321 To Look Back (*Respicere*)

Man ought to look back according to six dispositions, namely, above, below, to the right, to the left, before, and behind.

Above, certainly to God through devotion, Lam. 3[:41]: “Let us lift up our hearts with our hands to the Lord.” Psal. 140:2]: “Let my prayer be directed as incense in your sight.”

Below, also to the needy by compassion. So, the sun illuminates and warms the things below, Prov. last chapter [31:20]: “She has opened her hand to the needy,” etc.

To the right, to prosperous things, so that they examine carefully lest they might fall.

To the left, to the adverse things, so that they might know that they may also be useful beforehand for difficulty of works, Prov. last chapter [31:19]: “She has put out her hand to strong things.”

Behind, sometimes to the neglect of the daily office, just as the sailor throws out weighty things from the ship on account of the peril of the brine, Acts 28[:3-5] Paul “shaking off” the viper from his hand, “suffered no harm.”

¶ Again, a man ought to look back to the life of the saints just like to a mirror, so that he may know how much he lacks, according Gregory, *Moralia,* 24, upon that of Job [33:27]:[[1]](#endnote-1) “He shall look upon men, and shall say, I have sinned.” He who wants to understand most fully how this is, let him look how he is not measured by the form of the good, how filthy he is. Let a species of the just be proposed, as if some form to be imitated. For one lesson is the life of the good and not only the life of one saint, but many of this kind are proposed for us as if mirrors.

And Augustine in the book *De penitentia*,[[2]](#endnote-2) if you do not know how it is to live rightly, so that also you may have what you seek, and show others what they should imitate. Look to Christ, and the apostles, of whom the last is he who said [1 Cor. 4:16]: “Be followers of me, as I also am of Christ.” Take note with your soul how many thousands of martyrs. Where you will see men, women, boys, and girls, nor be deceived by imprudence, nor perverted by iniquity, nor broken by fear of danger, nor corrupted by the love of the world. But because the examples of the saints are beautiful, Christ warns, Matt. 5[:16]: “So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works.” But from this respect and ministering by good example, he impedes much by his own reflection, looking on himself by which man sets little store, sometimes also he magnifies himself. A hunter of a tiger,[[3]](#endnote-3) with the tiger being absent, he steals his cub and equally quickly departs. He leaves mirrors by the places of the journey which the tiger following looks at the mirror and believes to have found his cub, wherefore finally he stays, and the hunter escapes. So, the hunter devil by sin takes away good works just like the cub from thence of the conscience. But while the sinner follows to recoup his good works through penance, he is deluded by looking on his own excellence, and believes his vices to be virtues. Therefore, the blessed expedite more the good of others by a mirror, than looking at themselves.

¶ Again, there are three kinds of men who cannot look upon their originator God: those uncured by sickness, those removed by iniquity, and those captive by penalty. The original iniquity will be uncured. The actual iniquity will be prolonged. The penalty of temptation will captivate. Against the first of these it is said in the Gospel of Luke [21:28]: “Lift up your heads.” The second, “Because he is at hand.” Against the third, “Your redemption.”

1. Gregory, *Moralia* 24.8.15 (PL 294-295): Qui enim [Col.0295A] plenissime intelligere appetit qualis est, tales nimirum debet conspicere qualis non est ut ex bonorum forma metiatur, quanto ipse deserto bono deformis est. Ex his quippe quibus plenissime bona adsunt, perpendit recte, quae sibi minus sunt, atque in illorum pulchritudine conspicit foeditatem suam, quam in semetipso et potest perpeti, et sentire non potest. Lucem namque debet conspicere, qui vult de tenebris judicare, ut in illa videat quid de tenebris aestimet, per quas videre praepeditur. Peccator namque si incognita vita justorum semetipsum conspicit, peccatorem se nullatenus comprehendit. Videre enim se non potest, quia, fulgorem lucis nesciens, cum semetipsum conspicit, quid aliud quam tenebras attendit? Justorum ergo debemus vitam conspicere, ut [Col.0295B] subtiliter deprehendamus nostram. Illorum videlicet species, quasi quaedam formanobis imitanda proponitur. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Augustine, *Sermo 351: De utilitate agendae poenitentiae* 4 (PL 39:1548): Si autem nosti, age quod nosti; ut et tu quod quaeris habeas, et aliis quod imitentur [H]ostendas. Christum animo attende, attende Apostolos, quorum novissimus est ille qui dicit, Imitatores mei estote, sicut et ego Christi (I Cor. IV, 16). Attende animo tot martyrum millia. Cur enim te Natalitia eorum conviviis turpibus celebrare delectat, et eorum vitam sequi honestis moribus non delectat? Ibi videbis non solum viros, sed etiam feminas, postremo pueros et puellas, nec imprudentia decipi, nec iniquitate perverti, nec periculi timore frangi, nec saeculi amore corrumpi. Ita te non invenientem quid excuses, non solum praeceptorum inevitabilis rectitudo, sed etiam exemplorum innumerabilis multitudo circumdabit. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, 18.102 (1505, p. 477b): Masculus autem de fetu penitus non curat, vt dicit idem. Qui autem omnes catulos deferre cupit, specula magna in itinere derelinquet que mater insequens in via inuenit et in eis se intuens, de sua imagine filios esse credit, cira autem suam vmbram illic detenta et circa filiorum extractione de vitro occupata dat raptori spacium fugiendi, et sic per vmbram decipitur ne raptorem pro catulorum liberatione vite rius persequat.

For the male recketh not of the whelps, and he that will bear away the whelps, leaveth in the way great mirrors, and the mother followeth and findeth the mirrors in the way, and looketh on them and seeth her own shadow and image therein, and weeneth that she seeth her children therein, and is long occupied therefore to deliver her children out of the glass, and so the hunter hath time and space for to scape, and so she is beguiled with her own shadow, and she followeth no farther after the hunter to deliver her children. (Steele edition of 1905). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)