)

The “composición de lugar” was not original to Loyola, but his use of it in the *Exercises* has been credited for helping people to become engaged in prayer in a personalized and subjective manner. As Rossano Zas Friz puts it, “con la [composición de lugar] el ejercitante construye su ‘escenario’ en el cual ‘se’ expresa en las representaciones de su imaginación, que sin duda reflejan su experiencia e historia personales” (*Diccionario de Espiritualidad* 1: 361). More importantly, it is through the more personalized and affective experience of prayer that a practitioner comes to embrace its meaning:

¹⁵ For more on the Nieremberg’s catechism and its relationship to the Tridentine decree, see Hendrickson, 55–59.

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No es la simple estructuración de un marco de referencia sensible [...] de una contemplación, sino la acogida interior del ejercitante, que se expresa en la creación de un marco imaginativo subjetivo, del progresivo desarrollo pedagógico de la gracia que lo lleva a la meta de los Ejercicios, paso a paso. (I: 361)

According to Ralph Dekoninck, the use of the visual imagination in this way aids the person engaged in contemplation in grasping more readily an abstract or even deeper knowledge, or, in Nierembergian terms, the “noticia” he wants the reader to embrace: “La imagen viene pues a envolver los conocimientos, a encarnar un saber abstracto que se apropia así de manera más sencilla” (156). A similar method of using images in the seventeenth century, explains Dekoninck, was adopted as a pedagogical technique by Jesuit teachers of natural philosophy, including Nieremberg, who sought to impart their lessons with allegorical and spiritual meaning:

¿Cómo no reconocer en estas imágenes una especie de composición de lugar científico, que sirve de base para el desarrollo de puntos de argumentación, durante los puntos de la meditación, mientras que las aplicaciones científicas dejan acercarse a las enseñanzas prácticas que el meditante debe extraer de su ejercicio espiritual, con ayuda del director espiritual, equivalente al profesor? (154)

Here we might recall the way in which Nieremberg instructs the reader of *De la diferencia* to think about the most minute things, and to explode them in the imagination into great and ugly monstrosities: “piensa que todos cuantos átomos en el aire, arenas en el mar, hierbas en el campo y estrellas en el cielo son unos monstruos y cuerpos feísimos, y de todos ellos haz un monstruo y una fealdad.” His use of the verbs *pensar* and *hacer* evokes an imaginative experience designed to convince the reader of the passing value of all things, but it is also a rhetorical technique meant to move them with *pasmo* and to apply the experience to the self: “reformemos nuestra vida.” We have also seen how in *De la hermosura* readers are invited to view the beauty of creation, and in doing so to envision themselves bathed in divine light, “estando en medio de la luz,” and aflame in God’s love, “rodeados de llamas.” In other words, Nieremberg guides his readers toward a conclusion not unlike the way in which Loyola instructs people to complete his *Spiritual Exercises*, which culminates in the “Contemplación para alcanzar amor”: “Mirar cómo Dios habita en las criaturas, en los elementos dando ser, en las plantas vegetando, en los animales sensando, en los hombres dando entender” (§233).

Conclusion

As I hope to have shown, the ascetical treatises of Juan Eusebio Nieremberg share some of the same techniques that were applied to the representational display of objects in *vanitas* and *bodegón* paintings in the seventeenth century. On the one hand, they serve a didactic purpose of instructing readers to view the created world through different perspectives of distortion and proportion. As literary works, they exemplify how textual narrative relates to the visual arts and how some of the same ideals were applied across literary and artistic theorizing. On the other hand, the spiritual message they impart regarding the temporal world is meant to foster greater appreciation for the eternal. Just as in viewing the paintings of Valdés Leal, Sánchez Cotán, and Murillo onlookers are meant to experience *desengaño* or *pasmo*, and to grow in greater piety and devotion, the readers of Nieremberg’s stories are guided in the process of reforming their

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lives by rejecting vice and sin. In this way, his visually descriptive narrative relates to the Jesuit method of prayer in the *Spiritual Exercises*. While Nieremberg does not invite readers to insert themselves in prayerful contemplation of biblical passages in the same way as Loyola, he does, however, invite them to see with imagination and to apply that which is seen to the self, all according to the end for which they were created.



Figure 1. Juan de Valdés Leal.
Finis gloriae mundi (The End of Worldly Glory)
Oil on canvas, 1672
Hospital de la Santa Caridad, Seville
Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY



Figure 2. Juan Sánchez Cotán
Membrillo, repollo, melón y pepino (Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber)
Oil on canvas, ca. 1600
Gift of Anne R. and Amy Putnam
The San Diego Museum of Art, 1945.43

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Figure 3. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo
La cocina de los ángeles (The Angels Cooking)
Oil on canvas, 1646
Musée du Louvre, MI203
Photo: Gérard Blot

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