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Jubilee of the Heart: How Monastic Song Became Mystical Poetics

By

Kris Jonathan Trujillo

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Rhetoric

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Amy Hollywood, Co-Chair

Professor Daniel Boyarin, Co-Chair

Professor Niklaus Largier

Professor James Porter

Fall 2017

Abstract

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by

Kris Jonathan Trujillo

Doctor of Philosophy in Rhetoric

Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Amy Hollywood, Co-Chair

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This dissertation describes how the proliferation of “song” as a trope in the vernacular poetic tradition that Michel de Certeau calls “mystic poetics” arises out of the monastic practice of singing the Psalms. Through close readings of John Cassian, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hadewijch, and John of the Cross, it reveals that the ethical formation of the “mystic-poet” is as much a product of theological devotion as it is an attempt to craft a figure of literary exemplarity in the vernacular. Against the characterization of mystical poetry as spontaneous, immediate, and singular, this project argues that mystical poetry and the contemplative life to which it is bound are not removed from the world, but rather firmly grounded in the ritual, embodied, and communal practices of devotion that shape monastic and semi-monastic life. Ultimately, I propose a genealogy of mystical poetics that is not opposed to, but indeed contiguous with the repetitive and ritual reading practiced in Christian monasteries.

An interdisciplinary endeavor, this project brings together the study of religion, literary studies, queer theory, and critical theory. In addition, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that bridges premodern and contemporary theory and attends to the growing fascination that humanistic inquiry has with religion and religious traditions. By tying the rhetorical force of “song” to the lived reality of Christian piety, the project espouses a performative theory of metaphor that takes seriously its material conditions and effects. By undoing the conventional distinction between literal and figurative language and by drawing from contemporary queer theory, it also intervenes into the conversation about religion and sexuality, which, I contend, includes the spiritual bodies and erotics of mystical union. Finally, the project traces the translation of Greek *theōria* into the medieval Christian contemplative life and, as a consequence, complicates any secular narrative of critical theory’s development.

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Introduction

From Silence to Song

*Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
And hermits are contented with their cells;
And students with their pensive citadels;
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
In truth the prison, into which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.
—William Wordsworth, "Prefatory Sonnet"*

SILENCE, SONG, AND THE MEDIEVAL SOUNDSCAPE

Surrounded on each side by lilac fields, a small wood stands just north of the Cîteaux Abbey, the mother house of the Cistercian order originally founded in 1098 and located in Burgundy, south of Dijon. If you walk down the dirt path running through this wood, you will eventually come upon a ten-foot-tall stack of lumber stretching almost one hundred yards. The product of La Scierie Forey, a sawmill and the only other organization aside from the abbey located in this small French commune, the lumber sits in silence, far enough away from the motor sounds of the mill. Of course, silence is all to be expected in the monastic setting, but the silent lamentation of these pieces of wood bespeaks that silence is not, in fact, a given of nature, but rather a construction, an artifice. The sound of silence is not a monastic default; it is arrived at after much hard work.

Wood is important here because of its changing status as a keynote of the European soundscape. As R. Murray Schaffer explains in his seminal book *Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977), "Many of the most unique keynote sounds are produced by the materials available in different geographical locales: bamboo, stone, metal or

wood, and sources of energy such as water and coal.”¹ Keynote sounds, thus, reflect not only the specific environmental conditions of their production, but also a particular historical moment depending on the wealth or scarcity of a resource. The case of wood, according to Schaffer, is exemplary of this change: “Wood had, of course, been an original keynote of Europe also; but the forests were depleted when wood was required for the smelting and forging of metals.”² The long pile of lumber is a testament to the deforestation of Europe, most often associated with its roots in what is called the “great clearances” of the 10th through 13th centuries—the expansion of agricultural land into the forests on account of the rising population.³ Wood is silent because it is made to be silent—a pile on the ground, rather than a forest through which the wind hums—but also because there is simply less of it.

Monastic communities were a significant part of the changing landscape and soundscape of medieval Europe. This latter point may not be immediately evident since monastic silence is often regarded as the background upon which actual sound is made. But as this dissertation will demonstrate the soundscape of the contemplative life, including the abiding silence, required much hard labor. Seen in this way, the contemplative life or what we might call *theorizing* is not, ultimately, a retreat from the world, but rather performed within and conditioned by its material surroundings. It is conducted as and through the hard work that produces the built environment of monastic space. And while the notion of the medieval soundscape has become a helpful way of thinking about sound, song, and music long lost, scholarship has focused primarily on external sound, thus, following the empirical imperative laid out by Shaffer in the 1970s.⁴ As the following will argue, sound’s intimate attachment to affect and the theological anthropology of the inner man, especially as it is developed in the Christian West, require an account of the inner sense of sound in order to provide a fuller understanding of the medieval soundscape. For the silence of monastic setting is deceptive: it conceals the silent song that sustains the loving devotion of monastic life. It holds the secret of Christian perfection, the heights of contemplation, the very jubilee of the heart.

¹ R. Murray Schaffer, *Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (New York: Destiny Books, 2977), 59.

² Schaffer, *Soundscape*, 59.

³ For a historical analysis of the great clearances, see Richard C. Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 199–132.

⁴ Schaffer’s emphasis on the empirical account of sound can be found in his description of the “earwitness.” See, Schaffer, *Soundscape*, 8–9. For a helpful summary of the use of “soundscape” as an analytic framework in medieval scholarship, see Susan Boynton, “Sound Matters,” *Speculum* 91, no. 4 (October 2016), 998–1002.

LOST IN SILENCE

The romantic enchantment of the Christian monastic life is quickly dispelled by the sheer amount of work that it takes to follow a particular *regula*, or “rule of life.” But what the monastic life offered was not a life in a pastoral environment or a fantasy of eternal leisure. No, instead, the promise made to monks and nuns hundreds of years in the past was that by entering into this life of obedience, they would be able to reshape their lives. This endeavor required, then not only the constant reshaping of one’s own past, secular life, but also the insistent return to the historical past of the Christian tradition. This yearning for the past or for other time affectively marks each of the characters in this study. Yet for so many years, the torment of their burning desire has remained silent, or rather, it has been isolated to the study of religion and, therefore, unheard by a broader humanities audience, especially by those concerned with theory. By working at the intersection of religion and literature, I aim to bring into relief the obscured connections between the medieval Christian contemplative life, on the one hand, and modern theory and poetics, on the other.

The convention of overlooking the Christian Middle Ages in broader discussions about theory and poetics is grounded, in its most superficial form, in a common etymological observation. When the term “theory” incites any kind of historicizing, the most conventional move is to turn to Plato and his formulation of *theōria*, or theoretical philosophy. After this hypothetical exploration of Platonic theory, a move is often made to Hegel’s *Theorie*, thus asserting some form of due diligence in historicizing one’s terms. The obvious difficulty, especially for a medievalist, is the way that such a historiographical tendency essentially jumps over the Middle Ages, unintentionally exacerbating the false stereotype that the Middle Ages were, indeed, the Dark Ages. Some, like Andrew Cole, have taken note of this lacuna in extant genealogies of theory. Cole’s book *The Birth of Theory* (2014), thus takes on the challenge of filling out, as it were, the medieval history of theory by positioning Hegelian dialectic against Nietzsche, and then by tracing its roots in dialectical habits of thought emergent in the Middle Ages.⁵ Cole surely adds an important piece to our understanding of medieval pre-histories of theory. But a blind spot persists in his text: it is not that Cole does not treat the significance of Christianity to his characterization of the Middle Ages. It is that his emphasis on habits of thought skews the conversation about theory towards cognition and away from the devotional or affective aspects of theorizing. It provides a characterization of Christianity that is particularly philosophical and not devotional.

A stronger allergy to Christianity afflicts Friedrich Nietzsche with and against whose theoretical project Cole sets up his own. Indeed, the “secularization” of modern theory may be attributed, at least in part, to Nietzsche despite his clear fascination with theology. This paradox emerges most acutely in his retrospective evaluation of his early work *The Birth of Tragedy*. Retrospectively appended to the 1886 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, originally published in

⁵ Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Oddly enough, Cole’s own framing structure—Plato on one end and Hegel on the other—inadvertently reproduces the historiographical convention that he attempts to undo and implicitly marks as other the middle term of medieval dialectic.

1872, Nietzsche's "Attempt at Self-Criticism" serves as a prefatory *apologia* for his youthful attempt to produce what he characterizes as a "questionable," "odd," "inaccessible," and, even, "impossible" book.⁶ Topping off his admission that "this book burdened itself with a whole bundle of difficult questions," Nietzsche ironically suggests to "add the hardest question of all! What, when seen through the prism of *life* [*Optik des Lebens*], is the meaning of morality?"⁷ Immediately after invoking the question of morality, however, he emphasizes its fundamental incompatibility with his book's philosophical project by asserting "that art—and *not* morality—is the true *metaphysical* activity of man."⁸ "Perhaps the best indication of the depth of the *anti-moral* tendency in the book," he speculates, "is its consistently cautious and hostile silence [*feindseligen Schweigen*] about Christianity."⁹ Nietzsche, then, elaborates his polemical critique against Christianity: "In truth there is no greater antithesis of the purely aesthetic exegesis and justification of the world, as taught in this book, than the Christian doctrine which is, and wants to be, *only* moral, and which, with its absolute criteria (its insistence on god's truthfulness, for example) banishes art, *all* art, to the realm of *lies*, and thus negates, damns and condemns it."¹⁰ More Plato than Plato, Nietzsche's Christianity banishes "*all* art." In fact, that it is "bound to be hostile to art" (*kunstfeindlich*) ultimately proves its "*hostility to life*" (*Lebensfeindliche*) since, for Nietzsche, "all life rests on semblance, art, deception, prismatic effects [*Optik*], the necessity of perspectivism and error."¹¹ Thus, it is no wonder that the meaning of morality, whose very values, according to Nietzsche, are sanctioned, by Christianity, poses a particularly difficult question—the hardest one, in fact—"when seen through the prism of *life*."

More astonishing, however, is his rhetorical strategy in returning Christianity's hostility towards art and life with the hostility of silence, for Nietzsche is only able to articulate his disavowal by deliberately invoking Christianity's name. Understood as a moment of apophysis—mentioning by denying one's capability or intention to mention—Nietzsche's silence ironically reframes the central problem of *The Birth of Tragedy* as the relationship between Christianity and aesthetics. If this book about Greek tragedy, this book wherein Nietzsche "baptized" (*taufte*) the explicitly anti-Christian doctrine of the Dionysiac,¹² is implicitly concerned with Christianity all along, then might "Nietzsche the philologist" be more akin to "Nietzsche the theologian" than he lets on? Nietzsche serves as a helpful example of the way that Christianity haunts our modern genealogies of theory. In fact, given how the example of Nietzsche calls into question the very distinction between Christian theology and philosophy, I am left wondering, "Has theory ever

⁶ Nietzsche, "An Attempt at Self-Criticism," in *Birth of Tragedy, and Other Writings*, eds. Raymond Guess and Ronald Spiers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), §1, §3. References are to essay sections, standardized across editions.

⁷ Ibid., §4.

⁸ Ibid., §5.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

been secular?” What is at stake for those who would like to maintain a vision of theory that is a product of a modern secular age? My own inquiry mirrors a similar examination of the putatively secular status of critique performed famously at the inaugural symposium of the Program in Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley in 2005, memorialized by the volume *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (2009).¹³ The answer to both of the questions is almost so obviously, “No,” and yet I am compelled to ask about religion and theory in this way—that is by invoking the terms of secularism—given that secularism and secularity have come to dominate questions about religion in the humanities more broadly.

The elaboration of this insistent “No” is performed in the pages of the following dissertation, and in contrast to the work on secularism and secularity. Instead, in turning to premodernity, I will explore how questions about devotion and desire might help to bridge the disciplines of religious studies, literary studies, and critical theory.¹⁴ Again, my inquiry is guided by an extension of the etymological observation cited above. What happens in between *theōria* and *Theorie*? By tracing a particular translation of *theōria* into Latin *contemplatio*, and then, as Michel de Certeau suggests, the connection between *contemplatio* and the “new science” of *la mystique*, I describe a premodern genealogy of theory that is grounded in the Christian contemplative life and the mystical texts to which this way of life gives rise.¹⁵ Furthermore, while important studies have investigated the significance of Christian mysticism to modern theory,¹⁶ there has been less interest in the ways that monasticism influences modern theoretical projects.¹⁷ Part of the difficulty in envisioning the significance of monasticism and the contemplative life it supports to modern theory is a false distinction between monasticism, on the one hand, and mysticism, on the other. While, as this dissertation demonstrates, modern characterizations of mysticism emphasize radical exceptionalism, immediacy, and singularity, monasticism is read as

¹³ Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley, CA: Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009).

¹⁴ Work that has influenced my thinking on devotion, literature, and religion includes Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); Colin Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and, Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 95.

¹⁶ See especially, Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and, Niklaus Largier, “Mysticism, Modernity, and the Invention of Aesthetic Experience,” *Representations* 105, no. 1 (winter 2009): 37–60.

¹⁷ Important exceptions would be Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and, Cary Howie, *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

repetitive, ritually grounded, rote, and deadening.¹⁸ This false dichotomy impedes an understanding of these two terms as inseparable from each other throughout the history of Christianity. Furthermore, a concomitant effect is the alignment of mysticism with literary or poetic genius. By eliding mystical exemplarity with poetic genius, the mystic-poet is rendered entirely exceptional and often read in secular terms of literary history without any account of his or her religious devotions.¹⁹

This dissertation counters these modern historiographical trends by focusing on the devotional practices that have shaped the production of mystical literature. Indeed, by focusing on practices, I suggest that we might arrive not only at a better understanding of the conditions that produced the body of Christian mystical literature, but also at possible new approaches to the study of both poetry and theory—approaches that emphasize poetry and theory as praxis conditioned by the material, embodied, and communal settings out of which they emerge. My insistence is that we are not so different from some of the Christian figures I treat in this project. Our devotions—construed broadly—are shaped by our material and historical conditions and enable particular ways of life, particular forms of embodiment, and particular orientations toward community and coalition.

¹⁸ Another important false opposition between monasticism and mysticism, which I shall take up in chapter 2, is based on the significance of erotics. Because the Song of Songs has historically provided a rich inventory of terms deployed in mystical texts, its association with Christian mysticism has emphasized the particularly erotic nature of mystical tropes, like union with God. The prolific scholarship on the Song of Songs has further supported this association. In contrast, monasticism assumes a stereotypically ascetic quality. More recent work has astutely challenged this characterization of Christian monasticism. See, for example, Lara Farina, *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and, Howie, *Claustrophilia*. For scholarship on the Songs of Songs and eros, see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Denis Renevey, *Language, Self and Love: Hermeneutics in Richard Rolle and the Commentaries of the Song of Songs* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001); and, Denys Turner, *Eros And Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995).

¹⁹ The distinction that I draw between the terms “exemplarity” and “exceptionalism” is intentional. I use the term “exemplarity” to refer to the ways in which the Christian mystical exemplar serves as a model for *imitatio* and, therefore, is always bound to the social. In contrast, I use the term “exceptionalism” following Jasbir Puar, who explains, “Exceptionalism paradoxically signals distinction from (to be unlike, dissimilar) as well as excellence (imminence, superiority), suggesting a departure from yet mastery of linear teleologies of progress.” *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 3. For a detailed analysis of the resources and limits of medieval Christian exemplarity, see Rachel Smith, “Exemplarity and Its Limits in the Hagiographical Corpus of Thomas of Cantimpré” (PhD diss, Harvard University, 2011). For critiques of the language of normalcy in medieval scholarship, see Amy Hollywood, “The Normal, the Queer, and the Middle Ages,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 2 (2001): 173–179; and, Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

JUBILEE

At the heart of this investigation of the medieval Christian history of the contemplative life stands the intersection of two devotional traditions grounded in song. One of these traditions involves the regularly repeated singing, recitation, or chant of the Psalms in community. The other involves the writing of commentaries on the Song of Songs. For both of these practices, song is central; however, song assumes a distinct valence in each. While the recitation of the Psalms enacts singing in *practice*, the Song of Songs commentary tradition relies upon a notion of song as a theological and literary *trope* that stands for the heights of Christian contemplative perfection. But what exactly is the relationship between the practice of song and song as a trope, or singing in the literal sense and singing figuratively? How, furthermore, do poetic forms referred to as “song” demand a rethinking of what poetry is and how it functions? Indeed, the calcification of poetry as a written form, tends to ignore an important history of music and song that is embodied, affective, and performed in community. In contrast to this tendency, studies like Bruce Holsinger’s *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (2001), Emma Dillon’s *The Sense of Sound: Musical Meaning in France, 1260-1330* (2012), and Marisa Galvez’s *Songbook: How Lyrics Became Poetry in Medieval Europe* (2012) have traced the important connections between music, bodies, affect, and written texts in the Middle Ages.²⁰ This dissertation contributes to this work by rethinking the tropification of song—that is, the transformation of song from a practice to a figure—not as the loss of the body, senses, or community, but rather as an attempt to preserve these things through a process of spiritual transformation enabled by allegorical or figurative language. In other words, I move away from any notion of *mere* metaphor towards an understanding of figurative language that both matters and resignifies the grounds of materiality in the first place.

The difficulty of the task of sustaining the dynamic lived experience of medieval Christian song is exacerbated not only by the basic ephemerality of music, but also by a complicated Christian ambivalence to song epitomized by Augustine’s meditation on the use of music in Christian worship:

The pleasures of the ear [*voluptates aurium*] had a more tenacious hold on me, and had subjugated me; but you set me free and liberated me. As things now stand, I confess that I have some sense of restful contentment in sounds whose soul is your words, when they are sung by a pleasant and well-trained voice. Not that I am riveted by them, for I can rise up and go as I wish.... Sometimes I seem to myself to give them more honour than is fitting. I feel that when the sacred words are chanted well, our souls are moved and are more religiously and with a warmer devotion kindled to piety than if they are not so sung. All the diverse emotions of our spirit have their various modes in voice and chant appropriate in

²⁰ Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Emma Dillon, *The Sense of Sound: Musical Meaning in France, 1260-1330* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and, Marisa Galvez, *Songbook: How Lyrics Became Poetry in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

each case, and are stirred by a mysterious inner kinship. But my physical delight, which has to be checked from enervating the mind, often deceives me when the perception of the sense is unaccompanied by reason, and is not patiently content to be in a subordinate place...

Sometimes, however, by taking excessive safeguards against being led astray, I err on the side of too much severity. I have sometimes gone so far as to wish to banish all the melodies and sweet chants used for David's psalter from my ears and from the Church as well. But I think a safer course one which I remember being often told of bishop Athanasius of Alexandria. He used to make the Reader of the psalm chant with so flexible a speech-rhythm that he was nearer to reciting than to singing. Nevertheless, when I remember the tears which I poured out at the time when I was first recovering my faith, and that now I am moved not by the chant but by the words being sung [*non cantu, sed rebus quae cantantur*], when they are sung with a clear voice and entirely appropriate modulation, then again I recognize the great utility of music in worship. Thus I fluctuate between the danger of pleasure and the experience of the beneficent effect, and I am more led to put forward the opinion (not as an irrevocable view) that the custom of singing is to be approved, so that through the delight of the ear the weaker mind may rise up towards the devotion of worship.²¹

Song, for Augustine, is too sensual, too physical, too embodied, and yet these qualities are precisely what enable Augustine to feel that "when the sacred words are chanted well, our souls are moved and are more religiously and with a warmer devotion kindled to piety than if they are not so sung." Still he is tormented by giving in to the "pleasures of the ear"—a particular form of fleshly pleasure—and, through reason, praises song based on a strict distinction between *cantus*, or "song," on the one hand, and *res*, or "the words being sung," the "thing being sung," on the other. Song, thus, offers a means to arouse Christian devotion, but ultimately its musicality is more of a danger and less valued than the things, words, or meanings sung—in this case, the Psalms of David.

While the musicality of the *cantus* marks it as potentially dangerous, Augustine identifies another kind of wordless song that, in contrast, appears only to stand for spiritual exemplarity. In his commentary on Psalm 100, Augustine offers a definition of the term *iubilus*, or "jubilee." He explains, "One who jubilates does not utter words [*non verba dicit*], but it is rather a kind of sound [*sonus*] of joy without words [*sine verbis*]; for the voice is thus the soul dispersed out in joy, demonstrating as much as it is able the feeling without grasping the sense [*exprimentis affectum, non sensum comprehendentis*]."²² In turning to *iubilus*, Augustine drops the significance of words altogether and focuses, instead, on the sonority of jubilee. In an odd way, then, the very quality that is too sensuous for Augustine's formulation of *cantus* emerges as the most beneficent

²¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.33.49–50. All Latin is taken from PL 32.

²² Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, vol. 3, 73–98 (New York: New City Press, 2002), 100.4. All Latin is taken from CCL 38–40.

quality of jubilee. How exactly do we understand this transition? As this example illustrates, he moves from the outer to the inner register of sound by claiming that the jubilating voice is the soul demonstrating its feeling (*affectum*), not comprehending sense or meaning (*sensum*). The jubilating voice bears a particularly significant affinity to the inner life. Although it is a sound [*sonus*] heard aloud, it points more properly to a state of utter joy, a state of inner experience. Jubilee is, thus, no ordinary song sung along the way of spiritual development, but rather the very sign of the hard work accomplished before its sounding in wordlessness.

As I will explain, jubilee takes on a different valence in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. By positioning it firmly within the domain of inner experience as the "jubilee of the heart," Bernard follows an older distinction between the inner and outer senses and effectively extends the domain of Christian song from the outer world to that of interiority. In other words, Bernard's work makes clear that the medieval soundscape is irreducible to the sounds and songs heard aloud; nor is its silence mere silence. On the contrary, the medieval soundscape includes the inner sounds and songs that come to shape the devotional lives of Christian monks and mystics. The proliferation of texts that deploy "song" as a trope, then, are not engaged in a futile task that attempts to put into words the putative ineffability of jubilee or to simply fill the silence, but rather preserve through the figure of language the dynamic life of the inner sense of sound.

TRAJECTORY

I argue, in this dissertation, against the exceptional, singular, and radical quality of "mystic poetics," a term used by Michel de Certeau to describe a particular poetic tradition founded, as he claims, by Hadewijch of Brabant, a thirteenth-century beguine.²³ At the conclusion of *Mystic Fable*, de Certeau deploys the trope of music to think about the ineffable quality of the poetry associated with this tradition. In what he calls an "Overture to the Poetics of the Body," he declares, "There is no *mystics* without it [without music]."²⁴ What is odd, though, is that he does not consider the actual musical practices that organized the life of Christian monasticism and mysticism. Music, for de Certeau, remains a mere metaphor and is not animated by the vibrant musical history that precedes the emergence of "mystic poetics." I, thus, respond to de Certeau's project by providing a prehistory of mystical poetics to which music was central. The trajectory of my argument moves from the foundations of Western Christian monasticism in the fifth century, to the twelfth-century Cistercian reform, to analyses of two examples of mystical poetics from thirteenth-century beguine literature and sixteenth-century Carmelite reform. Grounding this genre of religious literature, I demonstrate, is the intersection of two Christian devotional traditions centered around song mentioned above—the recitation of the Psalms enjoined by the *Rule of Benedict* and the Song of Songs commentary tradition that flourished in the Middle Ages. While the former is tied explicitly to monasticism, the latter is

²³ De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 297.

associated more often with mysticism, but I will show that these two traditions—one of song in *practice* and the other of song as a *trope*—are inextricable from one another and fundamental to the kind of texts that de Certeau identifies under the name “mystic poetics.”

Chapter 1 examines the poetics of Benedictine monasticism by tracing the development of musical labor from Plato through John Cassian to Benedict of Nursia. The *Rule of Benedict* was the most successful “rule of life” in the early Middle Ages, and its emphasis on psalter recitation came to ground the Christian monastic life in a comprehensive program of music and song. Importantly, while the Psalms were central to the cultivation of the contemplative life, they were not separate from the forms of labor espoused by monks and nuns. They did not support a strict distinction between action and contemplation. On the contrary, the practice of psalter recitation undid any easy distinction between these two ways of life by exemplifying how the musical labor of singing the Psalms grounded monastic contemplation.

Chapter 2 examines an influential intervention made by the twelfth-century Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard is perhaps most renowned for his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, a set of eighty-six so-called sermons that provide an elaborate allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs. Because of this text’s popularity, Bernard scholarship has focused on his exemplary contemplative life and its influence on the proliferation of mystical texts that emerge in the late Middle Ages. Indeed, in many ways, Bernard enables the assumption of the voice of the Bride in the Song of Songs and, thus, strengthens the already vibrant recourse to the Song of Songs in medieval Christian texts. This emphasis, however, has obfuscated the basic fact of Bernard’s status as a Cistercian, that is as a monk who adhered strictly to the *Rule of Benedict*. How do we read Bernard’s austerity with the erotic and embodied language of his *Sermons*? As this chapter demonstrates through a reading of Bernard’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs* with his *Apology to Abbot William*, both sides of Bernard are grounded in the values of the Cistercian way of life and serve to complement, rather than oppose each other.

The second half of the project analyzes two of the prominent figures in de Certeau’s genealogy of “mystic poetics” in order to question the viability of the origin story that he attempts to tell in *Mystic Fable* (1982). While de Certeau emphasizes loss, discontinuity, and bewilderment, I situate Hadewijch and John of the Cross within a longer tradition of Christian song. Chapter 3 turns to Hadewijch, the founding figure in de Certeau’s genealogy of “mystic poetics.” While Hadewijch scholarship has tended, until recently, to emphasize the immediacy and spontaneity of her visionary experiences, I argue that her texts are grounded, once again, in the practice of psalter recitation. As my readings of her Song 23 and her *Visions* demonstrate, the communal and embodied devotion of beguine communities structured her songs and her *Visions* even at their most apophatic. In other words, while some might read Hadewijch’s recourse to the trope of ineffability as a gesture towards disembodiment and exile, her use of the trope, on the contrary, serves to fortify her relationship to the material and historical world of her beguine community.

Chapter 4 takes up a final example of mystic poetics in the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite John of the Cross. Through a diachronic reading of John of the Cross with Juan Goytisolo’s novel *The Virtues of the Solitary Bird* (1988), I explore the connection between monasticism, mysticism, theory, and critique. While John is often praised for his poetic genius, I argue that his poems must be read in the context of his devotional life and in conjunction with

the commentaries that he wrote alongside. In the end, I meditate upon the possibility of loving critique in order to suggest how the ways that characterizations of the mystical have carry important political and ethical ramifications.

In a closing section, I begin to read William Blake within this newly configured genealogy of mystical poetics. By having emphasized the communal, embodied, and material devotions that organize this religious and literary tradition, I suggest not only a more capacious understanding of the relationship between literature and religion, but also ask into the disposition of yearning that organizes each of these characters' lives. Devotion and desire, as I will argue throughout, are not sovereign faculties. A subject doesn't simply decide to desire and uphold a particular politics, theology, or way of life. Devotion and desire, even of the most passionate kind, are cultivated through the very ordinary acts that one repeats each day; they are shaped by the quotidian.

And while I agree with Wordsworth who implies that poetic beauty, too, emerges out of the structures that limit the boundaries of our lives—that the extraordinary is ultimately grounded in the limitations of the ordinary—I see something other than the “solace” and “pastime” that breed “contented,” “blithe and happy” subjects in the space of the monastery. For while Wordsworth's “nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room”—that is, while they do not worry about the spatial limitations of their community—they certainly do fret; they worry, and agonize over their desire for and devotion to God, and they work hard at it. How might this kind of yearning desire find its analogue in contemporary devotions? And what are the political implications of the particular ways in which such yearning is represented? Cassian, Bernard, Hadewijch, John of the Cross, and William Blake all felt backwards, in a way, reaching out to an alternative time. As did Michel de Certeau. But how do these longings differ? At what point does this kind of temporal melancholy become politically dangerous? And was it ever politically constructive in the first place?²⁵ In the end, the mystical poets I treat in this project are not solipsistically removed from the world, but rather concerned precisely with community, critique, and reform. Mystical poetics generates not an unthinking, unquestioning, uncritical devotion. Its backwards look is not a simple reinstatement of the past, but a desire for a world otherwise than now—or, perhaps more accurately, a desire for a now lived otherwise.

²⁵ These questions emerge out of my engagement with, among others, Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and, Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1998).

Chapter 1

Translating Theory: Musical Labor and the Poetics of Benedictine Monasticism

The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of psychic and emotional components of that need—the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment.

—Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”

Philosophy, as a theory of metaphor, will first have been a metaphor of theory.

—Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy”

THE RULE OF BENEDICT AND THE LABOR OF OBEDIENCE

“Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart” (*RB* Prol. 1).¹ With these opening words, the *Rule of Benedict* evokes a scene of instruction that has initiated monks and nuns to the coenobitic life since the text’s production in the sixth century. Written by Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–547) for his monastic community in Monte Cassino, this *regula*, or “rule of life,” became the most widely implemented amongst the various monastic communities that emerged in the Early Middle Ages.² To a modern ear, the above call, set within the context of Western Christendom’s increasing institutional organization and, especially, in its translation of *magister* to “master,” may sound like a demand for total submission to the abbot’s mastery. To be sure, the picture of monastic autocracy conjured by

¹ *RB* 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982). All further references to the *Rule* will appear parenthetically in text as *RB*. All Latin is taken from CSEL 75.

² While around thirty *regulae* were written from 400–700 C.E., the *Rule of Benedict* exerted the greatest influence on Western Christianity on account of the relative flexibility and moderation of its precepts, the veneration of Benedict of Nursia fostered by Pope Gregory the Great’s (ca. 540–604) account of his life, and the centrality of the *Rule* to Carolingian monastic reform. See Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 2, *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 27–28; and Amy Hollywood, “Song, Experience, and Book in Benedictine Monasticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, 59–79 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 59–61.

these words is far from dispelled by the *Rule*'s insistence that "the labor of obedience [*oboedientiae laborem*] will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience [*inoboedientiae desidiam*]" (RB Prol. 2). It may seem, then, that the monastery is a space not only of subservience, but also of very hard work.

Citing the stability or, as he calls it, the "fixity" upon which monastic obedience is grounded, M. B. Pranger rehearses this worry about monastic authority in decidedly aesthetic and affective terms. As he explains, "In the enclosed space of the monastery and the circularity of its rites there seems to be no room for the adventures of the epic, the excitement of lyricism, the spontaneous, disorderly outburst of laughing in comedy, or the black denouement of tragedy."³ One way to read the regulation of monastic space and time, suggests Pranger, is as a dual constriction wherein "enclosed space," itself, figures as the explanatory metaphor for temporal occupation. According to this reading, monastic time is so dominated by ritual action's regularity and stultification that it simply leaves no room for the vicissitudes of emotion or the diversity of their expression, especially as they are found in the genres of classical literature.⁴ Monastic edifices, in turn, stand as the literal materialization of temporal occupation, as a figure for aesthetic—read, ascetic—complacency. But does the "labor of obedience" stifle affective arousal and creative literary production as much as these constrictive appearances might suggest? To what extent might we find artistry underlying the artifice of monastic stability? If the regulation of monastic literacy corroborates an implicit prohibition of or, at least, an ambivalence towards classical genres, then does space remain for a poetics particular to Christian monasticism? Might we find in the enclosed space of the monastery, a poetics that, like monastic time, "obeys the patterns and rituals of retardation and repetition"?⁵

In order to venture an initial account of monastic poetics, let us turn, once again, to the opening words of Benedict's *Rule*, this time with an ear for the original Latin: "Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri et inclina aurem cordis tui." In Latin, the lyricism of rhymed prose rings through the incantatory alternation of *a*'s (*obscura*, *praecepta*, *inclina*) and *i*'s (*fili*, *magistri*, *tui*), whose regularity in rhythm discloses an artful intentionality in composition. By calling attention to the aural aspect of the *Rule*'s prose, rhyme not only demands adherence to the principal mandate to listen; it also emphasizes a particular mode of listening more attuned to aural aesthetics than to verbal semantics. Indeed, that Benedict begins his *Rule* with the word *obscura* and not the more conventional *ausculta* signals a deliberate emphasis on and reformulation of the mode of listening grounding monastic life.⁶ By replacing the *aus-* (a variant stem of *auris*,

³ M. B. Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity: Essays on the Poetics of Monasticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 22.

⁴ As Pranger is well aware, classical literature, that is literature of Greek antiquity, occupied a much more complicated place in the early education and continued training in reading and writing of Christian monastics. For a treatment of the range in Christian attitudes towards classical literature, see especially Jean Leclercq, "Liberal Studies," in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 112–150.

⁵ Pranger, *Artificiality of Christianity*, 22.

⁶ The rhetorical significance of introductory words is treated in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. See especially 1414b, wherein he analogizes the exordium of a speech to a poetic prologue and to a musical prelude. While

Latin for “ear”) with the prefix *ob-*, Benedict’s exhortation to listen is tied directly to the virtue of obedience (*oboedientia*),⁷ which, derived from *ob-* + *audire* (to hear, to listen), also etymologically links itself to audition. Rather than obscuring the significance of listening to the *Rule*, the term *obsculta*, through implicit etymological reference to both *auris* and *audire*, places the art of listening at its core.

By inviting a kind of spiritual interpretation for the derivation of its meaning, the term *obsculta* encapsulates an exegetical mandate made even more explicit in the subsequent call for initiates to incline “the ear of your heart” (*aurem cordis tui*). This instruction is guided by a Pauline theological anthropology that distinguishes between the inner and outer person. Most famously in the prologue to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Origen (ca. 185–254) elaborates upon this distinction by describing an inner person composed of inner senses, intelligible through spiritual interpretation.⁸ As Niklaus Largier explains, “Although the inner or spiritual senses correspond to the five outer senses (in fact they are named in analogous ways), they are not to be seen as simply analogous or metaphorical.” Instead, suggests Largier, “the invention and the rhetoric of the inner or spiritual senses allowed for a creation of a space of experience, exploration, and amplification of the emotional as well as the sensory life of the soul in prayer and contemplation.”⁹ In the words of Patricia Dailey, “language produces or enables an embodied effect.”¹⁰ What both Largier and Dailey suggest is that the inner senses are produced by and sustain a theory of language that operates not merely referentially, but rather performatively in order to open up a space of affective engagement. Therefore, by appealing to the inner senses, the *Rule of Benedict* calls for “obscultation” as an obedient mode of listening that is spiritually

Aristotle certainly advocates “speaking out immediately what one wants to say and so setting the tone and connecting this with the subject” (1414b), it is not clear that he places particular emphasis on the first word. Whether Aristotle did or did not intend to focus specifically on the first word of a text, the fact remains that Neoplatonic interpreters of Plato like Iamblichus (ca. 245–325), for example, read the first word of a dialogue as expressing the goal or main subject (*skopos*) of the text. An example of this mode of interpretation in Christian exegesis is Gregory of Nyssa’s (ca. 335–395) treatment of the Psalms. See Ronald E. Heine, “Introduction,” in *Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, ed. and trans. Richard Heine (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 29–43.

⁷ The connection drawn between *obsculta* and obedience is noted in the first complete commentary on the *RB* written by Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel (ca. 760–840). Responding to those who criticize Benedict for not having written *ausculta*, Smaragdus argues that the term *obsculta* is just as valid as the terms *obaudi* (obey), *obtempera* (comply), and *obsecunda* (acquiesce), which share the prefix *ob-*. Implicit in this particular set of terms is a sense of submission or deference to authority. See Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel, *Commentaria in Regulam Sancti Benedicti*, in *Smaragdi Opera Omnia*, vol. 102 of *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 691–930 (Paris: 1851), 691.

⁸ Origen, “The Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs,” in *Origen, The Classics of Western Spirituality*, 217–244 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 220–222.

⁹ Niklaus Largier, “Praying by Numbers: An Essay on Medieval Aesthetics,” *Representations* 104, no. 1 (fall 2008): 80.

¹⁰ Patricia Dailey, “The Body and Its Senses,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, 264–276 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 271.

attuned to the sensual and emotional dimensions—that is, not merely to the letter—of the abbot’s instructions.

Far from demanding authority outright, the *magister* or, more appropriately, “teacher” initiates pedagogy as a practice of persuasion or, even, seduction, since the ultimate goal of monastic audition is the cultivation of loving desire for God. The literacy required to make meaning of the *Rule* is akin to divine audition. Just as God hears the monk’s prayers, both silent and aloud, by regarding his “purity of heart and tears of compunction, not [his] many words” (*RB* 20:3), the monk is enjoined, from the start, to move beyond the letter of instruction in order to hear and be moved by its affective and spiritual meaning. Another way to describe this conformation of human and divine spiritual acuity is as the fulfillment of the image of God in humanity (*imago Dei*). However, unlike God, the monk does not arrive at the monastery with his affective literacy fully formed. Only through the hard work of spiritual training, under the tutelage of the abbot, does the monk progress towards the ultimate goal of “*that perfect love of God which casts out fear* (1 John 4:18)” (*RB* 7:66). Set in terms of affective transformation, the monk’s spiritual progress follows the trajectory from fear towards the perfect love of God. What is astonishing is how Benedict describes this transformation *through* the “labor of obedience” as the very transformation *of* labor itself. As the *Rule* proclaims, “Through this love, all that he once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort [*absque ullo labore*], as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue” (*RB* 7:67–69). In the end, then, the progressive transformation of a monk’s “labor of obedience” affirmed by his arrival at the “perfect love of God” takes place as the very unworking of labor.

According to this formulation, labor and love appear mutually exclusive. Upon arriving at the love of God, the monk seems to break free from the restrictions of labor. However, if we follow Pranger’s insight that progressive time’s admission into the monastery depends upon its bending to “the patterns and rituals of retardation and repetition,” then we might ask if the monk’s progression ever truly arrives at this perfect love of God or if the “labor of obedience” is ever entirely discarded. Instead of reading the monk’s movement from labor to love as a progressive narrative with a definitive break that mutually excludes the toil of labor from the arrival at God’s perfect love, Pranger’s characterization of monastic temporality, governed as it is by the repetition of ritual, suggests that the monk must repeatedly return to his labor even as he progresses further towards the cultivation of perfect love. Thus, the monk is bound to perform perpetually the labor of love, a kind of affective labor whose paradoxical formulation orients it towards its own undoing. By working towards its very undoing, monastic labor refuses to locate its value in any quantitative economic model of profit; instead its value derives from the cultivation of affect and the loving desire of God.

The significance of labor to the monastic life is not entirely surprising given that the motto *ora et labora* is popularly associated with Benedictine monasticism. However, the concision of this phrase tends to polarize prayer and labor, rather than unite them, and this polarization frequently grafts itself onto a respective set of terms—*contemplatio* and *actio*. *Labora* is often read as referring narrowly to manual labor (*labor manuum*) especially since a chapter “On the daily manual labor” (*De opera manuum cotidiano*) is dedicated entirely to this activity’s

requirement to fend off idleness (*otiositas*) (RB 48.1).¹¹ What this reading forgets is not only that the labor of obedience, above all, undergirds monastic life, but also, as I have demonstrated above, that the sense of sound governs the very terms of this obedience. Indeed, manual labor is secondary to another form that more aptly embodies the labor of obedience—the prayerful recitation, chanting, and singing of the Psalms known as the work of God (*opus Dei*). Fundamentally organizing the daily life of the monks, the *opus Dei* or Divine Office punctuates the silence of the Benedictine soundscape by scheduling eight liturgical hours each day: Vigils, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline. Across the span of twelve chapters, Benedict outlines an arrangement of Psalter recitation that ensures each of the 150 Psalms will be performed at least once every week, ultimately, in order to facilitate the movement towards the contemplation of God (*contemplatio*). Thus, figured as the work of God, the monk’s recitation of the Psalms affirms that the contemplative heights towards which one ascends are not removed from, but firmly grounded in labor.

That a musical practice grounds Benedictine life indicates that the *Rule*’s emphasis on the inner sense of sound is not entirely separate from the external sounds of the monastery. Monastic psalmody provides the rhetorical, auditory, and affective inventory out of which the space of the inner senses is produced. It offers the occasion for affective labor, which, in Michael Hardt’s words, “is itself and directly the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities”—in this case, the cultivated desire for God enacted within and through monastic community.¹² In what follows, I will examine how musicality, broadly construed—that is, as rhythmic and sonorous expression—comes to be associated with the affective labor of the contemplative life, which, as it turns out, is far from the deadening of sense. In order to arrive at the recitation of the Psalms in Benedictine monasticism, I will, first, turn to musical labor’s significance for ancient Greek *theōria* as it is presented in Plato’s *Phaedo* and then to John Cassian’s translation of *theōria* into Latin *contemplatio*. In the same way that psalmody organizes the temporality of Benedictine monasticism around the repetition of ritual, the work of making music, for Plato, gives rise to a rhythmic time experienced as what I will call theoric or contemplative delay. This resistance to temporal progress figured as musical rhythm does not seclude theory and contemplation from the world, however, since, as we shall see, the slippery materiality of sound acts as a connecting bridge between outer and inner senses, between literal and figurative meaning, between body and soul.

¹¹ It should be noted that this Benedictine motto also obscures a third important activity organizing monastic life—*lectio divina*, or the “divine reading” of scripture grounding spiritual meditation and contemplation. While technically distinct from the Divine Office, the focus of this chapter, both *lectio divina* and the Divine Office comprise the activity of monastic prayer (*oratio*). Indeed, as I will argue, the seemingly discreet activities of *lectio divina*, the Divine Office, and manual labor overlap in important ways. For an elaboration of *lectio divina*, see E. Ann Matter, “*Lectio Divina*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, 147–166 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹² Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” *boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (summer 1999): 89.

THE SPECTACLE OF THEORIZING AND PLATO'S THEORIC DELAY

Plato's *Phaedo* might seem like a strange place to begin an interrogation of Platonic *theōria*, since, unlike the Socratic discourses conventionally associated with this topic found in the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic*,¹³ this dialogue does not provide an explicit formulation of theoretical philosophy, that is, a *philosophia* aimed at *theōria*. The conventional turn to any of these three dialogues formulates *theōria*, in most basic terms, as the contemplation of the Forms (*eidoi*), and the impact of such a formulation has been an alleged pernicious "ocularcentrism" of Western metaphysics. Thus, Hannah Arendt reminds us that the philosophical term "theory" was derived "from the Greek word for spectators, *theatai*" and that the act of contemplation meant "looking upon something from the outside."¹⁴ Similarly, Kaja Silverman argues that Plato's allegory of the cave immortalizes the fact that "Western philosophy began with the turn away from the world of the senses to a suprasensual domain." Furthermore, she claims, "the turn away from the world is definitionally a visual event."¹⁵ And, for Adriana Cavarero, this "metaphysical predilection for vision" grounded in the very terms *eidos* and *theōria* has effected a devocalization of *logos*.¹⁶ For these thinkers, the ocularcentric conception of theory (1) positions the theorist at a distance from its object of contemplation, (2) requires a flight from the world, and (3) denigrates embodied, sensory, and affective experience.¹⁷

In contrast, the *Phaedo*'s marginal status in relationship to the scholarship on theoretical philosophy immunizes it from this tendency to reduce philosophical contemplation to an enterprise that is ultimately removed from the material, embodied, and social world. Instead of offering a scene of explicit metaphysical "vision," the text grounds itself in the ancient Greek civic institution called *theōria* out of which theoretical philosophy emerges. Moreover, it frames *theōria* within a musically orchestrated discussion about what properly constitutes musical labor, thereby highlighting the especially musical quality of both civic and philosophical modes of theorizing. By highlighting aurality and, in particular, the production of song, the *Phaedo* brings "the sensuous dimensions of aesthetic experience" to the fore and effectively evades subsumption

¹³ See *Symposium*, 201d-212-a; *Phaedrus*, 243e-257b; and, the best-known example, the "Allegory of the Cave," found in *Republic*, 514a-518b. For analyses of the formulations of *theōria* offered in all three of these texts, see Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 24-35; Andrea Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83-118.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 93.

¹⁵ Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1-2.

¹⁶ Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 36.

¹⁷ For the significance of vision to premodern intellectual history, see Martin Jay, "The Noblest of the Senses: Vision from Plato to Descartes," in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, 21-82 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

under “the dominant idealist and formalist traditions of criticism in antiquity and in the modern accounts that mirror these biases.”¹⁸ Theorizing in this text regains an erotic, affective, and embodied existence and is irreducible to a mere habit of thought.¹⁹ Indeed, the musicality of the *Phaedo* offers an important resistance to any ocularcentric historiography of *theōria*, which, in its extreme, locates contemplation’s *telos* in a version of Christian asceticism that rejects the body, extricates itself from the political life, and disavows aesthetic experience.

After all, music organizes the *Phaedo*’s exposition of *theōria* on a few different levels, much like this dialogue’s composition as a series of nested accounts. As the author of a text built around multiple reports of what others have said, Plato finds himself furthest removed from the narrative action. In fact, Phaedo is quite clear that Plato is absent from Socrates’s death,²⁰ but in drawing attention to Plato’s participatory distance, this absence also calls itself out as a literary device. In other words, as many scholars have noted, the “fact” of Plato’s absence conversely highlights his skilled literary craft and deliberate foregrounding of the text’s artificiality, of which this recursive framing device is exemplary.²¹ Most readings of the *Phaedo* would, thus, understand it as an account of Echecrates and Phaedo’s conversation, which is, in the end, an account of Socrates’s timely discovery of the arguments for the soul’s immortality in the hours before his execution. However, while the text’s subtitle, *peri psyche*, would attest to the centrality of this narrative level—it does occupy the majority of the textual diegesis, after all—this interpretation ignores a final embedded report that, in contrast to Nicole Loraux’s reading, I would suggest presents the central concern of the dialogue.²² If the *Phaedo* is particularly marked by its self-reflexivity, then the heart of its *mise-en-abîme* occupies the privileged position from which to interpret the text. And, this *abîme* is truly abysmal as it introduces a salient aporetic moment wherein Socrates questions the virtue of his lifelong labor—whether the theoretical philosophy that he has practiced at all along is the greatest kind of music.

This moment is introduced by the final level of these nested accounts wherein we hear an exchange between Cebes and Socrates whose respective question and response report the words of others—the kernel of the nested accounts. Serving as a proxy interrogator, Cebes explains, “Several others have asked about the poems you have composed, the metrical versions of Aesop’s

¹⁸ James I. Porter, *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

¹⁹ Habits of thought *per se* are neither disembodied nor free of will, desire, and emotion. An emphasis on thought, however, risks constricting the analysis to intellectual activity. Andrew Cole’s genealogy of theory, for example, moves towards this narrow view of performing theory. While it locates Hegelian dialectics in medieval scholasticism and, by implication attends to the historical and material conditions of this particular habit of thought, it does not attend to the affective or embodied aspects of theorizing. Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 214).

²⁰ When asked by Echecrates who was present, Phaedo singles out Plato’s absence without even being prompted: “But Plato, I think, was ill” (59b).

²¹ See especially Nicole Loraux, “Therefore, Socrates is Immortal,” in *The Experiences of Tiresias: The Feminine and the Greek Man*, trans. Paula Wissing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

²² *Ibid.*, 145.

fables and the hymn [προοίμιον] to Apollo, and Evenus asked me the day before yesterday why you who never wrote any poetry before, composed these verses after you came to prison.”²³ Socrates responds just as indirectly but more puzzlingly by ventriloquizing the enigmatic voice from a recurring dream. “The same dream,” Socrates explains, “came to me often [πολλάκις] in my past life, sometimes in one form and sometimes in another [ἄλλοτ’ ἐν ἄλλῃ ὅψει φαινόμενον], but always saying the same thing [τὰ αὐτὰ δὲ λέγον]: ‘Socrates,’ it said, ‘make music and work [ἐργάζου] at it.’”²⁴ Having all his life understood these words as the encouraging cheer to continue doing what he was already doing—namely, “to make music, because philosophy was,” according to Socrates, “the greatest kind of music [μεγίστης μουσικῆς]”—Socrates suddenly makes the following admission of doubt: “But now, after the trial and while the festival of the god delayed my execution, I thought, in case the repeated [πολλάκις] dream really meant to tell me to make this which is ordinarily called music [δημώδη μουσικὴν], I ought to do so and not to disobey.”²⁵ Would oneiric fidelity take the form of what is ordinarily called music (*dēmōdē mousikēn*), that is popular music or music of the people (*dēmos*), or of philosophy? Must Socrates choose between the *literal* practice of music and music *figured* as philosophy, or does this conundrum identify music as a privileged term with which to think the relationship between the literal and figurative? And, why, at this moment, is Socrates compelled to question the proper musical object of his work (*ergon*)?

While much has been made of the timeliness of Socrates’s arguments for the immortality of the soul just before the moment of his execution, we might recall that the sufficient time to conduct this dialogue—as well as the *Crito* for that matter—is provided by a stay of execution in the first place. This point suggests not only that the opportune time (*kairos*) for a discussion about the soul is only made possible by a prior temporal delay—what Phaedo calls the “long time” (*polus chronos*) between the trial and the execution—but also that the nature of this delay bears critically upon the themes of this text. Wandering back from Athens, Phaedo stops in Phlius and runs into Echecrates who is more than eager to hear the details surrounding Socrates’s death. After an excited exchange of questions—*Were you there? Did someone else tell you? What did Socrates say? How did he die?*—Echecrates asks why so much time passed between the trial and execution and Phaedo returns his first sustained response with the following explanation:

Theseus once went to Crete with the fourteen youths and maidens, and saved them and himself. Now the Athenians made a vow to Apollo, as the story goes, that if they were saved they would send a mission [θεωρίαν] every year to Delos. And from that time even to the present day they send it annually in honour of the god. Now it is their law that after the mission [θεωρίας] begins the city must be pure and no one may be publicly executed until the ship has gone to Delos and back; and sometimes, when contrary winds detain it, this takes a long time [πολλῷ χρόνῳ]. The beginning of the mission [θεωρίας] is when the priest of Apollo

²³ Plato, *Phaedo*, 60d.

²⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, 60e.

²⁵ Plato, *Phaedo*, 61a.

crowns the stern of the ship; and this took place, as I say, the day before the trial. For that reason Socrates passed a long time [πολὺς χρόνος] in prison between his trial and his death.²⁶

Turning to the myth of Theseus upon which this religious practice is founded, Phaedo highlights three times over that the reason for the delay in Socrates's execution is the annual mission (*theōria*) to Delos in honor of Apollo. As Andrea Nightingale asserts, "In an effort to conceptualize and legitimize theoretical philosophy, the fourth-century thinkers invoked a specific civic institution: that which the ancients called '*theoria*.'"²⁷ In the classical era, *theōria* most often took place as a journey to a religious festival or an oracle conducted by an ambassador (*theōros*) who would engage in a kind of sacral spectating funded and supported by the state. While temporarily detached from home, the *theōros* was still accountable to the state, and the expectation was the transformation, edification, and enlightenment effected for the *theōros* would translate into a first-person account of this journey to be delivered upon the return home.²⁸ As the first thinker to reappropriate this term for the sake of philosophy, Plato was making a novel claim about the role of theorizing in the political life. "By linking philosophical theorizing to an institution that was at once social, political, and religious," explains Nightingale, Plato "attempted to ground theoretical philosophy in the social and political world," arguing against the accusation of total detachment.²⁹ It is this cultural practice of civic *theōria* that not only initiates the exposition of the *Phaedo*, but also gives Socrates the necessary time for philosophical *theōria*, which, much like a journey to Delos and back, can take a quite long time. In fact, by situating Socrates's evaluation of musical labor at the intersection of civic *theōria*'s "long time" (*polus chronos*) and the persistence of a dream repeated many times over (*pollakis*), Plato establishes the temporality of philosophical *theōria* as one simultaneously of repetition and delay.

According to Phaedo's report, then, this delay comes at the intersection of two temporal modes. Whereas the Athenian city-state's juridical time is organized linearly (from trial to sentence to execution), the mission to Delos operates according to a rhythmic or iterative time witnessed both by the annual repetition of this ritual and the voyage's physical movement back and forth, which is itself controlled by unpredictable elemental factors like wind and sea.³⁰ While

²⁶ Plato, *Phaedo*, 58a-c.

²⁷ Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, 3.

²⁸ Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, 47-49. Nightingale articulates three major kinds of *theōria*: missions to oracles, participation in religious festivals, and the search for wisdom through seeing the world. She also makes the important point that what counts as a journey "abroad" reflects undergirding presuppositions about what counts as other. In traditional *theōria*, this determination was putatively made based on territorial distinction, but the sacred orientation of each of these journeys already suggests the ancient Greek ideological distinction of religious ritual and forms of wisdom. For an exposition of these three modes of theorizing, see Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, 44-47, 54-68.

²⁹ Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, 4.

³⁰ While it may seem that these two kinds of rhythm organizing theoric delay are quite distinct, they are both grounded in natural phenomena—the lunar cycle, on the one hand, and the elements, on the other.

it may be tempting to read these temporalities oppositionally—juridical time interrupted and upended by religious time—we might also recognize that this mission to Delos is itself state-sanctioned. But, if this mission’s delay is the condition that authorizes Socrates’s final act of theoretical philosophizing, then are we to understand that the state’s sanctioning power extends its sovereignty into the domains of religion and philosophy? On the contrary, to arrive at state sovereignty from the state’s legitimizing force is not only to elide being “sanctioned by” and “subject to” the state, but also to ignore the resignifying power of cultural and conceptual appropriation. And, indeed the resignification of civic *theōria* as philosophical *theōria*—that is, wresting the value of political theorizing for the sake of philosophy—is precisely what Plato attempts. So, while a particularly civic mode of traditional *theōria* may serve to sanction the stay in Socrates’s execution, this legitimizing move is merely a point of departure on the way to theoretical philosophy. In a certain sense, then, a prior *kairos*, installed by the intersection of juridical and religious time, preconditions Socrates’s timely discussion of the soul by ushering in an opportune moment at which to think the inextricability of civic and private modes of theorizing, of politics and ethics, of the *polis* and the *psuchē*.³¹

WORKING AT MUSIC, WEAVING A MYTH

That Socrates turns to popular music once the ship to Delos sets sail not only highlights the significance of music to civic *theōria*, but also sets up Socrates’s music-making—both of the popular and philosophical registers—as fundamental to the act of theorizing. More bluntly, Plato associates Socrates with singing and song throughout the text. Cebes worries, for example, that Socrates’s death marks the loss of a “good singer of charms” (ἀγαθὸν ἐπὶ φδὸν) who assuages the

And even if the festival calendar, dependent on the former, displays greater regularity, this regularity is not a derivative of, say, state logic, but rather operates according to its own logic that happens to appeal to the regularity of the state. The “regularity” of the lunar cycle, therefore, only exists as proportion and numerical order through the state’s retroactive conferral, which is ultimately to suggest that the rubric of regularity is bound to state regulation and that the rhythmic mode introduces an element of contingency that cannot be determined by the state.

³¹ Indeed, much of the anxiety to which Socrates responds in the *Phaedo* is that his soul (*psuchē*) will not persist in its dispersal through death. This anxiety bespeaks the assumption that the concentrated soul is the essence of the individual, a formulation of personhood that reverses the Homeric view of the *psuchē* as merely a double or image (*eidōlon*) that exists only in death as the phantasm of a once-living being. While Jean-Pierre Vernant, citing the *Phaedo*, asserts that Plato is responsible for this revaluation of the *psuchē*—concomitant with a devaluation of the body—Socrates’s persistent failure to present a satisfactory argument for the immortality for the soul suggests that this issue is less than resolved. This failure may, moreover, not only suggest that the singularity of the *psuchē* is a fiction, but also implicitly insist that the soul-as-subject is always already and forever constituted within a collective, be it political or philosophical. Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Psyche: Simulacrum of the Body or Image of the Divine?” in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, ed. Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 186-192.

fear that death results in the scattering of the soul.³² Then, in order to persuade his students that his death is a blessing and not a misfortune, Socrates allies himself with swans, those fellow servants of Apollo who sing (ἐξῴδειν) not “for sorrow, in mourning for their own death,” but rather “most and best in their joy that they are to go to the god whose servants they are.”³³ And, after he concludes his eschatological myth of the soul in the Hades, Socrates advises,

Now it would not be fitting for a man of sense to maintain that all this is just as I have described it, but that this or something like it is true concerning our souls and their abodes, since the soul is shown to be immortal, I think he may properly and worthily venture to believe; for the venture is well worth while; and he ought to repeat such things to himself as if they were magic charms [ἐπάδειν], which is the reason why I have been lengthening out the story so long [μηκύνω τὸν μῦθον].³⁴

This final reference to song is particularly astounding in that it provides explicit instruction on how to read and engage with Socrates’s myth (*mūthos*). Myth, according to Socrates, should not be taken literally; rather, it requires figurative interpretation. But more important than interpretation is the repetition of myth as an incantation or charm. For Socrates, then, the power of myth is derived from its reification of figurative meaning through repetition. Following his command to read or, more accurately, sing myth figuratively, Socrates likens himself to a man of tragedy (ἀνὲρ τραγικός) and, thus, broadens the domain of myth to include the whole of the *Phaedo*.³⁵ If song reifies the efficacy of myth, then, as a result, the references to song throughout the *Phaedo* perform, through iteration, the very incantation that serves to mythify the life of Socrates.

Myth and song are intimately interwoven throughout the text as even the first reference to myth, the theoric delay authorized by the myth of Theseus, demonstrates. Civic *theōria* often involved a lavish and well-trained chorus (*choros*), but the *theōriai* to Delos were particularly magnificent. In the case of Deliac pilgrimages, the successful leader of a theoric mission (*architheōria*) “may even to some extent have been conceived of as following in the footsteps of the great Athenian hero, Theseus himself, the Athenian leader of youthful *choroi* [sic] *par excellence*.”³⁶ Theseus, as *Phaedo* explains, once led fourteen Athenian youth to Crete in order to defeat the Minotaur. Fifteen in total, this group numbered the precise size of the classical chorus, according to Euripidean and Sophoclean tragedy. It is no coincidence that Socrates is accompanied by fourteen friends just before his execution. Framed by this founding myth of

³² Plato, *Phaedo*, 78a.

³³ Plato, *Phaedo*, 85a.

³⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, 114d.

³⁵ Plato, *Phaedo*, 115a.

³⁶ Peter Wilson, *The Athenian Institution of the Khoregia: The Chorus, the City and the Stage* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 45. For a historical description of the relationship between *theōria* and *choregia*, see Wilson, *Khoregia*, 44–46.

Deliac *theōria*, Socrates assumes the role of Theseus leading his friends as a *choros* on a mission not necessarily to overcome the threat of death, but rather to assimilate death into the project of theoretical philosophy.

But the story of Theseus and the Minotaur is not the only mythic allusion to song woven through the *Phaedo*. Homer's *Odyssey* also works its way throughout the text and supports, both through intertextual and intratextual reference, a characterization of Socrates as one who gives into and disseminates, in return, the song of the Sirens. While no explicit citation of the Sirens is made in the *Phaedo*, the text evokes these mythological creatures through intertextual reference to the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. Famous for its emphasis on setting and context, Plato's *Phaedrus* invokes the Sirens by way of its description of the cicadas.³⁷ Once Phaedrus and Socrates find a place to rest outside of the Athenian walls, Socrates comments at the beauty of their chosen spot by proclaiming, among other things, how "it resounds with the shrill [λιγυρὸν] summer music of the chorus of cicadas."³⁸ The emphasis on "shrill" or "clear" (*liguros*) song carries through the *Phaedo*, and Socrates even comments on the etymology of this term as he calls upon the Muses to aid him in producing his first speech. "Come then, O tuneful [λίγειαί] Muses," Socrates cries, "whether ye receive this name from the quality of your song [ῥᾳδῆς] or from the musical race [γένος μουσικὸν] of the Ligians [Λιγύων], grant me your aid in the tale this most excellent man compels me to relate."³⁹ Whether the term *ligus* derives from the quality of the Muses's song or from the musical Ligians, the point of this etymological inquiry is to draw attention to the significance of the terms *liguros* and *ligus*. By associating this quality of shrillness and clarity in sound with both the cicadas and the Muses, Socrates highlights the affinity between the two. But he introduces a third group of characters when he returns to the myth of the cicadas. The cicadas, Socrates tells Phaedrus, used to be people, but when the Muses and song came into being, they were so enchanted that they sang instead of ate. So they withered and died but were born anew as cicadas who, upon their death, report to the Muses which people have served and honored each of them. In order to attain the highest honor, Socrates and Phaedrus must continue to practice philosophy "unmoved by the charm of their [the cicadas'] Siren voices."⁴⁰ What is, at first, characterized as the clarity and shrillness of the cicadas music and the Muses song becomes, in the end, the dangerously seductive song of the Sirens.

The introduction of the Sirens upon this final meditation on the cicadas and the Muses, however, is not entirely sudden because Socrates's emphatic characterization of song as *liguros* and *ligus* already serves as a conventional allusion to these creatures. The *Odyssey* uses the term twice to describe the song of the Sirens. In the first passage, Circe warns Odysseus of the Sirens and suggest a means whereby he may sail past them. She warns,

³⁷ For analysis of the *Phaedrus*'s setting, especially as it revolves around the cicadas, see G.R.F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

³⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 230c.

³⁹ Ibid., 237a.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 259a.

Whoso in ignorance draws near to them and hears the Sirens' voice, he nevermore returns, that his wife and little children may stand at his side rejoicing, but the Sirens beguile him with their clear-toned song [λιγυρήν...ᾠοιδῆν], as they sit in a meadow, and about them is a great heap of bones of mouldering men, and round the bones the skin is shrivelling. But do thou row past them, and anoint the ears of thy comrades with sweet wax, which thou hast kneaded, lest any of the rest may hear. But if thou thyself hast a will to listen, let them bind [δησάντων] thee in the swift ship hand and foot upright in the step of the mast, and let the ropes be made fast at the ends to the mast itself, that with delight thou mayest listen to the voice of the two Sirens.⁴¹

Not only does this passage demonstrate the association of shrill or clear-toned song with the Sirens. It also describes the victims of the Sirens' song as dead and desiccated corpses strewn about their small plot of land. In the context of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates's account of the cicadas cannot but evoke the image of these withered bodies. Socrates's myth of the cicadas, whose bodies withered away as they listened to the sweet song of the Muses, appears to be modeled precisely upon the more horrific myth of the Sirens. The second reference to clear-toned song in the *Odyssey* comes in Odysseus's confirmation that he has followed Circe's admonition. He recounts,

Then I anointed with this the ears of all my comrades in turn; and they bound [ἔδησαν] me in the ship hand and foot, upright in the step of the mast, and made the ropes fast at the ends to the mast itself; and themselves sitting down smote the grey sea with their oars. But when we were as far distant as a man can make himself heard when he shouts, driving swiftly on our way, the Sirens failed not to note the swift ship as it drew near, and they raised their clear-toned song [λιγυρήν...ᾠοιδῆν].⁴²

Despite the danger of the Sirens, Odysseus is so moved by curiosity and desire that he follows Circe's orders to have his men bind him to the ship's mast so that he can hear the seductive song, yet not fall victim to it. While Odysseus is saved from the seduction of song, the cicadas are not. Indeed, their enchantment by song transforms them, according to Socrates depiction, into both Sirens and the Sirens' victims. They both sing like the Sirens, and die by song like their victims. The Muses, thus, seem to give rise both to tuneful music and to the shrillness of the Sirens' song.

What, then, is Socrates in the *Phaedo*—Siren or victim of the Sirens? On the one hand, his alignment with Odysseus in this text places him on the side of the victim. As the two Homeric passages above indicate, bondage is a crucial aspect of Odysseus's listening to the song of the Sirens. Indeed, these bonds are the only thing that keep him from succumbing entirely to their shrill and clear-toned song. So moved by his desire for song is Odysseus, that he orders his men

⁴¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. A.T. Murray, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 12.41–52.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12.178–183.

to release him, but “Perimedes and Eurylochus arose and bound [him] with yet more bonds [δεσμοῖσι] and drew them tighter.”⁴³ The terms *desmos* (“bond”) and *deō* (“to bind or fasten”), from which the former is derived, are used in all accounts of Odysseus’s encounter with the sirens. And like Odysseus, Socrates’s last days are told in terms of bondage. The term used for prison “*desmōtērion*,” for example appears six times throughout the *Phaedo* in both a literal sense and a figurative sense to describe the relationship of the soul to the body.⁴⁴ On the other hand, while Odysseus remains bound to the ship, Socrates is ultimately unfettered through the text, first, literally and, then, figuratively through his death.⁴⁵ Thus, the language of bondage in the *Phaedo* alludes to Odysseus in order ultimately to invoke implicitly the song of the Sirens. That he loosens his bonds bring Socrates closer to the cicadas and, thus, to the Sirens. Indeed, as Socrates claims in the *Phaedrus*, to be a philosopher (*philosophos*) is also to be a lover of the Muses (*philomousos*),⁴⁶ but, of course, the most enthusiastic lovers of the Muses, the cicadas, ultimately become, for Socrates, not only the victims of the Sirens, but the Sirens themselves. By following the command of his repeated dream to “make music and work at it,” Socrates assumes the position of a *philomousos* and implicitly a singer of the Sirens’ song as well. He is, in fact, the character who constantly sings throughout this text. It is not surprising, then, that Alcibiades compares Socrates to the Sirens in the *Symposium*: “I withhold my ears perforce as from the Sirens, and make off as fast as I can, for fear I should go on sitting beside him till old age was upon me.”⁴⁷ Theoretical philosophy, thus, calls not just for seduction, but also for the possibility that one can be entirely undone or completely estranged from oneself—what Socrates calls the very “practice of death.”⁴⁸ As Judith Peraino aptly puts it, “To face the music of the Sirens is to engage with a monstrous queer desire, a desire that can disenfranchise and destroy, but also energize and sustain.”⁴⁹

The *Phaedo*’s references to the *Odyssey* are, finally, corroborated intratextually by the connection between the allusions to Odysseus and the explicit invocation of Penelope, his wife. In an attempt to underline the importance of mortifying the senses in order to practice theoretical philosophy, Socrates draws an analogy: the philosopher who works to free themselves of the body but gives into pain and pleasure engages “in futile toil [ἀνήνυτον ἔργον], like Penelope unweaving the web she wove.”⁵⁰ This invocation of Penelope is the only other use of the term *ergon* in the *Phaedo*, and it is characterized as an act that is unending (*anēnuton*), an act of repetition and delay. While this kind of work may seem to carry a negative tenor at this moment,

⁴³ Ibid., 195–196.

⁴⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, 57a, 58c, 59d, 59e, 114c.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 60c, 67d.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 259b.

⁴⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 216a.

⁴⁸ Plato, *Phaedo*, 81a.

⁴⁹ Judith A. Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 19.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Phaedo*, 84a.

it appears to share important qualities with the work of making music. From the start, the task of theorizing has been set up as a kind of temporal delay: the *theōria* to Delos delayed Socrates's execution and permitted one last attempt at philosophical *theōria*, which is performed as the repeated act of making music and working at it. Penelope's weaving is significant here because of its connection to the act of making of music. If we follow the etymological claim that the noun *oimē* (song) is cognate with the term *oimos* (thread) and derived from a verb-root meaning "to sew," then Socrates, who offers first a hymn (*prooimion*) to Apollo, not only sings but also sews from the start.⁵¹ But, like Penelope's weaving and unweaving, these acts are subsequently undone. Indeed, theorizing's rhythmic, repetitive delay seems to require the vacillation between working and unworking. Musical labor is, thus, set up in non-teleological terms, as a kind of resistance to teleological modes of labor and productivity, and this form of temporal resistance, as I will show, comes to characterize the kind of alternative action made possible by the contemplative life in Christian monasticism. One does not take up the practice of music and arrive ultimately at theoretical understanding of the Good. Even Socrates doubted his music-making practices. So perhaps the temporal resistance of theory calls us to doubt the teleology of productivity, of political life, and of life as it is governed by the state. Perhaps, then, the old syllogism—itsself a kind of teleology—is wrong. Perhaps Socrates *is* immortal. Or at least that is what Plato, eternally devoted to Socrates, would have us believe in the story that he has woven.

TRANSLATING THE THEORETICAL TRADITION

If we take seriously Jean Leclercq's claim that "Benedictine monasticism is attracted, not only to patristic sources in general, but to Eastern sources in particular" and that "St. Benedict had no wish to break with ancient monastic tradition, which was largely Eastern," then we are obligated, like those who follow the *Rule*, to read the works of John Cassian (ca. 360–435), whose *Conferences* and *Institutes* provide a critical bridge between Eastern and Western Christian monasticism.⁵² An account of Cassian's travels through the Egyptian desert recounted as a collection of his dialogues with various desert fathers, the *Conferences* is especially significant to histories of theory because it is, after all, ostensibly a text that attempts the translation of Greek *theōria* into Latin *contemplatio*. Translation for Cassian, though, is irreducible to linguistic exchange and instead is intimately bound to cultural exchange, to the handing down of Eastern traditions, which, I will show, center around the meditation on the Psalms.

The alliance of translation and tradition are of central concern in the first preface of the *Conferences* and, thus, serve to frame the entire text. Cassian first dedicates the text to the "most blessed Pope Leontius and holy brother Helladius" because, as he explains, they each descend in different ways from Pope Castor, whose original request initiated the written project of the

⁵¹ Gregory Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 63–64.

⁵² Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 89.

Institutes.⁵³ While Leontius is “united to the aforementioned man by family affection” and claims his due of the dedication “by hereditary right,” Helladius “has set out to pursue the sublime institutes of the anchorites” and “has desired to be instructed not in things of his own design [*non tam suis adinventionibus*] but in their traditions [*quam illorum traditionibus*].”⁵⁴ Precluded from familial lineage, Helladius like Cassian seeks connection with the desert fathers through a preservation of their traditions. He does not presume, in other words, to attain such spiritual exemplarity by dint of his own singular invention (*adinventio*), but through devotion to a particular community of anchorites and their tradition (*traditio*), in particular their spiritual exercises. Cassian expresses a similar sentiment in describing how the writing of the *Conferences* is a presentation “not as much my own institutes as those of the fathers.”⁵⁵ Indeed, central to the preservation of tradition is the act of writing itself. As Cassian describes, “In this respect, now that I have settled in a harbor of silence, a vast sea lies before me, inasmuch as I am daring to commit to writing something [*quaedam tradere audeam memoriae litterarum*] on the institutes and teachings of such men.”⁵⁶ Cassian must fare the seas of writing in order to resurrect the voices of the desert fathers, silent in their absence. By employing the term *tradere* alongside the etymologically related term *traditio* in order to describe the writing of the conferences, he comes to think of writing as a “handing down” or “imparting” of the fathers’ teachings “into the memory of letters.” Cassian, thus, forwards a theory of writing as a memorialization of tradition.

What he means here, by *memoria litterarum*, however, is not the entombing of a lived tradition, but rather its opposite. What Cassian sees in the act of writing is the capacity to sustain the vitality of the monastic tradition. To be clear, he sees this capacity operating not only through his brothers’ eventual move to put into practice the teachings recorded in the text. More significantly, he envisions his writings as capable, themselves, of bringing the desert fathers to life. “And so let your prayers,” he petitions his readers,

obtain from him who has judged us worthy to see them and to be their disciples and friends the bestowal of a complete recollection of those same traditions [*earundem traditionum memoriam plenam*] and a pleasing mode of expression. Thus, while explaining those things as holily and as completely as we received them, we may be able to put before you those very same men, embodied somehow in their own institutes and (what is more) speaking in the Latin tongue

⁵³ John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), preface.2. The original Latin will follow John Cassian, *Conférences*, ed. E. Pichery, 2 vols. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1955–1958), and all citations will take the form conference.section.line, except the preface, which only has lines. The title pope was commonly used to refer to bishops at this time. And that Helladius, who eventually becomes bishop, is referred to here as “holy brother” indicates that he was likely a priest like Cassian.

⁵⁴ Cassian, *Conferences*, preface.3.

⁵⁵ Ibid., preface.5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., preface.3.

[*quodammodo suis institutis incorporatos et quod maius est Latino disputantes eloquio*].⁵⁷

In calling for a *memoriam plenam* (complete recollection or memory) of the desert fathers, Cassian hopes to reproduce comprehensively the lessons he was taught in the desert Skete. Furthermore, assuming the mimetic quality of his text, he presumes ultimately to bring these men to life, fully embodied (*incorporatos*) and speaking aloud. Cassian acknowledges, however, a significant and astonishing change in these characters brought to life: instead of speaking their native Greek, they speak in Latin (*Latino disputantes eloquio*). But, of course, these characters do not speak Latin of their own volition; it is Cassian's work of translation that allows them to do so. His characterization of writing is, thus, twofold—on the one hand, supporting continuity by handing down the lessons of those who have come before and, on the other hand, recognizing the discontinuity of translation across linguistic and cultural lines. By extension, Cassian furnishes a theory of tradition as both continuous and ever-changing.

The astounding capacity for writing to conjure the embodied and speaking desert fathers cannot be overstated. In fact, Cassian's faith in this power of language is what enables him to take on the project of the *Conferences* in the first place. In moving from the *Institutes* to the *Conferences*, Cassian asks that we "proceed [*transeamus*] from the external and visible life of the monks [*ab exteriori ac visibili monachorum*], which we have summarized in the previous books, to the invisible character of the inner person [*ad invisibilem interioris hominis habitum*], and from the practice of the canonical prayers let our discourse arise [*ascendat eloquium*] to the unceasing nature of the perpetual prayer which the Apostle commands."⁵⁸ To move in language from the domain of the visible to that of the invisible is surely a difficult task, since Cassian must relinquish any fantasy that language is anchored in observable referents out in the world. Instead, as his description of the desert fathers above demonstrates, he is required to embrace a formulation of language as productive and creative. Once again, Cassian makes recourse to the language of "movement across" when he deploys the word *transeamus*, but he does not mean a simple passage from visible to invisible. Instead, *transire*, here, means to surpass or exceed. Just as the movement to Latin exceeds or moves beyond the Greek—"(*what is more*) speaking in the Latin tongue [*quod maius est Latino disputantes eloquio*]," he writes—his eloquence must ascend to the heights of the inner and invisible person.⁵⁹ In this way, the invisible exceeds not only the domain of the visible, but also the kind of linguistic operations made available to that domain. The *Conferences* as a work of translation is, thus, a project of rhetorical invention that teaches the greatest eloquence of "the unceasing nature of the perpetual prayer."

Although it is striking that, unlike its directionally akin terms *tradere*, *transire*, and *traditio*, *translatio* is not directly invoked in the preface, it ultimately governs the way that Cassian frames his literary project. Indeed, by referring to his own requirement to practice *translatio linguarum*, here the translation of Greek into Latin, *translatio* is rendered all the more

⁵⁷ Ibid., preface.6.

⁵⁸ Ibid., preface.5.

⁵⁹ My emphasis.

present by its very absence. But *translatio linguarum* is not the only sense of this term that pervades the text. *Translatio*, for Cassian, is also the movement from the literal to the figurative, the recruiting of figure, metaphor, and allegory to render discernible what is inner and invisible.⁶⁰ Thus, the *transitus* from the visible to the invisible is enacted through not only linguistic, but also literary and rhetorical *translatio*. The enlisting of figurative language would be one way to understand Cassian's claim that his *Conferences* presents the embodied and speaking desert fathers. But, I should note, that this does not leave them any more wanting in life. Instead, by making such a claim to figurative resurrection, Cassian affirms the real and material effects of figurative language—not only its ability to produce bodies, but its ability to produce material effects on the reader's body. This more capacious understanding of *translatio* implies, then, that the translation of Greek *theōria* into Latin *contemplatio* exceeds any simple metaphrasis, or word-for-word translation.

Instead, this translation involves concomitantly the transmission of practices organizing contemplative prayer and the deployment of various rhetorical strategies to imagine what putatively exceeds the visible world. The connection between *theōria* and *contemplatio* is established early into Cassian's first conference, which presents in narrative and dialogic form the instruction of Abba Moses on the goal (*scopos*) and end (*finis*) of the monk. Once he identifies "purity of heart" (*puritas cordis*) as the principal *scopos* of the monk, Abba Moses explains to the attentive Cassian and Germanus that the monk is to perform all devotional practices—"fasts, vigils, labors [*labores*], bodily deprivations, readings, and other virtuous things"—for the sake of this goal.⁶¹ He then turns to the figures of Martha and Mary found in the Gospel of Luke in order to elaborate on the relationship between these practical observances and the principal virtue of monastic life, "which is purity of heart or love" (*id est puritatem cordis, quod est caritas*).⁶² "Martha and Mary," explains Abba Moses,

are very beautifully portrayed in the Gospel as examples of this attitude [*mentis*] and manner of behavior [*actus*]. For although Martha was indeed devoting herself to a holy service, ministering as she was to the Lord himself and to his disciples, while Mary was intent only on spiritual teaching [*Maria spiritali tantummodo intenti doctrinae*] and was clinging to Jesus' feet, which she was kissing and anointing with the ointment of a good confession, yet it was she whom the Lord preferred, because she chose the better part, and one which could not be taken from her. For as Martha was toiling [*laboraret*] with devout concern and was

⁶⁰ This meaning of *translatio* is not specific to Cassian, but rather the meaning propagated by teachers of rhetoric. See for example, Augustine's discussion of the metaphorical or figurative sign (*signa translata*) in Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 37.32–33.

⁶¹ Ibid., 1.7.1.

⁶² Ibid., 1.7.2.

distracted with her work [*dispensatione distenta*], she saw that she could not accomplish so large a task by herself.⁶³

Jesus's expression of preference for Mary singles out, for Abba Moses, contemplation as the primary concern for the monastic profession. According to his reading, the example of Mary and Martha is a clear illustration "that the Lord considered the chief good to reside in *theoria* alone—that is, in divine contemplation [*in theoria sola, id est in contemplatione diuina*]." ⁶⁴ Not only identifying the centrality of contemplation to the monastic life, these words attest to the process of translation taking place on the page. Translation, however, is not an act that affirms identity; nor is it a smooth movement of the exposition of words as they sprawl across the page. Rather than establishing semantic identity like an equal sign between two equivalent terms, the text's *id est* interrupts expository flow in the form of a hesitation, hiccup, or stutter and marks the task of translation as truly "toiling with devout concern." Indeed, Cassian's translation of *theōria* into *contemplatio*, presented in the voice of Abba Moses, is itself a form of devotional observance requiring hard work. How, then, does Cassian justify his effort to write the *Conferences* while also upholding the primacy of contemplation over action?

While the allegorical interpretation of Martha and Mary concludes with Jesus's praise of contemplation over action, Abba Moses works hard to sustain the value of Martha's practical ministry. Describing her plea for help in completing her task, Abba Moses asserts that Martha "was calling [Mary] not to a disreputable task [*non ad uile opus*], to be sure, but to a praiseworthy service [*ad laudabile...ministerium*]." ⁶⁵ But, as he recounts, Jesus ultimately concludes, "Martha, Martha, you are concerned and troubled about many things [*erga plurima*], but few things are necessary, or even one [*paucis vero opus est aut etiam uno*]. Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." ⁶⁶ While the story still upholds Mary over Martha and contemplation over action, according to Abba Moses, the praiseworthy service that Martha performs is not entirely disavowed. Neither is it the case that labor *per se* is devalued in any way by this allegory. The most marked distinction between Mary and Martha according to this telling, in fact, is their experience of different "'tensions' of the mind," as one scholar puts it. ⁶⁷ While Mary pays active attention (*intentio*) to Jesus's spiritual teachings, Martha is in a state of distraction (*distentio*) on account of all the tasks of her ministry. Martha, then, has taken on too many tasks while Mary has taken only one. In a state of *distentio*, she is torn apart into multiplicity even literally on the page as Jesus calls to her twice, "Martha, Martha." It is not the labor that Martha undertakes that obliges her to take the lesser part, but rather that the variety of her labor results in her distraction.

⁶³ Ibid., 1.8.1–2.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 1.8.2.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Andrea Nightingale, *Once out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 58.

Augustine is instructive on the dangers of *distentio* especially because his formulation of this term comes out of a theory of time articulated precisely through his engagement with the Psalms. In his sermon on Psalm 121, for example, Augustine laments the instability of time both externally in the world and psychically in the soul:

Do not our years fail every day, brothers and sisters? Do they ever stand still? The years that have come exist no longer; those which are still to come have no existence yet. The years that have passed have already failed us, and the years of our future will fail us in their turn. The same is true, brothers and sisters, even of a single day. Take today: we are talking now, at this moment, but the earlier hours have slipped away and the later hours have not yet arrived. When they have arrived, they too will slip away and fail.... A person has a body, but a body is not absolute being, because it has no stability in itself. It changes with the passing stages of life, it changes as we move from place to place and changes with the seasons, it is changed by disease and infirmities of the flesh.... Not even the human soul can stand. What a variety of thoughts flit across it! What intense feelings of pleasure sway it! How fiercely it is pulled this way and that and stretched by its desires [*cupiditatibus diverberetur atque distenditur*]⁶⁸

The soul, like the earthly time of years or days, is not stable in itself and, thus, falls into *distentio*. In the case of time, Augustine describes *distentio* as its tendency always to slip away. No matter how small the unit of time—a year, a day, a second—the now is not a stable moment, but always slipping away just as the past already has and just as the future also will. In the case of the soul, *distentio* is the distraction, extension, or pulling apart caused by the lustful desire of *cupiditas*. Augustine, thus, connects the soul's distention with improper desire, but also implies that cupidity is a constant threat in worldly time. As surely as time passes, cupidity threatens psychic distention.

In order to combat such distention, Augustine invokes both *intentio* and *attentio*, or modes of attention. The tension between *distentio*, on the one hand, and *attentio*, on the other, can be seen in Augustine's example of singing a song:

Suppose I am about to recite a psalm [*canticum*] which I know. Before I begin, my expectation is directed towards the whole. But when I have begun, the verses from it which I take into the past become the object of my memory. The life of this act of mine is stretched two ways [*distenditur vita huius actionis meae*], into the past because of the words I have already said and into my expectation because of those which I am about to say. But my attention is on what is present [*praesens tamen*

⁶⁸ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, vol. 6, 121–150 (New York: New City Press, 2004), 121.6. All Latin is taken from CCSL 38–40.

adest attentio mea]: by that [*per quam (attentionem)*] the future is transferred to become the past.⁶⁹

Through the course of singing, Augustine is naturally led into distention, which is here posed in terms similar to his lamentation about time. Like the failure of the past and future, the memory of the words that he has sung and the expectation of the words that he will sing draw him in two different directions. *Attentio*, in contrast, abides in the present. In fact, as Augustine describes it, *attentio* enables the very transformation of future into past. Thus, it enables the active attention of the singer who carries the words of a song from the future, through the present, to the past. Augustine does not so much ignore entirely the future and past as he does contract time into the transformative moment, to concentrate the entirety of a song, the entirety of time into the now.

But it seems that singing songs or Psalms, for Augustine, always risks the danger of distention, distraction, or dispersal. During a meditation on the Psalms, Augustine confesses that he has vacillated on his stance about their proper performance. He admits, for example, that he had “sometimes gone so far as to wish to banish all the melodies and sweet chants commonly used for David’s psalter from my ears and from the Church as well.” He had also considered the method of recitation promoted by Athanasius of Alexandria, who “used to make the Reader of the psalm chant with so flexible a speech-rhythm that he was nearer to reciting than to singing.” Ultimately, though, he rejects both options, since his own experience of song allows him to recognize “the great utility of music in worship,” and he decides to approve of singing in Church:

Thus I fluctuate between the danger of pleasure [*periculum voluptatis*] and the experience of the beneficent effect [*experimentum salubritatis*], and I am more led to put forward the opinion (not as an irrevocable view) that the custom of singing in the Church is to be approved, so that through the delights of the ear [*oblectamenta aurium*] the weaker mind may rise up towards the devotion of worship [*affectum pietatis*].⁷⁰

By introducing the dangers of *voluptas*, Augustine suggests an affective dimension to the temporal distention effected by singing a song that one knows. The “distension or stretching in feeling and in sense-perception” (*affectus sensusque distenditur*) experienced in song, perhaps, bespeaks an affective relationship to time itself. Oddly then, it is the expert, the one who has lived more life or who knows the Psalms better, who is at greater risk of distention and remaining attached to experience. This might explain why the weaker mind is not distracted, but actually moved towards piety by song. It may also explain Augustine’s persistent anxiety about singing the Psalms.

While Cassian may share Augustine’s debasement of *distentio*, he does not share his anxiety about the Psalms. Indeed, the Psalms occupy a central position in the *Conferences*’s teachings on spiritual knowledge and prayer. The fourteenth conference is perhaps the most oft-

⁶⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11.28.38. All Latin is taken from the PL 32.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 10.33.50.

cited portion of this text on account of the four-fold exegetical method provided therein. As Abba Nesteros teaches, knowledge comes in two forms—πρακτικη, or “practical,” and θεωρητικη, or “theoretical,” both written in Greek script. Theoretical knowledge can also be subdivided into historical knowledge and three kinds of spiritual knowledge—tropology, allegory, and anagogy.⁷¹ Taken together, these four kinds of theoretical knowledge comprise a fourfold method of scriptural interpretation.⁷² However, the purpose of categorizing these forms of knowledge is not to provide a stock of methods from which readers can pick and choose. Abba Nesteros is clear from the outset that “the teaching and profession of our religion...consist in a defined order and method [*certo ordine ac ratione subsistit*].”⁷³ These forms of knowledge are inseparable from the ordered sequence in which a monk is meant to understand them. As a result, practical knowledge is inseparable from theoretical knowledge. Moreover, while the contemplative life of the monk persistently seeks theoretical knowledge, specifically of the spiritual sort, it cannot arrive at this kind of knowing without the foundations of practical knowledge. As Abba Nesteros commands,

Maintaining the diligence in reading that I think you have, then, make every effort to get a complete grasp of practical [*actualem*]—that is, ethical—discipline as soon as possible. For without this the theoretical purity [*theoretica puritas*] that we have spoken of cannot be acquired. The only people who attain to it, possessing it as a reward after the expenditure of much toil and labor [*post multa operam ac laborum*], are those who have found perfection not in the words of other teachers but in the virtuousness of their own acts. Obtaining this understanding not from meditating on the law but as a result of their toil [*de fructus operis*], they sing with the psalmist: “From your commandments I have understood” (Ps 118:104). And after all their passions have been purified they say with confidence: “I will sing and I will understand in the undefiled way” (Ps 100:1–2). For the one who is singing the psalm, who is moving forward in the undefiled way with the stride of a pure heart [*puri cordis*], will understand what is sung.⁷⁴

The injunction is clear: theoretical purity—rendered now in Latin transliteration as if to reflect the movement towards fuller understanding—cannot be attained without first mastering practical or ethical discipline, which requires much toil and labor. The invocation of the Psalms is remarkable here because it seems to operate in two ways. On the one hand, Abba Nesteros calls upon the Psalms to support in content the theme of understanding. On the other hand, he suggests that the very act of singing the Psalms will lead to understanding through its capacity to

⁷¹ Ibid., 14.8.1.

⁷² For an analysis of Cassian that sets him within the context of other exegetical methods, see the classic Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 2, trans. Mark Sebanc (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 135–138.

⁷³ Ibid., 14.1.2.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 14.9.2–3.

move one towards purity of heart. We might even say that the monk cannot understand the very verses of the Psalms that Abba Nesteros cites without first training in the labor and toil of singing the Psalms. In this way, the Psalms appear to stand for both practical discipline and theoretical purity. By occupying the site of action and contemplation, the work of the Psalms secures the inextricability of practical and theoretical knowledge. Thus, the singing of the Psalms is figured as an exemplary form of musical labor organizing both practical and theoretical knowledge.

The centrality of the Psalms to the life of the desert fathers is underscored by the role that they play in the ninth and tenth conferences, which together were to serve as the conclusion of the original text. These two conferences on prayer, thus, present in many ways the culminating point towards which Cassian's text has been directed. He begins his ninth conference with the claim that "the end of every monk and the perfection of his heart incline him to constant and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer."⁷⁵ At the height of the prayerful life Cassian, through the voice of Abba Isaac, identifies what he calls "fiery prayer," which he describes as "wordless prayer which is known and experienced by very few."⁷⁶ While the other four types of prayer—supplication, prayer, intercession, and thanksgiving—are distinguishable from one another based on their content and mode of address, fiery prayer exceeds these kinds of external qualifiers. Its distinction is felt more than known. As Abba Isaac explains, "This transcends all human understanding and is distinguished not, I would say, by a sound of the voice or a movement of the tongue or a pronunciation of words. Rather, the mind is aware of it when it is illuminated by an infusion of heavenly light from it, and not by narrow human words."⁷⁷ In the same way that the labor of monastic obedience undoes the very notion of labor, fiery prayer, without sound, movement, or words, undoes the very kinds of constructive moves that the other four types of prayer perform. While it stands above the other types of prayer, however, it is not attained by teleological progress. Indeed, Abba Isaac is at a loss to describe "the very different types of compunction, with their origins and causes, by which the mind, ardent and enkindled, is moved to pure and fervent prayers."⁷⁸ Instead he offers a collection of exemplary moment when, by God's grace, he has been aroused to fiery prayer: "Sometimes, while we have been singing, the verse of some psalm has offered the occasion for fiery prayer. Now and then the melodious modulation of a brother's voice has excited insensible minds to intense prayer. We know as well that the clarity and seriousness of the cantor have contributed a great deal to the fervor of those in attendance."⁷⁹ According to Abba Isaac's examples, fiery prayer is catalyzed by the Psalms and, in particular, the musicality of their recitation. Their sensuousness activates the outer senses so as to arouse the inner experience of ardent love for God.

The significance of the Psalms to Cassian's program for cultivating continuous prayer is ultimately illustrated by Abba Isaac's formula for maintaining the discipline of prayerful attention. In Conference 10, Germanus anxiously explains that the mind "is ever wandering to

⁷⁵ Ibid., 9.2.1.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 9.25.1.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 9.26.1.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 9.26.1–2.

and fro, tossed about by different things as if it were drunk.”⁸⁰ He worries that he will not be able to maintain his attention and diligence in prayer by the very fact that the mind is always wandering from thought to thought. Thus, he turns to Abba Isaac seeking a formula that will support not only a constant prayer, but also “the most sublime discipline, which teaches us to cling constantly to God.”⁸¹ Sympathetic to Germanus’s plea, Abba Isaac explains that training in contemplation is like learning how to write insofar as both require practice and the reproduction of models. He, thus, concedes to teach Cassian and Germanus how to maintain prayerful attention: “The formula for this spiritual theoria should also be transmitted to you. Always fixing your gaze very steadfastly upon it, you should learn to reflect on it uninterruptedly to your own benefit and become capable of mounting to still higher insights by using it and meditating on it.”⁸² This one formula will enable Cassian and Germanus to remain attentive to prayer and to reach the heights of fiery prayer. At last, then, Abba Isaac reveals that this “devotional formula proposed to you as absolutely necessary for possessing the perpetual awareness of God” is the constant meditation upon Psalm 70:1, which reads, “O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me.”⁸³ What Abba Isaac comes to suggest here is that this formula is not only an aid that will help Cassian and Germanus; it is, in fact, “absolutely necessary” for their cultivation of unceasing prayer. The most basic but the most necessary element of the prayerful life is, thus, contained in this single verse from the Psalms. In effect, this psalm stands in a synecdochic relationship to the entire book of Psalms. As Abba Isaac continues to explain, “It takes up all the emotions that can be applied to human nature and with great correctness and accuracy it adjusts itself to every condition and every attack.... This verse, I say, is necessary and useful for each one of us in whatever condition we may live.”⁸⁴ What this plea to God embodies is every possible emotion and affective disposition that one might experience. In addition, it is suitable to every person. In this way, Psalm 70:1 serves as the most flexible and basic formula for prayer, but also the most fundamental element of it.⁸⁵

By containing all emotion possible for human nature, this psalm emphasizes the significance of experience to understanding scripture and to cultivating unceasing prayer. As Abba Isaac elaborates,

The divine Scripture is clearer and its inmost organs [*venae medullaeque*], so to speak, are revealed to us when our experience [*experientia*] not only perceives but

⁸⁰ Ibid., 10.8.5.

⁸¹ Ibid., 10.8.3.

⁸² Ibid., 10.10.1.

⁸³ Ibid., 10.10.2.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 10.10.3–5.

⁸⁵ The identification of a single psalm as containing all possible emotions and affects, is a more constricted version of the claim that Athanasius makes in his “Letter to Marcellinus,” wherein he claims that the entire book of Psalms contains every possible condition that one may find oneself in. See Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter To Marcellinus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 101–130.

even anticipates its thought, and the meanings of the words are disclosed to us not by exegesis but by proof. When we have the same disposition in our heart [*cordis affectum*] with which each psalm was sung or written down, then we shall become like its author, grasping its significance beforehand rather than afterward.... And from the inner disposition of the heart we shall bring forth not what has been committed to memory but what is inborn in the very nature of things. Thus we shall penetrate its meaning not through the written text but with experience [*experientia*] leading the way.⁸⁶

Abba Isaac explains the move from this single Psalm to the entire Psalter and, ultimately, to all of scripture as the monastic subject's assumption of the prophet's voice. The monk penetrates so deeply into scripture to find that ultimately the affects of the heart align with the affects expressed in scripture. The scripture is not something to be interpreted, but rather to be experienced. Indeed, according to Abba Isaac's praise of Psalm 70:1, this verse contains the entirety of the affective inventory one may need to experience scripture properly. In fact, it seems that experience does not even necessarily exist prior to the recitation of the Psalms, but is rather shaped by them. The singing of the Psalms provides an occasion for the monk to become the author of his own experience. In this way, psalter recitation is not simply a rote, repetitive practice that subjugates the monk to the abbot's rule. Instead, this prayerful practice enables the monk to become most fully who he is meant to be by becoming "like its author, grasping its significance beforehand rather than afterward."

Ultimately, the production of the monastic subject depends upon the sensible arousal of song. What seems like a rote exercise—repeating the book of Psalms on a weekly basis—is anything but. As Cassian indicates, the recitation of the Psalms is not an act of retrieving a memory. Instead, it is the active and generative fruition of loving desire. Indeed, by emphasizing the sensual and material aspects of scriptural engagement—by penetrating scripture's "inmost organs"—Cassian leads us to an understanding of Christian contemplation that is not opposed to action, but rather the product of much hard work. But by unfolding through repetition and delay, contemplation and theory put into question teleological modes of action and production. Like Socrates, the monk takes up a theoretical life as a form of resistance, entirely aware of the possibility of one's transformative undoing in God, in community, in time.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 10.11.5–6.

Chapter 2

“Only He Who Sings It Hears It”: Bernard of Clairvaux and the Song of Songs

*On my bed through the nights
I sought him whom my soul loves
I sought him and I did not find.*

*[in lectulo meo per noctes
quæsiui quem diligit anima mea
quæsiui illum et non inveni]*
—The Song of Songs 3:1

“The function [of the monk] is not to teach, but rather to lament.”
—Bernard of Clairvaux, Letter 89

IN BED WITH BERNARD

There once was a certain Bernard who, finding himself in a liminal scene between an “absurd dream” (*un rêve absurde*) and the “world of reality” (*le monde réel*), awoke to feel the contours of another “body pressing heavily against him.” While Bernard was asleep “his friend had come close up to him—and, for that matter, the bed [*lit*] was too narrow to allow of much distance.” As we are told, Bernard turned over to sleep on his side and, as a result, felt a “warm breath tickling his neck.” Was this move by Bernard an attempt to turn away or, in turning away, to expose himself not-so-inadvertently to an airy caress? In either case, after a while, a final move was made, this time by Bernard’s friend: “Bernard [had] nothing but his short day-shirt” covering his half-somnolent body when one of his friend’s “arms [was] flung across him, weighing oppressively and indiscreetly on his flesh.” Unsure if his friend was really asleep, “he [freed] himself gently” from this play of desire.¹ Or, did he? If his dream was the site of absurdity, then how do we understand this embodied scene of choreographed touches, caresses, and tickling breath? What kind of unconscious call did Bernard hear in this playful interaction?

¹ André Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1925), 71. All English translations of this text are from, André Gide, *The Counterfeiters with Journal of “The Counterfeiters”*, trans. Dorothy Bussy (New York: Knopf, 1955), 56.

Another version of the story proceeds a bit differently. According to the account of this other Bernard,

the devil tried to play a trick on him. While he was sleeping, a naked girl snuck into bed [*in lectum*] with him. When he became aware of this, he peacefully and silently ceded to her that part of the bed that she had occupied and moved over to the other side and went to sleep. She was miserable about this and waited expectantly; then she started stroking him and tried to stimulate him. Finally, since he took no notice of her, the impudent girl blushed and, filled with dismay and amazement at his persistence, got up and hurried away.²

According to this second story, Bernard's strength and calm allow him to resist the seductive wiles of this girl filled with lust. Awoken by her presence, he does not give in, does not move in response to her advances, and, as a result of her confusion and shame, the woman flees from the room. Bernard's escape from the play of desire is, on this account, much more definitive and secure. His chastity remains intact.

Written nearly eight centuries apart, what these accounts present are two narratives about two different Bernards. The first derives from André Gide's novel *The Counterfeiters* (1925), and the second is an extract from *The First Life of Bernard of Clairvaux* (*Vita Prima Bernardi*) begun by Bernard's friend and Benedictine abbot William of St. Thierry (ca. 1075–1148) in 1147.³ But, exactly how different are they? On the one hand, one might be tempted to claim that these texts represent quite distinct textual relationships to history. While the former is a novel and, therefore, a work of fiction, the latter provides a historical account of the life of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who founded the Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux in 1115 and served as its abbot until 1128. On the other hand, as a text intended to support Bernard of Clairvaux's canonization, *The First Life* conforms to the rhetorical norms of hagiography by highlighting the ways in which Bernard exemplifies particular Christian virtues.⁴ As a Cistercian reformer, for

² William of St. Thierry, Arnold of Bonneval, and Geoffrey of Auxerre, *The First Life of Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Hilary Costello, Cistercian Fathers Series 76 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 9–10. All Latin is taken from William of St. Thierry, *Vita prima sancti Bernardi Claraevallis abbatis*, ed. Christine Vande Veire (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

³ After William died in 1148, the project of completing Bernard's *Prima Vita* was taken up, first, by Benedictine abbot Arnold of Bonneval and, then, completed by Cistercian Geoffrey of Auxerre, who was Bernard's secretary and later Abbot of Igny and Abbot of Clairvaux. See Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker, introduction to *St. Bernard of Clairvaux: The story of his Life as recorded in the Vita Prima Bernardi by certain of his contemporaries, William of St. Thierry, Arnold of Bonnevaux, Geoffrey and Philip of Clairvaux, and Odo of Deuil* (London: Mowbray and Co., 1960), 1–3.

⁴ In fact, when Bernard died on August 20, 1153, Geoffrey had already begun to compile a *vita* for Bernard's canonization, but the process did not move as quickly as Geoffrey and others had hoped. While Bernard's followers had expected the process to be expedited by Pope Eugenius III, who had not only been a monk at Clairvaux but also a Cistercian abbot, he died just over a month before Bernard. On account of this complication, Bernard's canonization was not declared until 1174 by Pope Alexander III after the

example, Bernard would have adhered strictly to the *Rule of Benedict* and, as a result, taken quite seriously its enjoinder to obedience. Thus, *The First Life* emphasizes not only Bernard's predisposition to obedience even as a child, but also the very way in which his life has always adhered to something like a monastic rule of life. According to the text, Bernard's virtue and his predilection for the monasticism derive from his mother Aleth, who serves as a model of spirituality upon which his own exemplarity is grounded, for she insists upon raising her seven children in a religious way of life: "As they grew up she kept them under her guiding hands, bringing them up in a kind of monastic fashion rather than that of the court [*eremo magis quam curiae*]. She did not allow them sweet delicate foods but rather common and nourishing food, and so she prepared them, under the Lord's guidance, as if teaching them the way of life of a hermit [*quasi continuo ad eremum transmittendos*]."⁵ Aleth, thus instills in her children from the very beginning an appreciation for the habits of the eremitic life. Raised like a monk from his birth, Bernard is primed for Cistercian monasticism by his mother's austere guidance.

Furthermore, Aleth embodies the very values of Cistercian monasticism as if she too were a nun, thus serving as a model of conduct for her children all of whom eventually enter the monastic life. As the text describes, "She followed in her own way [*in ordine suo*] the rule of the apostle [*apostolicam regulam*] and maintained her household in the fear of the Lord under her husband [*subdita viro*], intent on works of mercy and guiding her children with sound discipline [*disciplina*]."⁶ Once again, the text describes Aleth as a kind of loving teacher (*magister*) leading her children into the discipline (*disciplina*) of monasticism. But here her style of parenting is based precisely on her own adherence to a *regula*, or "rule of life," grounded in her submission under her husband (*subdita viro*), much like the obedience of a monk to his abbot. And in describing Aleth's eventual death, the text recounts how "for many years before her death, she brought up her children, insofar as a woman could who is obedient to her husband's authority [*sub potestate viri*] and does not have rights over her own body [*nec habenti proprii corporis potestatem*]."⁷ This description of Aleth explicitly cites the *Rule of Benedict* on the procedures for receiving monks, which directs the novice to donate all his belongings to the monastery because "he will not have even his own body at his disposal [*nec proprii corporis potestatem se habiturum*]" (RB 58.25). Thus, it secures her submission to a semi-monastic life by implying that she follows the *Rule* despite her lay status. What is more, Bernard comes to emulate his mother's virtuous disposition because, as the text explains, "he was obedient to his parents and subject to them [*parentibus oboediens et subditus*]."⁸ In Bernard, submission is finally tied to the Benedictine and Cistercian virtue of obedience, and this link retroactively renders Aleth an equally obedient subject, who "in her home, in her married life, in her dealings with the world around her...was for the most part living an eremitic or monastic life [*eremiticam seu*

submission of Geoffrey's final revision. See Hilary Costello, trans., introduction to *The First Life of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Cistercian Fathers Series 76 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), ix.

⁵ William of St. Thierry et al., *First Life*, 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸ Ibid., 6.

monasticam vitam].”⁹ Even before Bernard enters the Cistercian Order, then, his family structures itself on the very model of the monastery. Disciplined in a rule of life founded upon obedience, Bernard is subject not just to his parents, but more specifically to his mother, who assumes the rule of familial abbess. Like mother, like son. In the end, *The First Life*’s status as a hagiographical text does not *represent* a historical Bernard of Clairvaux, but rather produces a portrait of Bernard suitable for canonization. It is not the representation of history, but the writing of history itself.

The fictional status of Gide’s *The Counterfeiters* exploits the artificiality of the hagiographical genre in order to rewrite Bernard in the present. That the novel’s Bernard Profitendieu is inspired by Bernard of Clairvaux is a common observation.¹⁰ Not only does his surname allegorically evoke some form of benefit in God (*profit-en-Dieu*) or blessedness, but his father figure is named Albéric in apparent reference to Albéric of Cîteaux (d. 1109), who, with Robert of Molesme (1028–1111) and Stephen Harding (ca. 1050–1134), founded the Cistercian Order. Because of this connection, Bernard Profitendieu often comes to stand for the virtue of heteronormative citizenship in Gide’s novel and, in this way, seems to extend the hagiographical project initiated in the twelfth century into the twentieth century.¹¹ However, Bernard’s waking scene questions the dominance of this interpretation by rendering ambiguous the relationship of desire between Bernard and Olivier, with whom he shares a bed. What is queer about Bernard’s interaction with Olivier in this scene, though, is not specifically that they are two young men sharing a bed despite the way that their friendship certainly highlights, in retrospect, the eroticism in the homosocial space of the monastery.¹² Rather, it is Gide’s depiction of desire that seems to radically rewrite the scene of attempted seduction that we find in *The First Life*. Whereas Bernard of Clairvaux is depicted as the epitome of determination and persistence in resisting the naked girl’s advances, Bernard Profitendieu lingers, for a moment, in his somnolence. He does and he does not give in to Olivier. As Michael Lucey suggests, “The details of Bernard waking up already indicate the dispossession effects of sexuality—and our waking attempts to compensate for that dispossession—by placing sexuality in a problematic space between waking and sleeping.”¹³ For Lucey, sexuality is grounded in an understanding of desire that does not fortify the sovereignty of the subject, but rather dispossesses the subject of any claim to sovereignty.

To be clear, the Bernard of *The Counterfeiters* conforms in many ways to the characterization of Bernard found in his hagiography. Just as Bernard of Clairvaux escapes the

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Alain Goulet, *André Gide, “Les Faux-Monnayeurs,” mode d’emploi* (Paris: Sedes, 1991).

¹¹ Michael Lucey, *Gide’s Bent: Sexuality, Politics, Writing* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 115.

¹² For investigations of homosocial eroticism in monastic life, see William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050–1230* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and, Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience, 350–1250* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

¹³ Lucey, *Gide’s Bent*, 123.

naked girl, Bernard Profitendieu eventually “frees himself gently” from Olivier’s embrace.¹⁴ He is an exemplar of self-discipline and self-determination, having left home at the novel’s outset after learning that he was conceived from an extramarital affair. He consolidates, for many readers, the connection between the themes of firm character and authenticity that run throughout the novel in contrast to inauthenticity and perversion—or, more specifically, homosexuality—and, therefore, exemplifies the good citizen.¹⁵ Indeed, even his heterosexuality is implicitly idealized by the way that the novel characterizes the mystical or religious life, which Bernard of Clairvaux and, transitively, Bernard Profitendieu represent. Commenting upon his youthful (in)attention to women, Albéric Profitendieu’s colleague and neighbor Oscar Molinier remarks, “Or if we thought of them...it was ideally—mystically—religiously [*idéalement, mystiquement, religieusement*], if I may say so.”¹⁶ The mysticism that Gide presents, then, is an idealized form of devotion, seemingly without any ties to embodied or erotic life. In all respects, Bernard Profitendieu is self-possessed.

What Lucey’s reading of *The Counterfeiters* makes possible is the identification of the erotic precisely in the place of its absence or outright refusal. He ultimately suggests that self-possession, sincerity, and authenticity in Gide’s novel “should, as categories to which one phobically flees, become suspect—the flight to them could even be seen as symptomatic.”¹⁷ In other words, Bernard flees to these categories in order to fortify against the (all-too-real) felt possibility of his dispossession. Might the same reading arise out of Bernard of Clairvaux’s hagiography? What form of desire does this text hide or only indirectly name? In what follows, I will turn to writings by Bernard of Clairvaux in order to highlight a tension that these writings about Bernard tend to obscure—that is, the relationship between Bernard’s austerity, on the one hand, and his eroticism, on the other. While it should be clear by now that *The First Life* produces rhetorically an exemplary character in Bernard of Clairvaux just as much as *The Counterfeiters* produces in fiction the character of Bernard Profitendieu, my turn to Bernard of Clairvaux’s written texts makes no claim to offer greater insight into the historical Bernard. Instead, I turn to his *Apology to Abbot William* (*Apologia ad Guillelmum Abbatem*) and his *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (*Sermones Super Cantica Canticorum*) in order to undo further the assumption that, as Caroline Walker Bynum puts it, “Bernard was a genius and a man of very distinctive opinions.”¹⁸ While I do not deny the important role that Bernard had on Christian intellectual history—indeed, I turn to Bernard here in large part because of my own intellectual devotion to him—I am impelled to ask, “How are Bernard’s exemplarity and genius discursively produced in the first place?” In the end, I will demonstrate how what we think of as Bernard’s “genius” is grounded in discursive conventions that place austerity and eroticism in contiguity

¹⁴ Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, 71; 56.

¹⁵ See, for example, Goulet, “*Les Faux-Monnayeurs*,” *mode d’emploi*, 33; and, Jean-Joseph Goux, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs du langage* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1984), 73.

¹⁶ Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, 18; 12.

¹⁷ Lucey, *Gide’s Bent*, 142.

¹⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, Review of *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France: Psycho-Historical Essays*, by Jean Leclercq, *Speculum* 55, no. 3 (July 1980): 595.

with, rather than opposition to, each other. In other words, I will argue that the dispossessing desire that Bernard comes to articulate in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs* conforms with and ultimately grounds the theological conventions of Cistercian monasticism.

THE AUSTERITY OF BERNARD'S *APOLOGY*

Written in 1125, Bernard of Clairvaux's *Apology to Abbot William* is a text that has often been read as exemplifying Bernard's austere attitude towards religious art found in chapters 28 and 29 of this document. However, to attribute this "distinctive opinion" on the status of art in the monastic space to Bernard's exceptional character ignores the ways in which his claims are deeply rooted in monastic values and therefore shaped out of the devotional community that he had come to lead. As Conrad Rudolph claims, "One of the greatest weaknesses in the scholarship dealing with the *Apologia* is the tendency to ascribe the public statements of this accomplished writer and successful politician to personal quirks."¹⁹ Indeed, in order to elaborate this claim, Rudolph makes a similar point to the one made above about the hagiographic genre: "Hagiographical devices have been interpreted in terms of the personal psychology of Bernard, rather than recognized for the traditional, edifying function of *Vita* events that they were intended to serve."²⁰ By interpreting the events in *The First Life* as reflections of Bernard's psychological distinction, the reader forgets that the text is rhetorically constructed in order to promote an image of Bernard that conforms to the values of the Church Fathers. This same lesson is instructive in understanding the *Apology* and Bernard's attitude towards art, for as Rudolph explains, "The basis, then, of Bernard's objection to art as a distraction to the monk is not rooted in any personal idiosyncrasy, but is the vigorous projection of traditional monastic values."²¹ Bernard's austerity is, thus, not a radical departure from his community in any way, but rather a preservation of values restated for the purpose of reform.

Much of the reason that the *Apology* has been read as an outright attack on art and on competing monastic orders in the Middle Ages hinges upon a historiographical trend that has emphasized what has become known as the "Cluny-Cîteaux controversy." The basis of this perceived opposition is an interpretation of the text that reads the term *Cluniacenses*, or "Cluniacs," which Bernard uses twice in this treatise, as referring to the abbey at Cluny in Burgundy, France. As a result, the description of art found in chapters 28 and 29 of the *Apology* has served as a historical description of the abbey at Cluny in the early twelfth century. The

¹⁹ Conrad Rudolph, *The "Things of Greater Importance": Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 112. As Rudolph goes on to explain, Jean Mabillon's decision to preface an influential 1690 edition of the *Apology* with a letter written by Bernard that explicitly names the "Cluniacs" has had a great impact on the historiography of the "Cluny-Cîteaux controversy." Still, this letter does not definitely identify whom Bernard means by "Cluniacs" given the multiple meanings that this term carried.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 119.

apparent opulence of Cluny, supported by historical records of its highly elaborate liturgical performance of the Divine Office, thus, came to stand in contrast to Cîteaux's austerity, read incorrectly as its impoverishment.²² What this historiographical—not historical—opposition between Cluny and Cîteaux forgets, however, is the success of the Cistercian reform and the ambiguity over the proper object of Bernard's criticisms. While the letter clearly names William of St. Thierry as its proper addressee, that he and Bernard were close friends indicates that this address was a shield meant to hide Bernard's actual critique. Still, Bernard identifies William's "most glorious order," the traditional Benedictines, from the start of the text, which indicates that his invocation of the "Cluniacs" is not reserved just for the community at Cluny or, even, for Cluniac Benedictines more broadly.²³ Instead, it appears that Bernard's use of the term "Cluniacs" intends most broadly to engage all traditional Benedictines, Cluniac and non-Cluniac alike.

To identify all traditional Benedictines as the object of Bernard's attack, however, further overstates the opposition between the twelfth-century Cistercians and Benedictines, since the text clearly reflects a different rhetorical project—one of continuity and fraternity. The motivation for this document, at least according to its own account, derives from Bernard's frustration over a false accusation that William and he had continuously denigrated the traditional Benedictines in secret: "For how can I listen silently to your complaint concerning us," Bernard asks, "the most miserable men who...are alleged to pass judgment on the world and what is, among other things, more intolerable even to disparage your most glorious Order, to detract [*detrahere*] impudently from the holy men who live commendably [*laudabiliter*] in it, and to insult the luminaries of the world from the shelter of our low position?"²⁴ Bernard has no choice but to speak out against those who accuse William and him of disparaging the Benedictine Order "from the shelter of [their] low position." He expresses disbelief that anyone would accuse him of detracting or withdrawing from those who live "commendably" as a Benedictine. Of course, his word choice is strategic here: he is not claiming immunity from criticizing the Benedictine life altogether. These opening remarks, though, are less about the content of his criticisms and more about the context of their utterance. He is surprised by the specific charge that he voices his criticisms *in secret* or that he engages in idle chatter. Thus, he responds astonishingly to the accusation that he has engaged in gossip by characterizing the accusations themselves as gossip, diffuse complaints brought to his attention only through the figure of William. More importantly, he refutes these accusations by demonstrating his willingness to voice publicly any opinions that he has voiced in private: "I write you what you have often heard so that—since I am unable to go to each person and explain myself to him individually—you may have something which you know is without

²² Ibid., 14.

²³ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia as Guillelmum Abbatem*, in *The "Things of Greater Importance": Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art*, by Conrad Rudolph (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 1. All references to the *Apologia* will cite paragraph rather than page number. I should note that, in 1125, William of St. Thierry was, as indicated, an abbot of the traditional Benedictines, but later in his life, against the counsel of Bernard, in fact, William joined the Cistercian Order.

²⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia*, 1.

any doubt from me with which you may persuade them for me. For I am not afraid to write for all to see whatever I have said to you in private concerning this affair.”²⁵ If Bernard has said anything in private to William, he has not done so with the intention of concealing his opinions. Thus, he writes this *Apology*, a justification of his claims about the excesses of monastic life, in order to display just how willing he is to share his ideas publicly and to provide William with a didactic text that will circulate among other monks more quickly than Bernard himself can.

That this document is produced so as to provide William with a text “with which [he] may persuade [other Benedictines] for [Bernard]” indicates that outright condemnation is not the goal. Instead, Bernard and William in collaboration rehearse, through this document, an attempt at building monastic unity through a kind of loving critique. Bernard enacts this attitude by first expressing his adulation for the traditional Benedictines. He insists, “I have said and I continue to say that this way of life is holy, honorable, becoming in chastity, pre-eminent in discretion, instituted by the Fathers, preordained by the Holy Spirit, and exceedingly suited to the salvation of souls.”²⁶ He praises the Benedictine way of life in order to publicly avow continuity between the Benedictines and the Cistercians who both follow the *Rule of Benedict*. Bernard goes further than mere praise, however, and acknowledges the ways in which he has actively and beneficially engaged with Benedictines who have shown him hospitality, kindness, and honor. “I have commended myself to their prayers and have taken part in their discussions [*collationibus*]. I have often had conversations concerning the Scriptures and the salvation of souls with many of them, both publicly in chapter and privately in their chambers.”²⁷ By claiming that he has actively engaged in conversation and debate with the Benedictines, Bernard effectively renders the *Apology* an extension of these very discussions. The implication, then, is that any critique made in the text is not launched *in opposition* but rather *in collaboration* with the Benedictines.

He actively fights against the accusation that diversity in ways of life necessarily yields a fragmentation of monastic unity and suggests that these false accusations of condemnation derive from the simple fact that he is “seen to be a member of another Order.”²⁸ Bernard responds by voicing the logic of this argument *ad absurdum*:

But by the same rationale, you disparage ours, whoever of you live according to a different way. And so celibates and married people might be considered to mutually condemn each other, in that each one lives within the Church according to his own laws. Monks and canons regular could also be said to criticize each other because they are distinguished from each other because they are distinguished from each other by their own observances. We may suppose that Noah, Daniel, and Job are not able to tolerate each other in the same kingdom which we know they reached but not by a single way of life. And, of course, it would be unavoidable that either Mary or Martha or both displeased the Savior,

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ Ibid., 4.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 5.

who they both strove to please with different efforts of devotion. And by this rationale neither peace nor harmony will be considered to exist in the Church.²⁹

If difference in way of life is enough to substantiate disparagement, Bernard argues, then all varieties of Christians living according to different observances must necessarily despise one another. In fact, according to this logic, even those who have reached the kingdom of heaven but by different means must stand in conflict with one another. So too must Biblical characters like Mary and Martha and the respective contemplative and active lives for which they allegorically stand oppose one another. Taken to the extreme, the peace of Christendom is entirely undone by the hypothetical conflict that arises between each distinct way of life. Heaven is not safe from such destructive conflict; neither, in the end, is the individual monk who, as the embodiment of both Mary and Martha, must war against himself. Of course, Bernard recognizes that this configuration is untenable, so he responds with the image of Joseph's coat of many colors—"a many-colored robe, both seamless and woven from top to bottom, many-colored because of the many distinct ways of life of her many Orders, seamless because of the indivisible unity of her indestructible love."³⁰ In this coat he imagines a single Church that unites all the diverse ways in which Christians live their lives, so he speaks against fragmentation and rupture and calls for a unity in which diversity and difference persist: "Therefore, let us all come together in the one robe, and from all let there be one. From all, I say, let there be one."³¹ He is insistent here, responding urgently it seems to the "pressing new situation" wherein monastic unity is challenged not only by attacks from the episcopacy, but also by monastic reform whose success yields the possibility of fracture. As a powerful leader in this reform, however, Bernard sees an opportunity to forestall division, so he seizes the opportunity to reframe reform not as oppositional attack, but rather as the possibility of loving unity. As he explains, "And so? I am a Cistercian. Do I therefore condemn the Cluniacs? Far from it. Rather I love them, I praise them, I extol them."³² As a result of this claim, even the critique that eventually unfolds throughout the pages of the *Apology* is framed as a form of love that corroborates the necessity of monastic unity.

Bernard's chapters against excesses are divided into two sections. They begin with what he calls "small things" like prideful clothing, meals, and drinking and move on to chapters 28 and 29, which take up the "things of greater importance" and express famously his attitude on religious art in the monastery. While his comments are scathing, they are not idiosyncratic, but rather in line with monastic values. Furthermore, his declaration on art is not an outright prohibition, for he is clear that he will "overlook the immense heights of the places of prayer, their immoderate lengths, their superfluous widths, the costly refinements, and painstaking representations." Architectural grandeur, sculpture, and painting—Bernard acquiesces that "these things be made for the honor of God," but specifically within the confines of the secular

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 6.

³¹ Ibid., 7.

³² Ibid.

Church.³³ In other words, he draws a distinction between religious art in the secular Church and in the monastery in order to emphasize his immediate concern with the latter. After asking his fellow monks what gold is doing in the holy place (*sancto*), Bernard declares,

For certainly bishops have one kind of business, and monks another. We know that since they are responsible for both the wise and the foolish, they stimulate the devotion of a carnal people with material ornaments because they cannot do so with spiritual ones. But we who have withdrawn from the people, we who have left behind all that is precious and beautiful in this world for the sake of Christ, we who regard as dung all things shining in beauty, soothing in sound, agreeable in fragrance, sweet in taste, pleasant in touch—in short, all material pleasures—in order that we may win Christ, whose devotion, I ask, do we strive to excite in all this?³⁴

The distinction between the business of the bishops and the business of the monks is crucial to understanding Bernard here. His point is precisely that while bishops tend to the laity who vary in spiritual maturity and, thus, require material ornaments to excite their devotion, monks, having “withdrawn from the people,” having “left behind all that is precious and beautiful in this world for the sake of Christ,” are ultimately not responsible for arousing the devotion of anyone but themselves. “The function [of the monk] is not to teach,” after all, as Bernard, in words echoing Jerome, reminds us.³⁵ This claim may seem selfish or uncharitable, but is rather grounded in the monastic ideal of emulating the Desert Fathers. In the face of what seems to be increased pilgrimage and, therefore, increased interaction with the laity, Bernard calls for a return to the “desert”—that is a return to heightened seclusion and withdrawal from the world. Bernard, thus, prioritizes the monastic community, and not just a single community or order, but a united monasticism. The chapters against excesses, in fact, diverge from the opening of the *Apology* largely because they assume a form of address between an “I” and a “we” rather than an “I” and a “you.” By invoking the third-person plural, of which Bernard counts himself a part, he implies that he is, in this portion of the text, more concerned with monastic unity than the particular grievances of one order over another. And unity, for him, requires a stricter removal from the secular world.

While Bernard suggests that religious art in the monastery is detrimental to the laity, his greatest concern, taken up in chapter 29, is over the danger that religious art poses as a spiritual distraction for the monk. He prepares this argument in chapter 28 in two ways. First, Bernard frames the entirety of chapters 27 and 28 in terms taken from Cassian’s warning against spiritual distraction. The distinction between the “small things” (*parva*), on the one hand, and the “things

³³ Ibid., 28.

³⁴ Ibid., 28.

³⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, “Letter 89,” in *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. by Bruno Scott James (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1998). Here, Bernard indirectly quotes Jerome, *Contra Vigilantium* 15, *Patrologia Latina* 23:352.

of greater importance” (*maiora*), on the other, appears to refer to the same distinction that Cassian makes in Conference 9. After Abba Isaac recounts a tale about a monk’s “mundane distractions” (*cotidianis distentionibus*),³⁶ he makes the following declaration:

And in fact the things that seem small [*parva*] and insignificant [*minima*] and that we see are considered by indifference by persons of our profession are no less burdensome to the mind because of their characteristics than those greater things [*maiora*] that usually intoxicate the minds of worldly people in keeping with their status. They do not permit a monk, for whom even a brief separation from that highest good must be believed to be immediate death and utter ruin, to lay aside earthy impurity and to long for God, upon whom his attention [*intentio*] should ever be fixed.³⁷

The things that seem small and insignificant, suggests Abba Isaac, are in fact of great importance because they do not allow a monk “to lay aside earthy impurity and to long for God, upon whom his attention should ever be fixed.” They get in the way of attending to God, and the cultivation of spiritual attention [*intentio*] is heralded as fundamental to sustaining the prayerful life of the monk. By turning in chapters 28 and 29 to “the things of greater importance [*maiora*], but which seem smaller [*minora*], because they are more common,” Bernard cites Cassian and, thus, frames his discussion about religious art in the monastery as a matter of spiritual distraction.

Second, Bernard suggests in chapter 28 that the proliferation of religious art in the monastery is ultimately detrimental to the moral lives of visiting laity because it welcomes curiosity: “It serves the eyes of the rich at the expense of the poor. The curious [*curiosi*] find that which may delight them, but those in need do not find that which should sustain them.”³⁸ Religious art in the monastery, Bernard warns, breeds avarice and curiosity but does not ultimately support lay devotion, cultivate virtue, or convert almsgiving into much-needed charity. The emphasis on curiosity (*curiositas*) is significant here not only because Bernard identifies it as the first step of pride.³⁹ Curiosity impedes in the cultivation of attention that is central to attaining a Pauline state of “prayer without ceasing.” As the greatest vice of memory, curiosity, according to Cassian, incites mental wandering that leads one astray from the task of prayerful devotion. Germanus’s characterization of the confused and distracted mind, thus, serves as an instructive warning against *curiositas*:

And so the mind always aimlessly on the move, is distracted by different things even at the time of the synaxis, as if it were drunk, and it never accomplishes any function proficiently. For instance, when it is praying [*orat*] it is recalling a psalm

³⁶ John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 9.6.1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.6.4.

³⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia*, 28.

³⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*, in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G.R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 123–125.

or some reading [*lectionem*]. When it is chanting [*decantat*] it is meditating [*meditatur*] on something else than what the text of the Psalm contains. When it is doing a reading [*lectionem recitat*] it is thinking of what it wished to do and what it wished it had done [*faciendum aliquid voluit factumue*]. Thus it receives and rejects nothing in a disciplined and proper manner, and it seems to react to chance incursions, not having the ability to hold fast to the things that please it nor to remain in them.⁴⁰

In response to this worry, Abba Isaac reminds Cassian and Germanus not only of the formula for attention available in Psalm 70:1, but also of the importance of vigils, meditation, and prayer. Germanus's description of distraction is revealing because it suggests that to be distracted is to move from a higher to a lower state of textual engagement based loosely on the *lectio divina*: distracted prayer leads one down to reading; distracted chant leads one down to meditation; distracted reading leads to rumination on action. This is not entirely surprising given the relationship between spiritual training and the discipline of attention.⁴¹ Less spiritually mature than the monks, the laity is thus more susceptible to the distraction of curiosity.

But even the spiritual maturity of the monks does not mean that they are entirely immune to the dangers of spiritual distraction. Chapter 29 of the *Apology* makes a clear shift from the interaction of the laity with religious art in the monastery to the space “in the cloisters [*in claustris*], before the eyes of the brothers while they read [*coram legentibus fratribus*].”⁴² In other words, Bernard focuses on the interaction of the monks with religious art in this section. That he sets this scene by making reference to reading is a clear indication that spiritual exercise and the concomitant cultivation of prayerful attention to God are of central concern in this passage. Bernard declares befuddlement at the presence of monstrous creatures, animals, and fighting soldiers within the monastery and identifies each of these figures as a “ridiculous monstrosity” (*ridicula monstrositas*), a kind of “deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity” (*deformis formositas ac formosa deformitas*).⁴³ Indeed it is this kind of contradiction in form—a beautiful form that is also deformed—that holds these figures together. He is led to exclaim, “In short, everywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms [*diversarum formarum*] is seen that one would rather read [*legere*] in the marble [*in marmoribus*] than in the books [*in codicibus*], and spend the whole day wondering at every single one of them than in meditating on the law of God [*lege Dei meditando*].”⁴⁴ These contradictory forms incite such wonder that they take the monks away from *lectio divina*—from reading in books and from

⁴⁰ Cassian, *The Conferences*, 13.2.

⁴¹ For a detailed analysis of the relationship between *curiositas* and *memoria*, see Mary Carruther, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 88–92; and, Lara Farina, *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 102.

⁴² Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia*, 29.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

meditating on the law of God. These figures provide an unnecessary spiritual distraction from the work of spiritual exercise. So why, exactly, does Bernard see such danger in these particular kinds of images? What is dangerous about them is precisely what is so seductive about them—that in their deformity they can evoke such beauty. Furthermore, while the monastic life calls for disciplined formation, these contradictory forms incite a distracting deformation. They call the monks to be as deformed as they are. Like an animal that “has a horse for a front half and a goat for the back” or “a quadruped [with] the body of a fish,” the monk distracted by these beautiful deformities is torn in two, drawn simultaneously towards spiritual exercise and the seductive quality of these material objects—between the spiritual and the material world. Because they do not motivate disciplined formation, then, these figures arrest spiritual progress. In no uncertain terms, these marble figures are poor reading material. To attempt to read the marble is to run into, as it were, a marble wall on the path towards spiritual progress.

In the end, Bernard presents not a personal opinion about religious art in the monastery, but a position of austerity conditioned by the values of monasticism—the flight from the secular world, the evasion of curiosity, and the cultivation of loving attention through *lectio divina*. Furthermore, he declares this position not only on behalf of the Cistercians, but rather on behalf of a unified monastic community. Reform, for him, does not equal opposition or competition, at least in its ideal form. And while the *Apology* emerges, in the first place, out of disagreements over parts of monastic life that are not covered by the *Rule of Benedict*, it attempts to persuade all monks of the spiritual benefits of its precepts. By filling in these gaps, the text presents itself as a kind of para-regular document that Bernard hopes will prove persuasive to all who follow the *Rule*. He is clear to emphasize this theme of monastic unity in the closing words of this text. He concludes,

This is our opinion concerning your Order and ours. It is what I am accustomed to say to our people and to—not about—yours. No one will be a better witness for me than you unless he has known me as you have. Those things which are praiseworthy in your people I praise and proclaim. If certain things deserve to be criticized, I make a practice of urging you and my other friends that they be corrected. This is not detraction, but a drawing together. I ask and beg that it may always be done in every respect by you for us. Goodbye.⁴⁵

Once again, Bernard assumes the third-person plural in order to underline the connection that he aims to cultivate between the Cistercians and the traditional Benedictines. Furthermore, he speaks *to* both Orders and not *about* either in order to proclaim that he has nothing to hide. These final words make a public declaration of monastic concord. But in order to do so, they must also account for the critiques contained within the text. Thus, Bernard reformulates critique as an act of love and respect for the good of the monastic institution—“not a detraction [*detractio*], but a drawing together [*attractio*].” As paradoxical as it may seem, Bernard’s justification for monastic austerity is grounded in an appreciation for community.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 31.

BERNARD'S EMBODIED EROTICS

Given its especially embodied and erotic qualities, Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* seem to stand in stark contrast to the austerity evinced in his *Apology*. This observation is not novel, and the question of how to resolve such a tension takes its cue indirectly from the Gothic revivals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when figures like John Ruskin, Henry Adams, Wilhelm Worringer, and Erwin Panofsky repeatedly drew an analogy between Scholastic theology and Gothic architecture in order to suggest that they share in a medieval impulse towards wholeness and synthesis.⁴⁶ Against the backdrop of this secure connection between Scholastic theology and Gothic architecture, the inconsistency of Bernard's aesthetic stands out. Thus, the question remains: "If Bernard speaks so vehemently against excessive art in the monastery in his *Apology*, if Cistercian architectural style is marked by its austerity, how can we understand the deployment of such excessive rhetoric in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*?" In contrast to these arguments for a connection between architecture and theology, Étienne Gilson makes the bold claim that there is, indeed, no need to bridge the gap between these two domains. "The walls of his monasteries were bare, but his style was not bare," declares Gilson.⁴⁷ While this description of Bernard's architectural and literary style does identify indirectly the anachronistic way in which this question seems to impute the modern category of a unified aesthetics onto the products of the Middle Ages, I am still left wondering with Burcht Pranger "how the austerity of architectural form is to be related to the abundance of his language. Can, or should, this style be reduced to mathematical austerity? If not, what sense can be made of it, or should it be assigned to the realm of chaos and disorder? Is there a link between architecture and Bernard's literary expression, or is the latter to be left to the unarticulated area of blind obedience and faith?"⁴⁸

While Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* may seem to stand apart from the austerity that marks both his *Apology* and *The First Life*, I will demonstrate that the literary abundance, embodied language, and eroticism that mark the *Sermons* are grounded in the same spiritual exercises that yield Bernard's austerity. The relationship between the *Sermons* and spiritual exercise is not entirely evident especially given how little we know of this document's provenance. As E. Ann Matter following Jean Leclercq explains, the conditions of its production are largely unknown. There are reasons to believe that these "sermons" were delivered, perhaps in conference at a monastic chapter, but the same account by Guerric of Igny that anticipates Bernard's delivery makes reference, as well, to their prior publication, indicating for Leclercq a

⁴⁶ John Ruskin, "The Nature of the Gothic," in *The Stones of Venice* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960), 157–190; Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint Michel and Chartres* (New York: Penguin, 1986); Wilhelm Worringer, *Form in Gothic*, trans. Herbert Read (London: Putnam, 1927); and, Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (Latrobe, PA: Archabbey Press, 1951).

⁴⁷ Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*, trans. A.H.C. Downes (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 63.

⁴⁸ Burcht Pranger, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Shape of Monastic Thought: Broken Dreams* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 231.

definitively literary quality of the work.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the characterization of this text as exemplary of Bernard's contemplative life or mysticism tends to further segregate it from Bernard's more active or political works like the *Apology* on the basis of a modern assumption that monasticism, grounded as it is in the regimented organization of ritual practice, is rote, repetitive, and deadening, while mysticism, especially of the affective sort, is associated with embodiment, immediacy, and spontaneity. Indeed, the embodied and erotic quality of Bernard's most contemplative text serves to propagate the idea that embodiment and eroticism are, themselves, exceptional aspects of his mysticism that greatly influence the surge in largely female, affective spirituality that arises in the thirteenth century. In the end, the common image of the *Sermons on the Song of Songs* is of a set of eighty-six sermons that represent the exceptionally embodied, erotic, and personal mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux.

Bernard certainly does enable the Christian mystic to assume the voice of the Soul as Bride, but to credit Bernard with this innovation overlooks theological precedent. In fact, the *Sermons* belong to a larger commentary tradition on the Songs of Songs, and many of the assumptions that guide Bernard's own interpretation—that the Song of Songs is an epithalamium between bride and a bridegroom, that these two figures are allegories for the relationship between the Church and Christ or the Soul and Christ—can be found in earlier commentaries like that of Origen of Alexandria (185–254). Origen's "Prologue to The Commentary on the Song of Songs," for example, begins with this opening claim: "This book seems to be an epithalamium, that is, a wedding song, written by Solomon in the form of a play, which he recited in the character of the bride who was being married and burned with a heavenly love for her bridegroom, who is the Word of God. For whether she is the soul made after His image or the Church, she has fallen deeply in love with Him."⁵⁰ Thus, Origen's identification of the Bride as the individual soul precedes Bernard's, but the circumstances of the former's theological controversies placed his texts in a dubious position until their reemergence through translation in the twelfth century.

Furthermore, to associate assuming the voice of the Bride with a uniquely personal mysticism removes Bernard's *Sermons* from their liturgical context. Bernard's indebtedness to the Divine Office as it is set up by Benedict and Cassian before him crystallizes most clearly around his declaration at the beginning of Sermon 3: "Today we read the book of experience [*libro experientiae*]."⁵¹ This claim refers, once again, to the culture of reading fostered in the monastic life, but the explicit connection between the "book of experience" and the Divine Office is clarified in Sermon 1. As this sermon makes clear, the book of experience does not refer exactly to personal experience, but rather to the shared experience of monastic devotion. As a Cistercian,

⁴⁹ E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 123–124.

⁵⁰ Origen, "The Prologue to The Commentary on the Song of Songs," in *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, First Principles: Book IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 217.

⁵¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G.R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 3.1.1. Bernard's sermons will be cited according to the following convention: "sermon.section.part." The Latin follows Bernard of Clairvaux, *Opera Omnia*.

Bernard recognizes the centrality of the recitation of the Psalms to this devotion. He reminds his brothers, “I think you will recognize from your own experience those Psalms which are called not ‘The Song of Songs,’ but ‘a song of steps’ [*cantica graduum*]. Each of you according to the steps he has taken upward in his heart, may choose one of these songs to praise and give glory to him who leads you on.”⁵² The Psalms ground the sensory training of the monks and guide them upwards towards the perfection of contemplation in God. They are, as Benedict directs, the very foundation of cultivating desire for God in the Cistercian Order. Bernard performs a crucial move, then, when he situates the Song of Songs within the context of the recitation of the Psalms. As he explains, the Song of Songs occupies the heights of contemplation:

But there is a song which, in its singular dignity and sweetness, outshines all those we have recalled, and every other there may be, and rightly I have called “The Songs of Songs,” because it is the fruit of all others. This sort of song only the touch of the Holy Spirit teaches, and it is learned by experience [*experientia*] alone. Let those who have experienced [*expert*] it enjoy it; let those who have not [*inexpert*] burn with desire, not so much to know as to experience [*experiendi*]. It is not a noise made aloud, but the very music of the heart [*iubilus cordis*]. It is not a sound from the lips, but a stirring of joy, not a harmony of voices but of wills. It is not heard outwardly, nor does it sound in public. Only he who sings it hears it, and he to whom it is sung—the Bride and the Bridegroom.⁵³

According to Bernard’s description, the Song of Songs is the culmination of one’s training in song, initially offered by the recitation of the Psalter. It not only “outshines all those we have recalled”—namely the Psalms, which aid, of course, in the very process of recollection—but also “is the fruit of all others.” It comes out of the hard work of performing the Divine Office, the very basis of monastic experience.

Experience is complicated here because Bernard seems to draw a connection between two different kinds of experience. On the one hand the brothers “recognize from [their] own experience” their recitation of the Psalms. On the other, they learn of the Song of Songs through a different kind of “experience alone,” an experience touched by the Holy Spirit. By turning to the Song of Songs, Bernard appears to open up a space for inner experience based explicitly on terms of the inner sense of sound: “It is not a noise made aloud...It is not a sound from the lips...not a harmony of voices...It is not heard outwardly, nor does it sound in public.” Instead the Song of Songs is “the music of the heart,” “a stirring of joy,” and “a harmony...of wills.” It is heard not in the external songs sung aloud, but rather in the inner song of the heart. This move inward, however, is not a refusal of the outer. Bernard does not choose the inner over the outer in

⁵² Ibid., 1.5.10. The “Songs of Ascent” are specifically Psalms 120–134, which were assumed to have been sung by pilgrims ascending the road to Jerusalem. Whether these Psalms were used in literal devotional practices of ascent, Bernard is clearly identifying them, here, as a figure of spiritual ascent. See Gerard McLarney, *St. Augustine’s Interpretation of the Psalms of Ascent* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2014).

⁵³ Ibid., 1.6.11.

drawing a connection between the Song of Songs and the Psalms. Instead, he emphasizes their inextricability and, therefore, the capacity to transform the material to the spiritual through a sensory training of affect.

Bernard's allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs merely enacts this transformation in hermeneutic terms by discursively producing the space and bodies of inner experience. Indeed, Bernard's text is teeming with erotic bodies that linger and multiply. Kisses, for example, inundate the pages of the first seven sermons which treat the first verse of the Song: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth" (Song 1:1). And the text goes on to invoke images of hands, feet, chests, breasts, and clefts so as to be literally—with letters—littered with body parts. My suggestion that these erotic bodies are discursively produced, then, is not to suggest that they are merely discourse and, therefore, not really bodies, not really erotic. Just as the Song of Songs is itself spiritually bound to the materiality of the communal and embodied recitation of the Psalms, the Song of Songs's spiritual bodies are inextricable from the earthly bodies of the monks. In other words, the spiritual bodies of the Song of Songs attest to possibility of transforming embodiment and eroticism in the first place. This operation is facilitated by Augustine's theory of language and its relationship to the body. In Book 1 of *On Christian Teaching* Augustine distinguishes between things (*res*) and signs (*signa*) and then spends the rest of this book discussing the nature of things. Things, as he explains, can either be enjoyed (*frui*) or used (*uti*), and he ultimately claims that only the eternal should be enjoyed. Augustine, however, recognizes that amongst the things to be used exist three other things, in addition to God, that one may love—ourselves, our bodies, and our neighbors, that is, "only those which exist in some kind of association with us and are related to God."⁵⁴ Rather than deny it outright, Augustine includes the body on his list of useful things that one may love. In fact, as Augustine reasons, the love of body is as evident and unwavering as love of self because our bodies are so much a part of who we are. What underlies this claim is a particularly corporeal theological anthropology. Put in terms of reform, Augustine explains: "Just as the soul is reformed [*reformatur in melius*] after repentance, by which the soul kills off its earlier evil character, so we must believe and hope that after this death, to which we are all liable by the bondage of sin, the body is changed to something better [*in melius commutari*] at the time of resurrection."⁵⁵ If you believe in reform, then you must believe in it body and soul. Rather than disparage the body, then, Augustine holds onto the hope that it will be redeemed in its resurrection. Death, then, is not the end of being, but rather the transformation of being.

Bodily reform, however, does not have to be reserved for the resurrection, argues Augustine. He leads to this conclusion by calling out those who, in contrast to him, denigrate all forms of embodiment:

Those who have this misguided aim are waging war on their body as if it were a natural enemy. They are misled by their reading of the words 'the flesh lusts

⁵⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.44–45. The text will be cited according to the following convention: "book.section." All Latin is taken from the PL 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.36.

against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; for these are in conflict with each other' (Gal. 5:17). These words were spoken because of the ungovernable habits of the flesh, against which the spirit lusts not in order to destroy the body but to make it subservient to the spirit, as our nature demands, by taming its lusts [*concupiscentia*], that is, its evil habits. For since it will be the case after the resurrection that the body will live for ever in a state of utmost tranquility and total subservience to the spirit, it should be our concern in this life that the tendency of the flesh is reformed [*mutetur in melius*] and not allowed to resist the spirit with its unruly impulses.⁵⁶

According to Augustine, the denigration of the body is based on a misinterpretation of Paul's letter to the Galatians. While the verse seems to suggest an entirely oppositional relationship between the body and the soul, Augustine claims that the spirit does not intend to destroy the body, but rather to stamp out its bad habits, its concupiscence, and bring it into conformity with the will of the spirit. What is more, reformation of the flesh is no longer occasioned just by the resurrection, but is rather the abiding concern of our present life. Augustine, thus, provides a theory of embodiment that presumes the possibility of its reform and transformation. The transformation of material bodies to spiritual bodies, however, is not immediate. It should concern us for our entire life. In other words, just because one claims that the allegorical bodies cited in Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* are spiritual, does not make them so. Their discursive production is not just a single linguistic act, but rather takes place as the sedimentation of rhetorical force concomitantly through the performative process of tropification and the performative production of inner experience.

PERFORMATIVITY AND THE SONG OF SONGS

Introducing the terms of performativity into an analysis of Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* requires a clarification not only of what I understand theories of performativity to illuminate about our readings of medieval texts, but also of what I mean by performativity in the first place. One might assume that the body of scholarship on medieval Christianity and performance produced over the past decade would exempt this study from justifying a turn to performativity in order to understand the kinds of meaning operative in Bernard's work. For example, Sarah Beckwith's *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (2001) examined "sacramental theater" and demonstrated the ways that an analytic emphasis on performance could reveal the overlapping implications for both theater and theology.⁵⁷ Performance has also been a useful analytic for approaching the musical arts, in particular, for scholars of both secular and liturgical song like Susan Boynton, Margot Fassler,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1.51–52.

⁵⁷ Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Patricia Dailey, and Elizabeth Randell Upton whose work has illuminated how variably song and psalmody were performed depending on local contexts.⁵⁸ Finally, performance has come to be a useful way of thinking even the least theatrical of ritual practices. Thus, with this broad sense of performance in mind, Jessica Brantley has understood the monastic reading practices of the Carthusians as akin to the “actual staging of dramatic literature.”⁵⁹ Similarly, Niklaus Largier has made recourse to the model of theatricality and performance in order to analyze the ritual practices of flagellation: “When the whip is raised, when leather, scourge, and cane strike against covered or naked flesh, we stand before a stage—a stage on which ritual unfolds.”⁶⁰ Indeed, even as Largier distinguishes the performance of ritual from overtly dramatic or self-conscious theater, his turn to performance, like the other scholars above, focuses especially on its public and communal aspect: “I have spoken of flogging in all its spiritual, punitive, and erotic contexts as a sort of ritual,” he explains, “because here an action is performed in a formalized manner that assumes a public character—even if it be the action of just one person.”⁶¹ What these invocations of performance share is an emphasis on the concomitant emergence of subject and community, even when the latter is not immediately present.

Despite the important interventions made by medievalists deploying the idiom of performance, including those for whom performance is irreducible to theatrical dramatization, less attention has been paid to the related, but distinct term “performativity.” While the term “performative” populates many of the pages of these studies, it is often meant simply to describe the theatrical or dramatic aspects of a particular action—that some act is, in broad, terms, performed. However, what is not explicitly named or articulated is a more specific theory of performativity associated with a variety of thinkers including J.L. Austin, Judith Butler, and Jacques Derrida amongst others, even if its terms haunt analyses of performance by dint of the very terms used. Even a study like Brantley’s that explicitly locates the origins of modern performance theory in the lectures of J.L. Austin tends to elide performance and performativity so as ultimately to dilute the analytic force made possible by theories of performativity and, instead, place their energy on expanding the domain of what counts as public or communal

⁵⁸ See especially, Susan Boynton, *Shaping a Monastic Identity: Liturgy and History at the Imperial Abbey of Farfa, 1000–1125* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Margot Fassler, *The Virgin of Chartres: Making History Through Liturgy and the Arts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Margot Fassler, “Hildegard and the Dawn Song of Lauds: An Introduction to Benedictine Psalmody,” in *Psalms in Community: Jewish and Christian Textual, Liturgical, and Artistic Traditions*, eds. Harold W. Attridge and Margot E. Fassler (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 215–240; Patricia Dailey, *Promised Bodies: Time, Language, and Corporeality in Medieval Women’s Mystical Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); and, Elizabeth Randell Upton, *Music and Performance in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁵⁹ Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 16.

⁶⁰ Niklaus Largier, *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal*, trans. Graham Hartman (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 13.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

performance in premodernity.⁶² One might argue that, given the impact that theories of performativity have had on performance studies, the inextricability of these terms does not require any distinction or, perhaps, that the distinction between performance and performativity is merely a matter of semantics. I would argue, on the contrary, that the significance of performativity does matter and that, perhaps, its very mattering requires the repeated restatement of this claim.

Line Engh's *Gendered Identities in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs: Performing the Bride* (2014) provides an instructive example of why performativity matters.⁶³ Despite her text's citation of both gender and performance, Engh insists on her distance from Judith Butler. "While I do employ some terminology prevalent in queer theory," she writes, "in this reading of medieval gender, I follow the perspectives of Caroline Walker Bynum, Joan Cadden, and Ruth Mazo Karras, who are all concerned with medieval sources, rather than the positions of Thomas Lacquer, Gilbert Herdt, or Judith Butler—none of whom with much to say about the Middle Ages."⁶⁴ In this first instance, Engh refuses Butler based on a rubric of expertise in historical period. Because Butler is not an expert in the Middle Ages, her work on gender is of no use to Engh. Methodologically, this move effects a strict distinction between history and theory that overvalues the historicity of the historical—that is, it ignores the ways in which history is itself historiographically produced and, therefore, conditioned by the historian's theoretical landscape and commitments. Engh enacts her second disavowal of Butler after claiming that inherent in her use of the terms "performing" and "performance" "is that it effects something, that it *does* something." She follows this explanation of her terms with a declaration: "I would like to make clear, however, that while the subtitle of this book undoubtedly evokes Butlerian perspectives, particularly by the conflation of the terms 'gender' and 'performance', Judith Butler's work is not central to the present study."⁶⁵ What Engh insists in these disavowals of Butler is that she is concerned with theatricality, but not performativity—that performativity would not help in her analysis of medieval gender. But, how does Engh intend to analyze how performances *do* something without the robust or nuanced theory of agency that performativity elucidates? By avoiding theories of performativity that are clearly evoked by the verb "to do," Engh is left with a fantasy of sovereign agency for whom intention yields immediate effects. But, as I suggested above, just because you say something, does not make it immediately so. Or in Butler's words, "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."⁶⁶

My own turn to performativity, follows instead Claire Waters's recourse to Butler and Derrida and her claim that their emphasis on "citationality" and "iterability" resonates with

⁶² Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 15.

⁶³ Line Cecilie Engh, *Gendered Identities in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs: Performing the Bride* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

crucial questions for the art of medieval preaching.⁶⁷ My insistence is that it is the performative, and not the performed, quality of psalter recitation that allows Bernard to configure this ritual practice as constitutive of and contiguous with his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. In part, then, I am attempting to work out a response to what Jessica Brantley identifies as “one question that has remained particularly vexed” for the critical discussion of performativity—that is, “the relation between performative language in the Austinian sense and what might more casually be called ‘performance’ itself.”⁶⁸ This problem is most clearly reflected in a certain kind of misreading of Butler who offers a performative theory of gender most acutely in both *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993): while Butler distinguishes the performance of gender from the performativity of gender—the acting out of particular gender roles versus the formulation of gender as produced by the consolidation of a series of effects—that she makes recourse to the example of drag in the final chapter of *Gender Trouble*, has caused some to think that the subject produces her or his gender through intentional acts like donning particular clothes, fashioning our bodies, or performing styles of embodiment. This is not the case, so in order to clarify what I understand to be this particularly performative quality and why this performative quality should matter for the ways that we talk about premodern ritual, a bit of a refresher on performativity in the Austinian sense will be necessary. The most basic account of Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) understands this set of lectures as setting up a distinction between the constative and performative utterance, which is ultimately undone both by subsequent commentators, but already implicitly by Austin himself. The constative utterance, according to Austin, merely describes a situation or state of affairs and is judged on the basis of being either true or false. The performative, in contrast, exceeds the descriptive operation and cannot be taken as either true or false. They do something, rather than simply describe something, and they are judged on the basis of what Austin calls felicity and infelicity.

As Amy Hollywood suggests in her essay “Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization,” Derrida’s and Butler’s accounts of performativity not only reframe Austin’s formulation of the performative utterance in terms of force and power, but also offer significant implications for our understanding of ritual as performative.⁶⁹ According to my reading of Hollywood, although “force” and “power” are not identical terms—force for Derrida is related largely to a general theory of signification, and power for Butler is taken up through her readings of Foucault and discourse—both of these terms provide a way of thinking from whence the performative derives its ability to *produce a series of effects*. Hollywood’s account of a performative theory of ritual begins with a demonstration of the ways in which Butler tends to use the language of ritual in theorizing performativity. Butler identifies, for example, a “ritualized repetition of norms” or claims that sex is “a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice.”⁷⁰ These instances seem to

⁶⁷ Claire M. Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 15.

⁶⁸ Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 15.

⁶⁹ Amy Hollywood, “Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization,” in *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁷⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, x; 10.

suggest that ritual is interchangeable with repetition for Butler, and it is not until a later claim in *Bodies That Matter* that we find an explicit connection to power. The iterability of performativity, she claims, “implies that ‘performance’ is not a singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualized production, and ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance.”⁷¹ By invoking the terms of constraint, prohibition, and compulsion, Butler introduces power into her formulation of performativity, but, as she insists at the end of this passage, these forces do not fully determine in advance the shape of what is produced performatively. The question that this raises for Hollywood is from whence the performative derives its force if these external forces (socially conditioned norms) are not fully determinative.⁷² How do we account for the power of the performative not only to act productively in ways conforming to these external constraints, but also to act in opposition to these constraints—what Butler calls “subversive citation”? In *Excitable Speech*, Butler comes to locate the force of the performative in the chiasmic relationship between the body of the speaking subject and speech itself. Based on the claim that the body enables speech but is also constituted by speech, speech and body are rendered irreducible to one another, and this gap opens up a space for subversive citation.⁷³

Derrida, on the other hand, locates the force of the performative in the structural character of its iterability. In order to make this claim he first critiques Austin’s account of the happy or felicitous performative as one determined by context and intention. These factors, both of which Derrida locates as external to the performative itself, cannot fully determine the efficacy of a performative.⁷⁴ In order to elaborate on this point, he turns to citationality. Citationality is the intentional citing of a performative act without appropriate intention. Examples are the performance of a marriage act in a play or the recitation of a poem, both of which Austin reads as parasitic or abnormal uses of language because they do not meet his criterion of involving the appropriate intention.⁷⁵ Derrida, in contrast, deconstructs the sovereign, intending “I” of Austin’s account and suggests that citationality is a risk that every act of signification must take—that there is no fully intending “I” to which the performative is tethered. Ultimately, because citationality is itself, for Derrida, iterability, iterability becomes the site of performative force.⁷⁶ What citationality reveals, for Derrida, is the very structural force and risk of performativity in its iterability.⁷⁷ This argument, in many ways analogous to Butler’s argument about drag. As a citation of gendered acts or performances, drag itself is not performative but rather reveals the

⁷¹ Ibid., 95.

⁷² Hollywood, “Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization,” 216.

⁷³ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 155.

⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 14–15.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 17.

structural force and risk of understanding gender as performatively construed—the risk, that is, that gender in its iterability is never the imitation of an original or essential masculinity or femininity, but rather always already a copy of a copy. Ultimately, Butler, who reads both Derrida and Austin, comes quite close to Derrida when she claims, “it is also by virtue of this reiteration [of ritual practice] that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm.”⁷⁸

What, then, are the implications of these theories of performativity for the study of ritual? First, the theory of signification forwarded by Derrida suggests that a performative theory of ritual generates meaning not through referentiality, but rather through its very structure of iteration. Following Asad’s critique in *Genealogies of Religion*, a ritual is not simply the symbol of an external reality or a text to be deciphered and uncovered, but rather a performative act that continually forms and reforms subjects and the contexts out of which they emerge.⁷⁹ Second, the subject produced out of ritual is not a sovereign “I,” a fully agentive subject. As Butler suggests, the repetition of the performative “is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal conditions for the subject.”⁸⁰ The implications are especially significant for our understanding of subversive citation. Subversive citation or resistance to the constraints that structure and condition ritual, then, is not volitional. The subject does not will his or her subversion of a hegemonic regime—a point that creates a great deal of consternation for readers calling on Butler, especially, to offer a normative (by which they mean prescriptive) politics. Instead subversion, in less volitional terms, is more akin to the transformation of the subject. Finally, the citation of ritual out of the appropriate ritual context may not result in a felicitous or apt performance, but it can, following Derrida, reveal the very structural force and risk undergirding performative ritual in the first place.

In the case of Bernard’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, it is first clear that he sees the Divine Office as generative of not only a particular subject, but also a particular context or, in his terms, experience. Not only does the recitation of the Psalms cultivate Christian perfection. It also produces a book of experience whose reading is organized by musical literacy. Only by having inculcated the affects of the Psalmist with such discipline, are the monks able to read and, through reading, write their book of experience. In the end, inner experience is performatively produced out of an iterative process that moves the monk from the outer to the inner person by transforming the very basis of materiality or by making the spiritual matter more than the carnal. As Butler suggests with regards to the performative production of the subject, “In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation.”⁸¹ This configuration offers one explanation of the relationship

⁷⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 10.

⁷⁹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 57–58.

⁸⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 95.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

between the monk's outer body and the spiritual bodies that populate the pages of Bernard's *Sermons*. These spiritual bodies materialize on the basis of an exclusion of the outer body, but this excluded outside is, in the end, internal to the spiritual body, to inner experience. In this way, the outer body is simultaneously abject, yet fundamentally tied to inner experience. The bodily tropes that mark Bernard's allegorical reading, thus, gain their force through the iterative process whereby the body is constantly reformed as a spiritual body. And the tropes of repetition, return, and delay—Bernard's inability just to get on with the next verse—that mark the unfolding of Bernard's text derive their force from the very iterative quality of psalter recitation that grounds the Cistercian understanding of the Song of Songs. By placing the Song of Songs in continuity with the recitation of the Psalms, Bernard makes possible the tropification of monastic ritual which persists in poetry and prose through rhythm and repetition.

Importantly, Bernard's Sermon 74 suggests that this higher experience, this jubilee of the heart, the silent song of the spirit, is not guaranteed or determined from the outset. In this sermon on the Bride's call to the Bridegroom "Return" (Song 2:17), Bernard recounts with insecurity his own mystical experience:

I tell you that the Word has come even to me—I speak in my foolishness—and that he has more than once (2 Cor. 11:17). Yet however often he has come, I have never been aware of the moment of his coming. I have known he was there; I have remembered his presence afterward; sometimes I had an inkling that he was coming. But I never felt it, nor his leaving me (Ps. 120:8). And where he comes from when he enters my soul, or where he goes when he leaves it, and how he enters and leaves, I frankly do not know. As it says, "You do not know where he comes from, nor where he goes" (John 3:8). That is not surprising, for of him was it said, "Your footsteps will not be known" (Ps. 76:20).⁸²

The recitation of the psalms may prepare one for mystical experience, but it does not make any guarantee. Thus, while the taking up the Divine Office may be volitional, the experience of the Word undoes the mastery of spiritual training. Just as the performative's iterability carries with it both the force and risk of citationality, the possibility of mystical union is risked through the very repetition of the psalter that grounds the affective and habitual training of the monks. Indeed, Bernard's citation of psalmody as the very iterative steps that lead to the "singular dignity and sweetness of the Song of Songs acts in ways similar to performative citationality. It reveals the structural force operative in the performative ritual of psalter recitation—namely, the guiding structure of repetition and return. It is no wonder, then, that Bernard's account of mystical experience is situated in a sermon on the single word of the Bride to the Bridegroom: "Return." Return, recall, and repetition—all forms of iteration—structure the force and risk of psalter recitation, itself an example of performative iteration. In the end, what is called subversive citation for Butler is the risk and hope of mystical exemplarity for Bernard.

⁸² Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 74.2.5.

“WITH A DESIRE LIKE HERS”

Emerging out of the context of devotion in community, Bernard’s austerity and his erotic bodies are not so different. Each attest to the intersection of reading and psalter recitation that undergird the spiritual exercises of the Cistercians. And while the austerity of Bernard’s *Apology* may conform more obviously to a strict adherence to the *Rule of Benedict*, Bernard’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, too, bespeak a strict adherence to the program of psalter recitation that fundamentally organizes the, ultimately, embodied and sensual form of reading in the Cistercian monastery. In fact, while the *Sermons on the Song of Songs* may seem to outshine the *Apology* in their sensuousness, both texts share a concern over how to saturate the sensory experience of the monk in order to cultivate proper affect and desire for God.

For Bernard, desire is fundamentally marked by loss. Even the Cistercian reform itself, intent on reinstating what has been lost in the *Rule of Benedict*, exemplifies how loss organizes Bernard’s life. Nowhere is this more clear than in Sermon 2. He opens this sermon with a rumination on the upcoming Christmas season:

When I reflect, as I often do, on the ardor with which the patriarchs longed for the incarnation of Christ, I am pierced with sorrow and shame. And now I can scarcely contain my tears, so ashamed am I of the lukewarmness and lethargy of the present times. For which of us is filled with joy at the realization of this grace as the holy men of old were moved to desire by the promise of it?

Soon now we shall be rejoicing at the celebration of his birth. But would that it were really for his birth! How I pray that that burning desire and longing in the hearts of these holy men of old may be aroused in me by these words: “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.”⁸³

Bernard disidentifies with his present time, and this disidentification manifests as a “sorrow and shame” of the “lukewarmness and lethargy of the present times.” He longs, in contrast, for the time of the Church Fathers, whose “burning desire and longing” he hopes to enflame by reading the first line of the Song of Songs. He hopes to emulate their ardor for Christ, but also the very ardor that motivates their very way of life—their ardor for austerity. Desire—and erotic desire at that—and austerity appear once again inseparable.

The longing that Bernard feels for the Church Fathers parallels the longing that he feels for the Word of God. After he describes his experience of the Word, he recounts the Word’s departure: “But when the Word has left me, and all these things become dim and weak and cold, as though you had taken the fire from under a boiling pot, I know that he has gone. Then my soul cannot help being sorrowful until he returns, and my heart grows warm within me, and I know he is there.”⁸⁴ The Word’s retreat is felt like a withdrawal of warmth, and this feeling incites in Bernard sorrow once again. His yearning desire for God is sustained, oddly, by the very possibility of loss in divine absence. This threat of loss ultimately makes him feel most like the

⁸³ Ibid., 2.1.1.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 74.2.7

Bride and enables him to assume her voice: “With such an experience of the Word, is it surprising if I speak the words of the Bride and call him back when he absents himself, when even if I do not burn with an equal desire, I burn with a desire like hers? It will be natural to me as long as I live to speak, ‘Return,’ the word of recall, to call the Word back.”⁸⁵ Bernard’s desire may not be equal to the Bride’s, but it is a “desire like hers,” that is, a desire marked by erotic yearning in response to the possibility of the Word’s withdrawal. His *Sermons* are an attempt to *naturalize* the affinity he has with the Bride and the assumption of her voice. And this attempt has been largely felicitous: this moment of identification has taken on great significance in the history of Christian mysticism because it is seen as making possible the assumption of the Bride’s voice through which Christian contemplatives have come to voice their yearning desire for God.

But this yearning desire marked by loss is not exclusively a part of Bernard’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. It underlies the pages of even those texts that proclaim his austerity and his chastity most vehemently. His *First Life*, after all, presupposes loss; the death of Bernard himself and the devotion that his contemporaries and friends had towards him are the very preconditions of the text. Loss, furthermore, motivates Bernard’s action in his *vita*, which is to say that his hagiographers, his friends write him as a character marked by loss throughout. Upon the death of his mother Aleth, Bernard “began to live his life in his own way.”⁸⁶ But what we are told is that his own way of life is built upon the very way of life that his mother also led. He incorporates her way of life and takes it on as his own. Indeed, he takes up her enthusiasm for the monastic life and becomes more a monk than she ever could be. Bernard assumes a “desire like hers”—the yearning desire of the bride, the yearning desire of and for his mother.

This chapter has been about assuming another voice, so I conclude with what I might call a vocal *mise-en-abîme*, a recursion of fragmented quotations, or a nesting of characters in oblique contact. I want to begin by quoting Carolyn Dinshaw quoting Homi Bhabha quoting Roland Barthes. First, Dinshaw quotes Bhabha quoting Barthes. She writes: “Here is Barthes, quoted by Bhabha: “‘Through me passed words, tiny syntagms, bits of formulae and no sentence formed ... It set up in me a definitive discontinuity: this non-sentence was in no way something that could not have acceded to the sentence, that might have been before the sentence: it was: outside the sentence.’”” Then Dinshaw quotes Bhabha and writes, “Here is affective writing: ‘Writing aloud is the hybrid [Barthes] proposes in language lined with flesh,’ Bhabha comments, ‘the metonymic art of the articulation of the body not as pure presence of Voice, but as a kind of affective writing, after the sumptuousness or suffering of the signifier.’”⁸⁷ And, finally here is Dinshaw in her proper voice: “But Bhabha’s concept of ‘affective writing’ proves very fruitful for a queer project such as mine, especially as it sets up the possibility of contact between linguistic fragments across time.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ William of St. Thierry et al., *First Life*, 6.

⁸⁷ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 20.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 21.

According to Bhabha's reading of Barthes, affective writing is fragmented. It moves against conventional grammar and inhabits a space external to the properly grammatical subject—that is, the subject of the sentence—in order, ultimately, to undo the continuity of this subject. Affective writing also takes place as a “writing aloud,” as the lining of language with flesh, and as the articulation of the body, and we might understand these formulations as suggesting that affective writing produces bodies as the site of sensory inscription, bodies not as Voice as such, but rather articulated by the material effects of voice. In co-opting the term from Bhabha, Dinshaw explains that, for her, affective writing “sets up the possibility of contact between linguistic fragments across time,” and, ultimately, Dinshaw claims affective writing for her queer project, which articulates the queer historical impulse as the desire for a queer touch across time.

Bernard's texts might, thus, be read as affective writing, texts that set up within the subject a “definitive discontinuity” while also setting up “the possibility of contact,” the yearning for community. For in the end, the dispossessing desire that Bernard writes simultaneously derives from and strives towards devotion performed in community in spite and because of the very possibility of its loss. Despite his pedagogical disinclination, Bernard's losses—of his mother, his brother, the Church Fathers, the Word—teach him and us that undergirding the jubilee of the heart stands the hard work of lamentation.

Chapter 3

Mystic Fables: Hadewijch and the Operativity of Her Songs

The theorizing operation finds itself at the limits of the terrain where it normally functions, like an automobile at the edge of a cliff. Beyond and below lies the ocean.
—Michel de Certeau, “The Arts of Theory”

THE ORIGINS OF DE CERTEAU’S MYSTIC POETICS

Michel de Certeau’s *Mystic Fable* (1982) concludes with a section entitled “Overture to a Poetics of the Body,” which cites Catherine Pozzi’s poem “Ave” as an exemplary illustration of what he sees as the fundamental relationship between mystics and music. Describing the poem’s rhythmic movement, de Certeau writes, “Its music bears simple words, rolling them onward as in a sea, bewitching them. The meaning is under the music’s spell. Musical waters inundate the house of language, transforming it and sweeping it along. At the beginning, as in ancient shaman or Hindu forms of *mystics*, there is a rhythm.”¹ Music, and in particular its rhythmic quality, acts as the motivating force of Pozzi’s poetic exposition whose movement is dominated by repetition. But this repetition undergirding the poem’s musicality does not serve merely to maintain or reproduce the status quo. Instead, de Certeau explains, “The music, come from an unknown quarter, inaugurates a new rhythm of existence—some would say a new ‘breath,’ a new way of walking, a different ‘style’ of life. It simultaneously captivates an attentiveness from within, disturbs the orderly flow of thought, and opens up or frees new spaces.”² By boldly proposing, “There is no *mystics* without it [without music],” de Certeau suggests not only that music fundamentally allows for the possibility of mysticism, but also that this possibility is one of novelty, freedom, and even revolution.

A tension, then, arises once we see that de Certeau’s analysis of Pozzi ultimately aims at locating her literary production within “[a] thousand-year-old tradition” of what he calls “mystic poetics.”³ How does de Certeau account for the continuity of a tradition founded upon discontinuity (disruption, freedom, novelty)? And, in the particular case of this textual overture, how does de Certeau understand Hadewich’s mystical texts as “[echoes] of Catherine Pozzi’s

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 297.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 299.

poems”? In what way do Hadewijch’s texts align with or diverge from the kind of musicality that de Certeau formulates in this overture? These questions are important not only because de Certeau concludes this final section by reading Hadewijch as an echo (with a difference) of Catherine Pozzi; not only because de Certeau identifies Hadewijch as a founding figure of mystic poetics; but also because music and song figure prominently in Hadewijch’s texts. And strangely enough, this last fact is effectively omitted from de Certeau’s treatment of Hadewijch despite the significance of musical language and tropes that structure this concluding overture. Once de Certeau turns to Hadewijch, all musical language drops out. She remains to him a mystic and poet, and while we might argue that de Certeau’s insistence upon the musical regulation of poetic practice clearly grounds Hadewijch within a musical milieu, I wonder in what ways closer attention to the historically particular modes of beguine musical practice might problematize de Certeau’s invocation of Hadewijch and the all too quick overshadowing of song by the tradition of “mystic poetics.”

To call this concluding section an “Overture to a Poetics of the Body” already gives a clear signal of the thematic concerns structuring these last few pages. But what is the effect of calling this section—and a concluding one, at that—an *overture*? Might the historical specificity of this musical term itself belie the significance of music to the thousand-year-old tradition of “mystic poetics”? And what ideological assumptions might the deployment of this trope carry with it? In broad terms the overture developed first as an instrumental piece played before an opera or theatrical performance in the 17th- and 18th-centuries and, in the Romantic era came to be established as its own stand-alone concert piece played at the head of an orchestral performance. And, indeed, this latter historical association with Romantic theories of music seems at least implicitly to influence de Certeau’s formulation of music, especially as it relates to language. As John Hamilton reminds us, “It was in fact romantic theory that first exploited the irrational (or suprarational) force of purely instrumental music. What would eventually come to be known as absolute music—music liberated or absolved from all verbal discourse—was proffered as being capable of presenting human truths that evaded the rigid definitions and concepts of the lexicon and verbal syntax.”⁴ So, with Hamilton, we read E.T.A. Hoffmann’s 1810 review of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony wherein he describes music as that which “discloses to man an unknown realm, a world that has nothing to do with the outer sensual world surrounding him, a world in which he leaves behind all feelings ascertainable by concepts in order to devote himself to the inexpressible.”⁵ Negation structures music’s transcendent or revelatory quality in the Romantic era; it discloses what is unknown and inexpressible and, in Hamilton’s terms, unworks language.

With this formulation in mind, de Certeau comes quite close to sounding like Hoffmann’s man who devotes himself to the inexpressible. Recall that music for de Certeau bears simple words whose meaning is under “music’s spell.” Music, he explains, “has taken over words, sweeps them away. Its movement is repetition: it recasts phrases in the form of incantations (*je meure/demeure/quelle heure*). It whispers the same syllables to the ear (*mille corps/encore/trésor/mille corps*) and the same phonetic instances (the chant is a variation in *m*:

⁴ John Hamilton, *Music, Madness, and the Unworking of Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 5.

⁵ Quoted in Hamilton, *Music, Madness*, 5.

mou/meu/mais/mé/moi/mon/meil/moi-même/ment, etc.).”⁶ Moving from phrases, to syllables, to the same phonetic instances, de Certeau attempts to further and further isolate poetry’s significance to the most basic unit of musical sonority. And, as he elaborates, “The sounds, resembling fragments of refrains, form an uncanny memory, prior to meaning. One would be hard put to say what it is the memory of: it recalls something that is not a past; it awakens what the body does not know about itself.”⁷ Disclosure occurs through the poem’s sound, not its referential meaning, and what is disclosed is prior to meaning; it is unknown. Thus, while de Certeau attempts to articulate a formulation of music as the site of ineffability for the entire tradition of mystic poetics as he sees it, his framing device betrays the Romantic ideology informing this formulation and, thus, diminishes its diachronic efficacy.

This emphasis on the operatic, especially in his formulation of the ineffable, is incongruous with de Certeau’s insistence that Hadewijch stands at the origin of the tradition of “mystic poetics.” By relying upon Romantic theories of music and of the operatic, de Certeau appears to set up multiple, disparate origins of the historical fable that he would like to tell. In other words, he implicitly undoes the significance of origins while telling a story that seems to require an origin, because his description of “mystic poetics” rests, broadly speaking, upon a history of secularization, whose key terms are exile, nostalgia, and mourning, that is, a history of discontinuity. My contention is that de Certeau effectively enacts a form of historical amnesia by identifying Hadewijch as the origin of mystic poetics. De Certeau does not, for example, consider the poetics of prose that I have explored in the texts of Cassian, Benedict, or Bernard of Clairvaux. Nor does he account for the ways in which Hadewijch’s mystical poetry emerge out of a tradition of Christian devotion grounded in the embodied and communal performance of song. As a result, he forecloses the possibility of recognizing the very body that he claims to have lost. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the embodied practice of psalter recitation persists transformed into the intersection of spiritual bodies and the material text that sustains the allegories of erotic bodies. By making possible the assumption of the Bride’s voice, Bernard also makes possible the assumption of the Bride’s body in the text. By attending to the continuities of psalter recitation and the tradition of Song of Songs commentaries, mystical poetics—in distinction to de Certeau’s “mystic poetics”—can be understood not to be disembodied or to have lost its body. Instead, I argue that mystical poetics sustains the body and the very rhythm and repetition of its iterative production in performative discourse. In order to demonstrate how this is so, I will work against the characterization of Hadewijch as exceptional in the history of Christian literature and spirituality by reading her *Songs* with her *Visions* and by identifying their connections to the devotional traditions centered around song that we have examined thus far. By taking seriously Hadewijch’s production of song, we might arrive at a clearer understanding of the kind of exemplarity that her musical work assumes to embody.

⁶ De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 297.

⁷ Ibid.

AUTHORIZING BEGUINE SONG

De Certeau is not the only thinker to identify Hadewijch as historically exceptional. This characterization of Hadewijch is echoed in Columba Hart's introduction to her translation of *The Complete Works*. She opens a section on what she calls Hadewijch's *Poems in Stanzas* with unrestrained praise for Hadewijch's poetic talents: "Hadewijch, as we have just seen, possessed no small talent for the writing of artistic prose, but the gift for poetry she displays in the *Poems in Stanzas* can only be termed lyrical genius. Since she was not a person with a religious side and secular side but wholly centered in God, all these poems are mystical love lyrics—a new genre for which she must be given the credit."⁸ While Hart acknowledges Hadewijch's skill in writing prose, she is no less than a "lyrical genius" when it comes to the strength of the *Poems in Stanzas*. She not only has a "gift for poetry," but is the founder of "a new genre for which she must be given due credit." Hart's praise for Hadewijch, indeed, sounds much like de Certeau's by claiming that she installs a new poetic tradition of "mystical love lyrics." In fact, Hart seems intent on maintaining this image of Hadewijch's poetic genius even in the compilation of her edition of *The Complete Works*. As she indicates with regards to the four extant manuscripts of Hadewijch's work,

"the *Visions* are followed by a supplement known as 'the list of the perfect,' referring to Vision 13. It gives the names of the saints most revered by Hadewijch, and of nearly eighty living persons known to her in various countries. The names appear to be authentic; a number of them designate various persons historically identifiable, and with relation to certain of whom dates can be established that have used to good advantage in Hadewijch studies."⁹

Hart describes this *List of the Perfect* in terms that confer its historical authenticity, and she acknowledges that Hadewijch studies has benefitted from the knowledge that the verifiable names on the list seem to confer on the historical investigations of Hadewijch and her works. However, this very quality that is seen as its strength for Hadewijch studies, bars it from inclusion in *The Complete Works*. On what basis does Hart make this decision, and what does it imply about the definition of work that informs her editorial decisions? "The comments that accompany the listings," as she explains, "lack the mature discretion that characterizes all her other writings. The 'List' as it has come down to us does not, therefore, enhance her literary standing, and for this reason it is omitted from the present translation."¹⁰ The *List of the Perfect* is characterized as immature in its discretion, which, for Hart, renders its status suspect in literary terms. Because it does not corroborate Hart's characterization of Hadewijch as a literary and poetic genius, the *List of the Perfect* is simply excluded from *The Complete Works*. Hart, thus,

⁸ Columba Hart, introduction to *Hadewijch: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 19. See also, Jef Janssens, "Hadewijch en de riddercultuur van haar tijd," *Ons geestelijk Leven* 54 (1977): 156–157.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

judges Hadewijch's texts on the basis literary quality and promotes a vision of valuable work as aesthetically productive. If the text, like the *List of the Perfect*, does not operate in aesthetic terms, then it does not perform valuable work.

I worry, though, that this notion of work is limited and enacts a stricter division between the religious and the secular than Hart ultimately intends. As much as she insists that Hadewijch "was not a person with a religious side and secular side," she ends up reproducing this very distinction in Hadewijch by reducing the value of work to the level of the aesthetic. Indeed, this move yields a limited vision of the aesthetic as well. By excluding the *List of the Perfect* from Hadewijch's *Complete Works*, Hart ignores the inseparability of work of literature and the labor of devotion, especially as it takes place "aesthetically," that is, in an archaic sense, as sensory experience. This blind spot to the intersection of devotion and sensory experience, exacerbated by Hart's modern assumptions about a general aesthetic theory, result in an emphasis of poetry over song. What are identified as Hadewijch's *liederen*, or "songs," Hart calls *Poems in Stanzas*, and this choice in translation effectively obfuscates any sense of their status as musical tools of devotion. While it may be true that her *songs* (as I will continue to name them from this point forward) demonstrate mastery in "stanza structure, the tornada, meter, rhyme, assonance, concatenation, and figures of speech," I question whether "in the poetry of courtly love, she could turn everything to profit."¹¹ Hart implies that the language of courtly love is the lens whereby everything Hadewijch writes is focused, but again she drops any language of religion and devotion, opting instead for a distilled and isolated version of the poetic. The result of this emphasis on courtly love poetry is that Hart, like others, according to Jessica Boon, "mistakenly [considers] Hadewijch's poetry and visions to be direct, unedited descriptions of a mystical experience."¹² Following Patricia Dailey, to read Hadewijch's songs as poetry not only leads to a particular formulation of mysticism that emphasizes "immediacy, experience, and the body," but also "tends to paralyze literary considerations beyond or even within these thematic trends."¹³ In other words, this skewed vision of mysticism tends to shift focus away from the methods whereby these texts are expertly crafted out of both their literary and devotional milieus.

Tanis Guest's earlier monograph on the songs enacts a similar bias. Claiming outright that she will read the songs according to her "own aesthetic approach," she explains that her purpose

is, then, to treat Hadewijch not specifically as a medieval poet, but simply as a poet; not divorced from her age, since no poet is that, but approached primarily from the viewpoint of the modern reader and the impact of the poems on such a

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹² Jessica Boon, "Trinitarian Love Mysticism: Ruusbroec, Hadewijch, and the Gendered Experience of the Divine," *Church History* 72, no. 3 (Sept. 2003): 489n. 21. The investigation of courtly love language in Hadewijch's texts has been a dominant trend in literary studies. This is exemplified by Barbara Newman, "La mystique courtoise: Thirteenth-Century Beguines and the Art of Love," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 137–167.

¹³ Patricia Dailey, *Promised Bodies: Time, Language, and Corporeality in Medieval Women's Mystical Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 124.

one. Unless that reader be a medieval scholar, as few are, seven hundred years have laid veils over ideas and doctrines of the *Strofische Gedichten* [Poems in Stanzas, or songs] and the circumstances from which they sprang; but the force of their emotions and the music of their language—however difficult—still have power to hold the reader; and in the twentieth century it is probably in these that their greatest attraction lies. With this in mind, I have sought to demonstrate some of the ways in which the emotions are expressed and the music produced, with a view not only to elucidating some of the artistry of the poems, but also illuminating to some extent the character of the poet—since the study of an artist’s choice of forms must yield some information about the artist.¹⁴

In a dazzling series of moves, Guest effectively “modernizes” Hadewijch in order to render her texts palatable to twentieth-century sensibilities. She, first, obliterates the medieval by even making a passing jab at medieval scholars, whose dwindling numbers signal insignificance. This denigration of the medieval then allows her to decontextualize what she calls the “*Strofische Gedichten*” since so few know anything about the text’s theological, historical, and material context. Her final move is to isolate the value of this text in its emotional expression and musical production in order to tie it to the character of the “artist.” Guest effectively distorts the medieval Hadewijch into a modern artist whose *Poems in Stanzas* are personal expressions of powerful emotions.¹⁵

In fact, Hart and Guest share an interest in the character of Hadewijch as genius, as artist. These texts are, they would seem to claim, the products of a singular being. But, as Jonathan Culler protests, we need “a different framework for thinking about lyric [that] will prevent many poems from appearing to be failed examples of a dramatic monologue or a lyric of personal expression.”¹⁶ By redirecting attention to the particular medieval devotional context out of which these texts emerged, we might begin to undo the modern preoccupation with the figure of the singular poet, artist, author. The example of the *Minnesang* manuscript is helpful here. As a songbook, it is “a multiauthor and anonymous lyric anthology contained in a manuscript codex or volume of parchment leaves bound together in a book form...that displays an intention to gather and organize different vernacular lyric texts as an overall collection.”¹⁷ *Minnesang* not only preserves the love lyrics of Middle High German performed by *Minnesänger*, who were akin to *troubadours* and *trouvères*; according to Marisa Galvez, it also “[establishes] expectations of the poem, the poet, and lyric poetry itself.”¹⁸ In a certain way, Hadewijch’s songs are closer to

¹⁴ Tanis Guest, *Some Aspects of Hadewijch’s Poetic Form in the “Strofische Gedichten”* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1975), 1.

¹⁵ Guest also alludes here to the production of music, but what she means by music is the musicality of the language used by Hadewijch, not on the musical culture that organizes beguine devotional life.

¹⁶ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 5.

¹⁷ Marisa Galvez, *Songbook: How Lyric Became Poetry in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

Minnesang than they are to “poetry,” especially because they do not presume a lyric “I” or the figure of the lyric poet prior to their performance in community. The figure of the poet, this character we call Hadewijch, is a product of the expectations set in her songs. I am not suggesting that there was no historical Hadewijch at all, but rather that we know so little about this thirteenth-century beguine that to assign to her the singularity of poetic genius is to render static the dynamic ambiguity of medieval ignorance. To think Hadewijch’s songs with *Minnesang* is to remain with the unknown aspects of this figure’s life and focus instead on the textual circumstances.¹⁹

Understanding Hadewijch’s songs requires an appreciation for the significance of song to the beguine way of life. Emerging first in Brabant and in the Rhineland, these thirteenth-century lay women lived in communities within cities, called “beguinages,” and cultivated a vibrant example of female spirituality of which not only Hadewijch, but also Mechtilde of Magdeburg and (ca. 1207–1294) and Marguerite Porete (ca. 1248–1310) were important models. These communities of women did not follow a rule of life; nor did they take any formal vows. This meant that they were free to leave the community if they so desired, and many did either to re-enter secular life or officially to enter an Order. Despite this diminished stability, especially in contrast to the Benedictine and Cistercian communities treated in chapters 1 and 2, beguines did follow the authority of a Grand Mistress. Still, their relationship to Church authorities was uneven, and the relative freedom of their devotional life certainly stirred some suspicion. In the end, though, these communities supported women who wanted to live a deeply religious life modeled upon monastic life. At the heart of their prayerful life was the musical practice of psalter recitation through the Divine Office performed either in a parish church liturgy or a beguinage chapel. Beguine adherence to the Divine Office, thus, rendered these communities semi-monastic and served as mode of indirect sanction for the religious life that they led.²⁰

Set within the context of the Divine Office, Hadewijch’s songs are not just poems, but more importantly extensions of the prayerful life grounded in the authority of a monastic tradition of psalter recitation popularized, as chapter 1 explains, by Cassian and Benedict. The clearest example of this connection between Hadewijch’s songs and the Psalms is Song 23. The first stanza reads:

The season offers us good success,
And if with success we did good,
We could conquer.
And if we were wise in care,

¹⁹ Another complicating factor to knowing the historical Hadewijch is the fact that her extant manuscripts suggest another figure referred to as Hadewijch II, who seems to have authored *Mengeldichten*, or the rhymed letters, 17–29. For implications of this codicological evidence, see Amy Hollywood, “Love Speaks Here: Michel de Certeau’s *Mystic Fable*,” *Spiritus* 12 (2012): 205–206n. 9; and, Dailey, *Promised Bodies*, 177n. 43.

²⁰ This paragraph is indebted to Walter Simons, “Beguines, Liturgy and Music in the Middle Ages: An Exploration,” in *Beghinae in cantu instructae: Musical Patrimony from Flemish Beguinages (Middle Ages–Late 18th C.)*, ed. Pieter Mannaerts (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 16–19.

We would be caring for the unwise,
Who do not yet know themselves
And are inwardly blind;
For they do not know what they love.
Thus we go away in all directions.
May God now come to our assistance!

[De tijt gheeft ons ten geode spoet,
Ende wrachten wij metten spoede goet,
So mochten wij verwinnen.
Ende waren wij dan in hoeden vroet,
So worden die onvroede behoet,
Die hen noch niet en bekinnen
Ende blent sijn van binnen;
Want sine weten wat si minnen.
Dus dolen wij in allen staden.
Nu moet ons god beraden.]²¹

The final verse of this stanza, which serves as the song's refrain, cites the Biblical verse Psalms 70:1. As chapter 1 explained, Cassian identifies this Psalm as the essential formula for cultivating prayerful attention and suggests that this single verse enables one to conform with the author of the Psalms so that "our experience not only perceives but even anticipates its thought, and the meanings of the words are disclosed to us not by exegesis but by proof."²² The goal of returning to this formula is to inhabit the position of the author, as Cassian explains: "When we have the same disposition in our heart with which each Psalm was sung or written down, then we shall become like its author, grasping its significance beforehand rather than afterward."²³ The goal of this formula is to become like the author of the Psalms so that prayerful attention is maintained and so that thoughts do not wander indiscreetly. It is no wonder, then, that the verse that introduces this refrain laments the state of distraction especially for those "who do not yet know themselves / And are inwardly blind." The penultimate verse reads, "Thus we go astray in all directions." Distraction disperses and fragments the subject, so in response, Psalms 70:1 provides a formula to gather oneself in devout attention and cultivate the very dispositions that the Psalms embody. Furthermore, that this verse serves at the song's refrain indicates that the text provides the very opportunity to return repeatedly to this formula. In this way, the song is not an expression of emotion, but rather the very mode of cultivating proper affect by conforming more and more to the disposition of the author of the Psalms.

²¹ Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 189. All Middle Dutch of the songs follows Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: Strophische Gedichten*, ed. J. van Mierlo (Leuven: Martinus Nijhoff, 1910).

²² John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 10.11.5.

²³ Ibid.

The conformation to the author that this song enjoins is reflected in the complicated rhyme scheme that it follows. As this first stanza illustrates in verses 1, 2, 4, and 5, this song relies upon a chiasmatic grammatical or derivative rhyme. What this means is that each verse's rhyme depends upon the criss-crossing of two words that assume different grammatical forms in each verse in order to maintain the rhyme. For example, "geode spoet" becomes "spoede goet," and "hoeden vroet" becomes "onvroede behoet." The effect of this grammatical chiasmus is to produce a sense of symmetry, which further emphasizes the notion of conformation. The movement from one verse to the next witnesses the grammatical conformation of the first word to the second and vice-versa. Song 23's rhyme scheme, thus, comes to enact the very process of conformation that this song declares most explicitly in verse 4:

If someone submits enough to the power of Love,
 I say that he is empowered by submission;
 Fidelity guarantees this to him.
 For this lover so evidences conformity to Love,
 And by this evidence is so conformed inwardly to her,
 That they are found to be both one,
 So that no mind might separate them;
 He would live in hunger for the depths of Love,
 In all satisfaction.
 May God now come to our assistance!

[Die ghenoech der minnen rike wijct,
 Ic segghe dat hi bi wike rijct;
 Dies gheuet trouwe orconde.
 Want hi hare so ghelike blijct,
 Ende so een met dien blike ghelijct,
 Dat mense beide een vonde,
 So dates gheen sin ghescenden en conde,
 Hine woende in honghere van minnen gronde
 Met allen vollen saden.
 Nu moete ons god beraden.]²⁴

Once again, this verse not only displays chiasmatic grammatical rhyme, but is also ends with a refrain citing Psalms 70:1. The theme of conformation is explicitly stated here in terms of becoming one with Love (*minne*). By teaching submission and fidelity, this stanza makes possible the dispositional conformation that will lead the singer of this song to an ultimate conformation with Love. Song 23 grounds itself in the very meditative practice that cultivates the proper disposition of loving prayerful attention to God. It, thus, shares a function with the Psalms. In the same way that Psalms 70:1 synecdochically stand for all 150 psalms, this song takes on the function of the entire Psalter. Its recitation is, therefore, an extension of psalter recitation. In the

²⁴ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 190.

end, this song not only functions as a paraliturgical text, it sanctions beguine devotion by grounding their prayer in modes of prayer and devotion sanctioned by monastic communities and the Desert Fathers before them. As this song exemplifies, Hadewijch's songs are not expressions of her personal feelings; instead, they are didactic texts that call the singer to conform to the disposition of the author—that is, to become as much like Hadewijch as possible. Hadewijch's exemplarity does not remove her from community. It grounds her in it as a model to which all other beguines may aspire.

HADEWIJCH'S VISIONS AND THE SOUND OF LITURGY

The significance of song to Hadewijch's texts extends into and structures her *Visions* as well. Returning to de Certeau's overlapping treatment of both Hadewijch and the ineffability of music, one might be tempted to ask, "What exactly is the problem with the anachronistic nature of this musical formulation especially if ineffability is not a trope entirely foreign to Hadewijch's texts?" The problem, of course, is that ineffability is itself discursively produced and conditioned by its specific material, historical, and rhetorical context. In other words, like music, there is not simply one ineffability, and, further, there is not simply one apophatic strategy that molds itself according to each iteration of the ineffable. By situating his reading of Hadewijch within an implicitly Romantic formulation of music, de Certeau suggests that, like the Romantics, Hadewijch's writings, particularly her songs, presume that music transcends verbal language, materiality, and embodiment. This is simply not the case, for by simply acknowledging the sensory or sonic significance of music, Hadewijch's writings bespeak the inseparability of sound and text instead of privileging music over the Word. A fuller picture of Hadewijch's relationship to musical practice demonstrates that literacy and training in song go hand in hand. What we find in Hadewijch's *Visions* is a particular form of ineffability that, because tied to music, is inseparable from both language and the body.

The combination of Visions 7 and 8, which are conventionally read together as a single vision, illustrates this point. "On a certain Pentecost Sunday," Hadewijch writes, "I had a vision at dawn. Matins were being sung in the church, and I was present." She continues,

My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire [*begherten*] and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me I did not content my Beloved, and that my Beloved did not fulfill my desire, so that dying I must go mad, and going mad, I must die [*steruende soude verwoeden ende al verwordende steruen*]. On that day my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully be desirous love that all my separate limbs threatened to break, and all my separate veins were in travail. The longing [*begherte*] in which I then was cannot be expressed by any language [*ontsegheleke*] or any person I know; and everything I could say [*segghen mochte*] about it would be unheard-of [*ongehoert*] to all those who never apprehended

Love as something to work for with desire [*begherten werken*], and whom Love had never acknowledged as hers.²⁵

Like Hadewijch's other visions, this vision begins with a reference to the liturgical feast during which the events transpire. She also specifies that the vision takes place during the particular liturgical hour of matins.²⁶ This rhetorical move both authorizes her text, but more importantly demonstrates the significance of the affective and sensory training that take place through liturgical performance, especially on feast days and particularly through the recitation of the Psalms. The scene that Hadewijch describes is, furthermore, marked by the body. Her heart, veins, and limbs all suffer with her yearning desire (*begherte*) to the point of being almost undone. Like the body, language too seems to fail here because she characterizes her desire as ineffable (*ontseggheleke*) and unheard of (*ongehoert*). In many ways, this opening scene, set within a liturgical scene, seems to affirm de Certeau's claims about the music's ability to incite the ultimate recognition of the unsayable and the unknowable. Despite the dissatisfaction between the Lover Hadewijch and her Beloved, Hadewijch's recourse to the ineffable, unlike de Certeau's, does not sustain a discourse of exile. Lover and Beloved share in the hope of satisfaction in love, and this unifying conformation is anticipated already in the opening of Vision 7 with the chiasmic phrase "dying I must go mad, and going mad, I must die" (*steruende soude verwoeden ende al verwordende steruen*). Like in Song 23, this device evokes the idea of symmetry and conformation, and even though the terms here are "madness" and "death," the meaning of the latter comes closer to Augustine's death-as-reformation than total annihilation.

Hadewijch continues the account of her vision by explaining how Christ comes to her in a series of mutating forms—as a child, as a man, and, finally, in the form of the Eucharist. Her most famous scene of union unfolds as follows:

Then he gave himself to me in the shape [*specien*] of the Sacrament, in its outward form [*figuren*], as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice, in form and taste, as the custom is. After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity [*na miere herten begherten / na miere menscheit*]. I was outwardly [*van buten*] satisfied and fully transported. Also then, for a short while, I had the strength to bear this; but soon, after a short time, I lost that manly beauty [*die sconen man*] outwardly [*van buten*] in the sight of his form [*in siene in vormen*]. I saw him completely come to nought and so fade and all at once dissolve [*al smelten in een*] that I could no longer distinguish him within me [*binnen mi*]. Then it was to me as if we were one

²⁵ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 280. All Middle Dutch of the *Visions* follows Hadewijch, *De Visionen van Hadewych*, ed. J. van Mierlo (Leuven: S.V. de Vlaamsche Boekenhalle, 1924).

²⁶ For an examination of the ways that the liturgy shapes the organization of Hadewijch's *Visions*, see Veerle Fraeters, "Gender and Genre: The Design of Hadewijch's *Book of Visions*," in *The Voice of Silence: Women's Literacy in a Men's Church*, eds. Thérèse de Hemptinne and María Eugenia Góngora (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 57–77.

without difference [*wi een waren sonder differencie*]. It was thus: outwardly [*van buten*], to see [*in siene*], taste [*in smakene*], and feel [*in ghevoelne*], as one can outwardly [*van buten*] taste, see, and feel in the reception of the outward [*van buten*] Sacrament. So can the Beloved, with the loved one, each wholly receive the other in all full satisfaction of the sight [*van siene*], the hearing [*van hoerne*], and the passing away [*van vervaerne*] of one in the other. After that I remained in a passing away in my Beloved, so that I wholly melted away [*versmalt*] in him and nothing any longer remained to me of myself.²⁷

What Hadewijch has produced at the beginning of her vision, namely her body in discourse, she undoes in this account of mystical union. Importantly, though, dissolution and undoing are not the end goals here. What is more significant is the dynamic relationship between discursive doing and undoing—the rhythm between the production and dissolution of body as text. For the dissolution that takes place in this scene is not utter annihilation. Instead Hadewijch deploys the shapes (*specien*) and forms (*figuren*) of figuration to communicate how her outer self moves inward, much like the way in which Bernard relies upon allegory to produce the space for inner experience. While the language of the senses run throughout this account, the qualification of the outer senses (*van buten*) drops out when Hadewijch claims that “the Beloved, with the loved one, [can] each wholly receive the other in all full satisfaction of the sight, the hearing, and the passing away.” Implicit in this omission is a move from the outer self to the inner, the bridging between, in Hadewijch’s words, “the desire of my heart and my humanity.” The move from outer humanity to the inner heart rests, according to Patricia Dailey, upon the introduction of Christ’s *lichame*, or “the glorified body as it conforms to Christ,” which stands in contrast to *materie*, or the material body.²⁸ According to her interpretation of this scene, “As we saw in the visions’ references to Hadewijch’s personal growth (which started with her being not yet fully grown, then becoming more perfect, and then oriented toward her community), a teleology appears in Christ’s progression from child, to man, to human being, to figure or symbol that unites the larger collective body in the Eucharist.”²⁹ Her reading traces a move “from *lichame* to *materie* to a *corpus* signed by God.” Thus, the melting away that both Christ and Hadewijch experience is more a transformation of bodies than the annihilation of them. Indeed, the trope of melting away evokes the final stanza of Song 23, which proclaims, “Then, in the madness of Love, / He will burn [*Verbernen*] in her deepest flood / And melt away [*versemelten*] like tallow: / May God now come to our assistance.”³⁰ The trajectory of Vision 7 thus follows the trajectory of Song 23 leading to a burning and a melting away. But to close the song and the vision with dissolution is not to isolate this experience as the singular good of the devotional. As the refrain in Song 23 reminds the singer, recitation, singing, and chant call for return, so even at the end of this song, the singer is called to begin the song anew and to persist in the cultivation of loving desire. Melting away,

²⁷ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 281–282.

²⁸ Dailey, *Promised Bodies*, 69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁰ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 192.

like Cassian's fiery prayer that Songs 23's burning words seem to evoke, is but one fleeting moment on the trajectory of spiritual progress.

While, I agree with Dailey that this vision leads to an emphasis on embodied devotion in community, I would locate this affirmation of community more explicitly in the continuation of this Vision 7 recounted in Vision 8. In an elaboration of the vision that she receives in union with Christ, Hadewijch describes an encounter with guide, a champion who "showed [her] again the ineffably beautiful [*onsegheleke scoene*] Countenance, which was in appearance like a great fiery flood, wider and deeper than the sea."³¹ At the conclusion of this vision, wherein Hadewijch learns that she has surpassed even her guide's spiritual progress, the guide gives the following command: "Return again into your material being [*materie*], and let your works [*dine werke*] blossom forth."³² The vision concludes with this explanation: "Then I came back to myself as someone in new severe pain, and so I shall remain until the day when I am again recalled to the experience from which I then turned away."³³ At the end of this vision, Hadewijch is directed to return to her *materie*—her materiality or her material conditions—and to her *werke*. I would like to suggest that at the intersection of these two terms is not just a general form of material work, acts, deeds performed by the beguines. Instead, I would suggest that Hadewijch's *materie* and *werke* are exemplified by the textual materials that Hadewijch produces and with which she teaches her fellow beguines of the ways of union not only because of the lexical capaciousness of both of these terms, but also because the rhythm of this vision's narrative moves from and back to a particular material context—from matins, to vision, back to matins. Once again, the material conditions of Hadewijch's visions are consistently linked to the material practice of liturgy. The work to which she most immediately returns is to the recitation of the Psalms, so that she is called to let her "works blossom forth" suggests that she proliferate the very work of song. Her *Visions*, thus, come to authorize the production of song in the first place.

So, how do or can we understand de Certeau's reading of Hadewijch within musical framework especially if, following Carolyn Abbate, "Ascribing revelatory force to music is a legacy of the nineteenth-century" with which we must all grapple?³⁴ Arguing for a drastic reading versus a gnostic reading of music, Abbate writes,

Standing back from all the genuflecting, one might say that music is stickier and less important than the Romantics—including the many still with us—want to imagine. It is at once ineffable and sticky. That is its fundamental incongruity. Words stick to it [...]. Images and corporeal gestures stick as well. Thus claims for music's absoluteness or autonomy, which recur throughout the history of musical aesthetics, deny our occulocentric and logocentric nature, deny that physical

³¹ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 282.

³² *Ibid.*, 284.

³³ *Ibid.*, 284.

³⁴ Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (spring 2004): 518.

grounding and visual symbolism and verbal content change musical sounds by recommending how they are to be understood.”³⁵

Abbate calls for a situated and contextual musicology here—one that accounts for the ephemerality of experience. Indeed, she shares here with Hadewijch a recognition of the ephemerality of experience, especially those of heightened sense and sensuousness. But like Hadewijch, she suggests work here in the task of dealing with the incongruity of music’s ineffability, on the one hand, and stickiness, on the other. In the end, de Certeau offers a tragically melancholic vision of Hadewijch:

Unmoored from the ‘origin’ of which Hadewijch spoke, the traveler no longer has foundation nor goal. Given over to nameless desire, he is the drunken boat. Henceforth this desire can no longer speak to someone. It seems to have become *infans*, voiceless, more solitary and lost than before, or less protected and more radical, ever seeking a body or poetic locus. It goes on walking, then, tracing itself out in silence, in writing.³⁶

Whereas de Certeau experiences a “breakdown of the body,” and a turn to writing, always figured as an act of loss, Hadewijch returns to her *materie*, certainly in pain, yes, on account of her exile from Love, but also with a community in mind on whose account she does her *werke*. She is not lost, she is not disembodied, and her songs and *Visions* are the material index of such an exemplary devotional life.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid., 523–524.

³⁶ De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 299.

³⁷ Ibid. 298.

Chapter 4

John of the Cross, the *Spiritual Canticle*, and “That Abominable Solitary Vice We Call Theory”

*You say I am repeating
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.*
—T. S. Eliot, “East Coker”

GOYTISOLO’S RADICAL MYSTICISM

Amidst the polyphony of Juan Goytisolo’s *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario* (*The Virtues of the Solitary Bird*) (1988), a seemingly singular voice laments, “soy de una gente que cuando aman, mueren” (I come from a people who, when they love, die).¹ Whose voice utters this melancholic declaration? And who are the people among whom this narrator emerges? These questions of identity and filiation are only complicated further by the novel’s notorious textual fluidity and referential ambiguity. Moving dreamlike from one setting to another—a Turkish bath, a quarantined convalescent home under the guise of a resort hotel, a symposium of hermeneutic scholars specializing in the works of John of the Cross (1542–1591), a hospital room, a small prison cell in Toledo—*Las virtudes* populates its scenes with a set of characters whose overlapping contours confound even the putative narrator who, “en vela, dando vueltas y vueltas confuso, abrazado angustiosamente a la almohada, sumido en el ígneo fulgor de la noche oscura, la antesala de la opacidad auroral, el suave umbral de la embriaguez extática” (wide awake, tossing and turning in confusion, anxiously clutching the pillow, plunged into the fiery brightness of the dark night, the antechamber of an opaque dawn, the gentle threshold of ecstatic intoxication), asks anxiously, “él es yo? yo soy ella?” (is he me? am I her?).² Orthographically presented in this instance as a self divided literally by the mark of a question (“yo? yo”), the novel’s “I” serves as the fulcral site balancing character transformation staged here as gender

¹ Juan Goytisolo, *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1988), 152. All English translations of this text are from Juan Goytisolo, *The Virtues of the Solitary Bird*, trans. Helen Lane (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1991), 140.

² Goytisolo, *Las virtudes*, 58; 54.

inversion, the movement from *él* through a divided *yo* to *ella*. Despite the conventions of textual exposition, however, this movement's trajectory is not so unidirectional, the transformation not so decisive, and, perhaps, the implicit model of gender not so binary, each troubled in large part by the uncertainty of the interrogative voice. Thus, as a textual focal point of pronominal deixis, the narrative "I" is ultimately plural, serving as a flexible, yet ambiguous mediator of the multiple characters conjured in Goytisolo's text. As an interlocutor to the narrator—or, perhaps, just another version of the narrator—exclaims, "su plural me deja suspenso" (your plural baffles me). Subjectivity is left in a state of suspension or perpetual abeyance.³

To characterize the narrative voice as plural, however, is not to acquiesce entirely to indeterminability, but rather to acknowledge that it is constituted, at times simultaneously, by a multiplicity of references that tether it to some ground, as shifting as this ground may be. Even amidst the narrator's identity crisis recounted above, the conditions of textual possibility are delimited by a point of reference that undergirds the entirety of the novel. By plunging "into the fiery brightness of the dark night," the narrator invokes a mystical trope deployed by John of the Cross, author of *Noche oscura* (*Dark Night*), "cuya *Obra Completa* (edición de Licino Ruano de la Iglesia)," acknowledges Goytisolo, "vertebra la estructura de la novela" (whose *Obra Completa* [Licino Ruano de la Iglesia edition] forms the vertebral structure of the novel).⁴ Despite Goytisolo's overt claim that John of the Cross's corpus serves as the backbone of *Las virtudes*, literary criticism has tended to relegate the Spanish Carmelite to the sidelines of analysis. Instead, critics like Luce López-Baralt and Julio Ortega, for example, have focused their attention on the Sufi influence on both Carmelite mysticism and Goytisolo, while others like Stanley Black, Bradley Epps, and Paul Julian Smith have shifted their emphasis onto the specter of AIDS that also runs the course of the novel.⁵ What is more, any reference to John of the Cross within this body of scholarship subsumes the Spanish Carmelite under a version of mysticism that emphasizes radicality, spontaneity, and immediacy, and the ultimate effect is to elide "the exquisite contemplative of Carmel and the often violent, iconoclastic contemporary novelist."⁶ Indeed, this characterization of John of the Cross is not only a product of the scholarship

³ Ibid.

⁴ Goytisolo, acknowledgments to *Las virtudes*, 171; 162.

⁵ For studies on Goytisolo and Islam, see especially Luce López-Baralt, *Huellas del Islam en la literatura española: De Juan Ruiz a Juan Goytisolo* (Madrid: Hiperión, 1985); Luce López-Baralt, "Inesperado encuentro de dos juanes de la literatura española: Juan Goytisolo y San Juan de la Cruz," in *Escritos sobre Juan Goytisolo: Actas del II Seminario sobre la obra de Juan Goytisolo: Las Virtudes el pájaro solitario* (Almería, Spain: Instituto de Estudios Almerienses, 1990), 135–145; Julio Ortega, "Cántico de Juan Goytisolo," *La torre: Revista de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* 4, no. 15 (1990): 361–367; and Julio Ortega, "La huella sufí y el misticismo," *Diario 16*, Sept. 30, 1989. For studies on the significance of AIDS in *Las virtudes*, see Stanley Black, *Juan Goytisolo and the Poetics of Contagion: The Evolution of a Radical Aesthetic in the Later Novels* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2001); Bradley S. Epps, *Significant Violence: Oppression and Resistance in the Narratives of Juan Goytisolo, 1970–1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Paul Julian Smith, *Representing the Other: 'Race,' Text, and Gender in Spanish and Spanish American Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

⁶ López-Baralt, "Inesperado encuentro," 137. My translation.

surrounding *Las virtudes*, but also a reflection of Goytisolo's depiction of mysticism as radical heresy under the persecution of Spanish Catholicism. But must John of the Cross necessarily conform to such an iconoclastic mysticism?

This chapter refocuses attention on John of the Cross in an attempt to articulate how he resists Goytisolo's particularly radical portrayal. But, to be clear, my intent is not to make a stand for "historical accuracy," as if that were a possibility here, but rather to demonstrate that Goytisolo's characterization of John of the Cross is conditioned by hermeneutic, theological, and political commitments. As Colin Thompson bluntly states, "San Juan the man eludes us."⁷ A comparative reading of the *Cántico espiritual* (*Spiritual Canticle*) and *Las virtudes* will reveal that they call for distinct modes of engagement with literary texts and that these modes, in turn, give rise to divergent forms of mysticism. While Goytisolo's novel forwards a radical mysticism on the basis of textual immediacy and literary spontaneity, John of the Cross's poem and commentary attest to a mysticism for which immediacy and spontaneity are rhetorical strategies grounded in the communal and cultivated devotion to God of the Carmelite life.⁸ In the end, as I will explain, Goytisolo's formulation of a radical mysticism forecloses not only a model of critique implicit in John of the Cross's texts, but also alternative orientations and attitudes towards the politics of queerness and of religious difference.

THE CRITICAL FUNCTION OF THE PRACTITIONER: GOYTISOLO WITH ELIOT

Years before the conception of *Las virtudes*, Goytisolo contributed an essay entitled "Novela, crítica y creación" in response to the provocation of the 1980 symposium "La novela en español, hoy."⁹ In this piece he expresses befuddlement with the paradoxical responses to the rich developments in contemporary theory, enriched, as it was at that moment, not only by a continuously growing critical corpus, but also by the particular contributions of modern linguistics to literary analysis.¹⁰ He observes, on the one hand, novelists with "una especie de terror supersticioso al conocimiento teórico del lenguaje en el que se expresan, un deseo inconsciente de preservar la virginidad de su inspiración de un presunto choque esterilizador con las abstrusas realidades 'científicas,' un miedo a perder la espontaneidad creadora" (a kind of

⁷ Colin P. Thompson, *The Poet and the Mystic: A Study of the Cántico of San Juan de la Cruz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1.

⁸ For a study of the rhetorical strategies in fellow Carmelite Teresa of Ávila's corpus, see Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁹ For an account of the symposium hosted in September 1980 by Indiana University's Department of Spanish and Portuguese, see José Miguel Oviedo, "Nota preliminar," *Revista Iberoamericana* 47, nos. 116–117 (July–December 1981): 1–2. This essay was not the same essay that Goytisolo presented at the actual conference, but a contribution written specifically for the collection. See Juan Goytisolo, "Novela, crítica y creación," *Revista Iberoamericana* 47, nos. 116–117 (July–December 1981): 23 n.

¹⁰ Goytisolo, "Novela," 24.

superstitious terror of the theoretical knowledge of the language in which they express themselves, an unconscious desire to preserve the virginity of their inspiration from the so-called sterilizing collision with abstruse “scientific” realities, a fear of losing creative spontaneity). He marvels, on the other hand, at the proliferation of novels that merely illustrate preconceived theories—novels that he disparagingly calls *simples ejercicios* (simple exercises), *prótesis* (prosthetics), and *experimentos de probeta* (test experiments).¹¹ Thus, while some novelists, according to Goytisolo, shun theory in the hopes of safeguarding the spontaneity of their creative inspiration, others embrace it so zealously as to produce dogmatic and, therefore, lifeless extensions of theoretical doctrine.

And yet, the mocking tone with which Goytisolo describes the “superstitious terror” of the antitheoretical novelist betrays early on an important revelation: “El antiteoricismo que predomina entre los mejores autores de obras de ficción es más bien de fachada y obedece a menudo de consideraciones de estrategia personal. Quien más, quien menos, todos incurren en secreto en ese abominable vicio solitario que llamamos teoría” (The antitheorism that predominates in the finest authors of works of fiction is if anything a façade and often obeys considerations of personal strategy. Everyone, more or less, perpetrates in secret that abominable solitary vice we call theory).¹² Theory—all novelists fall into it, even if they don’t own up to it. By labeling theory an “abominable solitary vice,” Goytisolo highlights the hypocrisy of novelists who supposedly disavow it outright while giving in to its charms behind closed doors. Indeed, it is primarily this hypocrisy that renders theory a vice insofar as it is cast in opposition to the purity of literary work. But his alignment of theory with the solitary vice, the secret sex of masturbatory pleasure, is not a mere rhetorical indulgence that extends the metaphor deployed by Goytisolo to deride novelists who fear losing the “virginity of their spontaneity.” As Goytisolo makes clear, theory can in fact pose a danger just as much as it can serve as a resource for literary production. In other words, by invoking the framework of virtue and vice, Goytisolo raises a question about the ethics of theorizing, about how theorizing *should* take place in relationship to the novel. What his allusion to onanism suggests is that theory’s danger lies precisely in its capacity for insular modes of literary production.

In order to elaborate this claim, Goytisolo draws a distinction between the *crítico practicante de la ficción* (critic who practices fiction) and the *novelista que teoriza* (novelist who theorizes). While neither of these figures reaches the status of *crítico-creador* (critic-creator), the paragon of literary production who can write pieces that are “a la vez crítica y creación, literatura y discurso sobre la literatura” (at the same time critique and creation, literature and discourse on literature), Goytisolo expresses a clear bias for the *crítico practicante de la ficción*.¹³ Characterized as particularly obstructive to a novel’s interpretation, the *novelista que teoriza*, like the prosthetic novels that serve merely to illustrate a theory, forecloses “la ambigüedad y polisemia del lenguaje,” by refusing “el placer de la lectura múltiple y contradictoria” (the ambiguity and

¹¹ Ibid., 25.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 30–31.

polysemy of language; the pleasure of the multiple and contradictory reading).¹⁴ Bemoaning the vast proliferation of technologies of vocal reproduction, of the mass media, and of occasions for authors to speak about their work, Goytisolo warns against the ascent of *novelistas que teorizan* because their accounts of their own work end up dominating any subsequent textual engagement and, ultimately, reifying the fetish object of the *obra-autor* (work-author), whose hermetically sealed relationship excludes any other possible interpretation.¹⁵ The *novelista que teoriza*, then, is not only an Author—capital “A”—but also “una especie de lector privilegiado, que conserva un misterioso derecho de pontificar sobre la totalidad de cuanto ha escrito” (a kind of privileged reader, who maintains a mysterious right to pontificate about the totality of everything he or she has written).¹⁶ An embodiment of insular self-love, Goytisolo’s *novelista que teoriza* exemplifies, for him, the risk of indulging in that abominable solitary vice.

The critic who also practices fiction, in contrast, seems to offer Goytisolo the possibility of theory’s redemption. Goytisolo’s *crítico practicante de la ficción* originally derives from Mario Vargas Llosa’s interpretation of T. S. Eliot’s essay “The Function of Criticism” written in 1923.¹⁷ In order to undo the strict distinction between critical and creative functions, Eliot, in this essay, asserts that “the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative.”¹⁸ Instead of accepting a conventional distinction between critical and creative writing, Eliot is adamant that the labor of criticism undergirds the creative process to such an extent that “we do not know what previous labours have prepared, or what goes on, in the way of criticism, all the time in the minds of the creators.”¹⁹ Critical labor, like Goytisolo’s characterization of theory, takes place behind the scenes, but is not intentionally hidden from plain view—that is, it does not come close to attaining, for Eliot, the status of a solitary vice. On the contrary, even while affirming the contrasting purposes of the work of art (autotelic and, therefore, sufficient in and of itself) and critical writing (necessarily about something other than itself) and, thus, generally valuing the former over the latter, Eliot still unilaterally sees virtue in the critical function, which “finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kind of union with creation

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Ibid., 25–26.

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹⁷ Goytisolo, here, directly cites an essay by Carlos-Peregrín Otero. In this essay, Otero cites the interview with Vargas Llosa that draws upon Eliot’s essay and originally coins the term *crítico practicante*. Goytisolo then adds the qualification *de la ficción* in order both to retain the oppositional symmetry against the *novelista que teoriza* and to underline the creative labor for which Goytisolo praises the *crítico practicante*. This emphasis is, as I show, at odds with Eliot’s prior formulation since Eliot’s point is to underline the critical function of both the artist and the critic. See Carlos-Peregrín Otero, “Vargas Llosa: Teoría y praxis,” *Grial* 14, no. 51 (January February March 1976): 19; and Ricardo Cano Givario, *El buitre y el ave fénix: Conversaciones con Mario Vargas Llosa* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1972), 22–23.

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, “The Function of Criticism,” in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 30.

¹⁹ Ibid.

in the labour of the artist.”²⁰ Critique is not at all separate from the work of art; nor, is it relegated to post-creative discourse.²¹ It is integral, if not even prior, to the work of artistic creation.

While Goytisolo is more suspicious of what Eliot calls “the critical function” and what he calls “theory” than his Anglophone predecessor, he does admit that

la labor del teórico que no dogmatiza constituye una ayuda inapreciable para el novelista o crítico practicante de la ficción tanto cuanto le permite examinar el material en que se expresa desde nuevas perspectivas, trastornar las jerarquías verbales consagradas mediante un juego sutil de rupturas y transgresiones, eludir los gérmenes de opresión que insidiosamente se cuelan en el interior de cualquier discurso, independizarse y actuar de modo libérrimo respecto de su propio lenguaje. Esta función energética, salutífera, vivificadora que procura el conocimiento de las disciplinas lingüísticas permitiría al crítico practicante de la ficción una revolución permanente del lenguaje que—como en la lúcida visión de Trotsky—impediría que aquél se institucionalizara y aburguesase, ahogando así la dinámica subversiva de su propuesta bajo el peso de nuevos códigos, prejuicios y dogmas.

[the labor of the theorist who does not dogmatize constitutes an invaluable aid for novelists or critics who practice fiction inasmuch as it allows them to examine from new perspectives the material in which they express themselves, disrupt the consecrated verbal hierarchies through a subtle game of ruptures and transgressions, elude the grounds of oppression that insidiously sneak into the interior of any discourse, break away and act in a way absolutely free from their own language. This energetic, salutary, revitalizing function that procures knowledge from the linguistic disciplines would allow the critic who practices fiction a permanent revolution of language that—as in Trotsky’s magnificent vision—would prevent it from becoming institutionalized and bourgeois and from stifling, in this way, the subversive dynamic that it offers under the weight of new codes, prejudices, and dogmas.]²²

Theoretical labor, like Eliot’s critical labor, can serve as a revitalizing resource for the novelist and the critic who practices fiction. In fact, Goytisolo’s description of theory’s potential for linguistic, social, and ideological rupture, transgression, and revolution seems quickly to outpace the quotidian work of “sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing.” But Goytisolo’s faith in theory is tempered by the qualification that only non-dogmatic theory offers

²⁰ Ibid., 31.

²¹ My analysis throughout will not rely upon a strict distinction between criticism, on the one hand, and critique, on the other, in large part because the formulation of the critical function that Eliot offers includes both of these terms. My suggestion, then, is that Eliot’s analysis of critical labor and, by extension, Goytisolo’s discussion of theory have implications for both literary criticism and critical theory.

²² Goytisolo, “Novela,” 30.

such revolutionary potential, and this qualification ultimately betrays his underlying fear that the *crítico practicante de la ficción* can too quickly become a *novelista que teoriza*. While theory, for Goytisolo, carries the revolutionary potential to subvert the constrictions of institutionalized dogma, it risks too easily becoming dogma itself. Therefore, even as he appears to praise theory by declaring that “el problema fundamental de los críticos practicantes de la ficción radica en interiorizar el saber teórico de su tiempo” (the fundamental issue for critics who practice fiction lies in internalizing the theoretical knowledge of their time), this internalization ends up looking more like the suppression of theory especially since theories, as he suggests, only “iluminan con luces distintas” the novelistic work, “pero no la cambian” (illuminate with different lights; but do not change it).²³

In the end, the *crítico practicante de la ficción* diverges in fundamental ways from Eliot’s notion of “critics who practised, and practised well, the art of which they wrote.”²⁴ While Goytisolo rejects the *novelista que teoriza*, Eliot maintains “even that the criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism.”²⁵ The critical function that operates prior to the manifestation of the work of art is inextricable from the criticism produced after the fact, and, as such, each contributes to literature’s vitality. Critique, for Eliot, is inseparable from the practice of literature, so he, unlike Goytisolo, does not require a distinction between the *crítico practicante de la ficción* and the *novelista que teoriza*. Goytisolo, on the other hand, insists upon “el amplio margen que separa la teoría de la praxis” (the ample margin that separates theory from praxis).²⁶ Having experienced for himself the ways in which his own essays on linguist Émile Benveniste have limited the critical reception of his novel *Don Julián* (1970) by unintentionally dictating how this text should be read, Goytisolo emphasizes “el riesgo que corremos con nuestras interpretaciones *a posteriori*” (the risk that we run with our *a posteriori* interpretations) to shut down the multiplicity of meaning made possible by a novel.²⁷ In his ideal configuration, “comentarios e interpretaciones posteriores del texto serían superfluos, perderían su razón de ser” (commentaries and interpretations that follow a text would be superfluous, they would lose their *raison d’être*).²⁸ The figure of the *novelista que teoriza* exemplifies for him the way that theory or critique should not unfold—that is, after the fact of and extraneous to a novel’s publication.

But even Goytisolo’s bias for the *crítico practicante de la ficción* does not guarantee his esteem for theory, whose revolutionary potential is effectively diluted through the process of its internalization. What the antinomy of the *crítico practicante de la ficción* and the *novelista que*

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. 31.

²⁵ Eliot, 30.

²⁶ Goytisolo, “Novela,” 30.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 31. Goytisolo goes as far as to suggest that even “un texto como el que acaban de leer ustedes” (a text like the one you have just read), that is, the very essay “Novela, crítica, creación,” is redundant, useless, and superfluous (31).

teoriza comes to emblemize is Goytisolo's underlying ambivalence towards theory throughout his essay. Eliot fully embraces the critical function in all modes and clearly sets this theory of literary production over and against the notion that the great artist is "an unconscious artist" whose creative impulse is motivated by "oracular expertness" and "inspiration."²⁹ What Goytisolo only indirectly mocks—"an unconscious desire to preserve the virginity of their inspiration" and "a fear of losing creative spontaneity"—Eliot outright disputes. As a result, Goytisolo's ambivalence towards theory retroactively tempers his earlier denunciation of some novelists' "superstitious terror of theoretical knowledge." Indeed, because he adheres to such a strong oppositionality between theory and praxis, Goytisolo, as a novelist, finds himself indirectly allied with an artistic belief in singular and spontaneous inspiration. What was first a tongue-in-cheek description of theory as an abominable solitary vice comes to require, in the end, a more serious consideration.

THE LIMITS OF INFINITUDE

Whatever ambivalent hope in theory that Goytisolo harbors in the early 1980s, however, seems to dissipate entirely by 1986 when he comes to write *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario*, a text that grounds a singularly radical mysticism upon a strict opposition between restrictive criticism and open-ended creation, theory and praxis. Written as a kind of fragmented stream of consciousness—with no orthographic markers like capitalization or periods to signal the beginning or end of sentences—the novel moves somnambulistically through overlapping and inchoate scenes of apocalyptic terror, quarantine, and persecution aimed at Goytisolo's queer birds.³⁰ At each turn, the text draws attention to its status as "un sueño dentro de un sueño dentro de un sueño" (a dream within a dream within a dream).³¹ It lays claim to an unmediated oneiric quality as if the text provided immediate exposure to a world of dreams—or, more appropriately in this case, a world of nightmares.

The novel, after all, begins with "la pesadilla del adefesio, la aparición de la desgarbada del sombrero en las escaleras con su siembra feroz de cizaña" (the nightmare of the grotesque figure, the sudden apparition of the ungainly one in the hat on the stairs with her cruel store of seeds for

²⁹ Eliot, "Function of Criticism," 30.

³⁰ My interpretation of the birds throughout the novel as queer is strongly influenced by Bradley Epps's reading of *Las virtudes*, a reading that does the important work of identifying examples of Goytisolo's language with gay colloquialisms. Epps makes the larger claim that the troubling tendency in Hispanism to evade the subject of AIDS and sexuality in prior studies of this text is symptomatic of a widespread aversion and stigma towards AIDS and people living with AIDS. His essay, in response, takes up the issue of representation both of AIDS and of sexual identity in the novel. See Epps, *Significant Violence*, 379–384.

³¹ Goytisolo, *Las virtudes*, 77; 71.

sowing discord.”³² This *espantapájaros* (scarecrow) or *pajarraco* (hideous bird), as the apparition is described, comes to haunt the pages of the novel and specifically targets the flock of queer birds that Goytisolo gathers therein.³³ A long-limbed figure with tangled locks, dressed in a broad-brimmed black hat, scarecrow pants, and giant clogs, this sower of discord wreaks sudden havoc on “la Sauna de las Saunas diseminando imperturbable su semilla, tendiendo veloz el dedo aciago, abrasando a experimentadas y novicias, indultando caprichosamente a un galán, prosiguiendo con hierática solemnidad su ronda macabra” (the Sauna of Saunas, imperturbably sowing her seed, swiftly extending the fateful finger, setting old hands and novices alike on fire, capriciously granting amnesty to a lover, pursuing her macabre round with hieratic solemnity).³⁴ Intruding into the Sauna of Saunas—a clear reference to the Song of Songs upon which John of the Cross bases his *Cántico espiritual*—and sowing her seed, this apparition is only a thinly veiled allegory for what Goytisolo sees as the sudden havoc wreaked on the (sex) lives of gay men upon the advent of AIDS.³⁵ Although she carries no name, Goytisolo comes to refer to her as “la Dama de las dos sílabas” (the Lady with the two-syllable name), “el maldito adefesio de las dos sílabas” (the accursed, grotesque, two-syllable figure), “la desgalichada de las dos sílabas” (the unkempt two-syllable apparition), and “el adefesio de las dos sílabas sembrador de cizaña” (the sower of discord with the two-syllable name).³⁶ Unable or refusing to assign her the name of the health crisis that she represents, Goytisolo relies on the oblique reference to the two-syllabic term “Sida,” Spanish for AIDS. AIDS is thus named without being named, and as a nameless allegory, the nightmarish apparition typifies *Las virtudes*’s abiding question: how should this novel be read in the first place?

Because one of the novel’s settings involves a symposium of hermeneutic scholars gathered to discuss John of the Cross’s poetry, the text abounds with self-referential reading instructions cloaked as precepts for approaching the Carmelite’s poems. What immediately follows the episode in which the narrator asks “él es yo? yo soy ella?” is a galvanized expression of a position more ambivalently stated in “Novela, crítica, creación”:

era posible descifrar las oscuridades del texto, hallar una clave explicativa unívoca, desentrañar su sentido oculto mediante el recurso a la alegoría, circunscribir sus

³² Ibid., 38–39; 37.

³³ Ibid., 70, 16; 63, 18.

³⁴ Ibid., 14; 16.

³⁵ Throughout the novel the apparition and the birds are gendered with feminine pronouns. On the one hand, this reflects a kind of queer subversion through gender inversion. On the other hand, I worry about the ways in which the deployment of the feminine pronoun and female figures bespeaks not only the use of femininity as a literary tool for the service of men, but also the overshadowing of women who were also affected by the ravages of the AIDS pandemic. Furthermore, I am left wondering if such a pronominal gender inversion relies too strictly on binary logic and, therefore, does not necessarily uphold as fluid a concept of gender necessary for Goytisolo’s radical textual fluidity. Many thanks to Eleanor Craig on this point.

³⁶ Goytisolo, *Las virtudes*, 22, 33, 70, 131; 24, 32, 63, 123.

ambigüedades lingüísticas, establecer una rigurosa crítica filológica, buscar una significación estrictamente literal, acudir a interpretaciones éticas y anagógicas, enderezar su sintaxis maleable, esclarecer los presuntos dislates, paliar su señera y abrupta radicalidad, estructurar, disponer, acotar, reducir, esforzarse en atrapar su inmensidad y liquidez, capturar la sutileza del viento con una red, inmovilizar sus inasibles fluctuaciones y cambios oníricos, reproducir al acendrado esplendor del incendio místico mediante la acumulación de glosas, lecturas, fichas, notas académicas y apostilles, observaciones plúmbeas, gravosas ordenaciones sintácticas, exegesis filtradoras, páginas y páginas de prosa redundante y amazacotada?

no sería mejor anegarse de una vez en la infinitud del poema, aceptar la impenetrabilidad de sus misterios y opacidades, liberar tu propio lenguaje de grillos racionales, abandonarlo al campo magnético de sus imantaciones secretas, favorecer la onda de su expansión, admitir pluralidad y simultaneidad de sentidos, depurar la incandescencia verbal, la llama y dulce cauterio de su amor vivo?

[was it possible to decipher the obscurities of the text, find a univocal explanatory key, get to the bottom of its occult sense through recourse to allegory, circumscribe its linguistic ambiguities, establish a rigorous philological critique, search out a strictly literal meaning, resort to moral and anagogical interpretations, straighten out its malleable syntax, elucidate its supposed absurdities, extenuate its abrupt and unparalleled radicality, structure, order, prune, reduce, strive to trap its immensity and fluidity, capture the subtlety of wind in a net, immobilize its ungraspable fluctuations of oneiric shifts, reproduce the pure splendor of the mystic fire through the accumulation of glosses, commentaries, index cards, academic notes and comments, leaden observations, stodgy syntactical arrangements, filtered exegeses, pages and pages of dull redundant prose?

wouldn't it be better to plunge once and for all into the infinitude of the poem, accept the impenetrability of its mysteries and opacities, free your own language from the shackles of rationality, abandon it to the magnetic field of its secret attractions, encourage the wave of its expansion, admit plurality and simultaneity of meaning, purify the verbal incandescence, the flame and gentle cautery of its living love?]³⁷

While putatively about John of the Cross's poetry, the inquiry posed above is just as pertinent to *Las virtudes*—not to mention to John of the Cross's commentaries on his poetry, but of course these are of no interest or willfully ignored by Goytisolo. In fluid and rhythmic prose, Goytisolo articulates the question about reading according to the distinctions he draws in his earlier essay. On one side, the critic seeks to contain a text and to fix meaning—to “establish a rigorous philological critique,” “extenuate [the text's] abrupt and unparalleled radicality,” “strive to trap

³⁷ 59, 55.

its immensity and fluidity,” and merely reproduce the “pure splendor of the mystic fire” with the proliferation of commentaries, glosses, exegesis, and, most broadly, prose. On the other side, the faithful believer in the artistic creator gives in to the polysemy of language and contradictory meanings of a text by “[plunging] once and for all into the infinitude of the poem” and “[admitting] plurality and simultaneity of meaning.” Goytisolo pits critic against creator, theorist against practitioner, and, in the case of John of the Cross, prose against poetry. But as their overflowing and uncontainable form should make clear, these questions are merely rhetorical. Their very fluidity undoes what Goytisolo sees as the restrictions of critique, so, in the end, he indisputably sides with the radicality of mystical poetics and, furthermore, allies his very novel with this literary and theological genealogy.

The radical mystical poetics that Goytisolo promotes imagines the poetic text as singular, immediate, and spontaneous. Refusing reproduction in prose, “the pure splendor of the mystic fire” finds itself coextensive with poetry. As a result, the poetry is itself figured as singular and irreproducible. It furthermore calls for immediate engagement, that is, for the reader to be drowned (*anegarse*) by its infinitude. Because Goytisolo sees *Las virtudes* as itself an example of mystical poetics, it is no surprise that he relies upon the same set of terms to describe his novel in references to it after its publication.³⁸ So, in his essay “Escritura y oralidad,” Goytisolo associates *Las virtudes* with a primary orality that despite the proliferation of technology is pure and immediate.³⁹ Or, in “La experiencia abisal,” an essay putatively praising Spanish poet José Ángel Valente (1929–2000), Goytisolo claims that *Las virtudes* stands in poetic alliance with the *radicalidad* (radicality) and *singularidad* (singularity) of both John of the Cross and Valente.⁴⁰ Most telling, though, is Goytisolo’s account of *Las virtudes*’s origins. In December of 1985, he had acquired a severe intestinal illness, which, given the panic around AIDS, he thought was surely the first symptom of the “monstruo de las dos sílabas” (two-syllabled monster). Fearing that he was HIV-positive, Goytisolo read John of the Cross and, in “unas semanas de creatividad intensa” (a few weeks of intense creativity), he wrote the entire opening sequence as a meditation upon Félicien Rops’s 1882 print *Satan Sowing Tares*.⁴¹ Eventually an HIV test confirmed that Goytisolo was, in fact, HIV-negative, and he once again wrote as if freed from the heaviest burden: “Nunca he escrito con tanta precisión y fe ciega sobre un tema tan elusivo y complejo como el que se desenvuelve a lo largo de la novela. Tenía la impresión de que alguien (¿quién?) lo había programado en mi mente y de que yo me limitaba a seguir su dictado; de que el autor era otro, y mi trabajo, el de un mero escribidor” (Never had I written with such precision and blind faith on a theme as elusive and complex as the one that unfurled throughout the novel. I had the

³⁸ Whether Goytisolo understands these comments as the product of a *novelista que teoriza* is unclear despite the fact that they are precisely the kind of extraneous statement that he derides.

³⁹ Juan Goytisolo, “Escritura y oralidad,” in *Contra las sagradas formas* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2007), 142–147.

⁴⁰ Juan Goytisolo, “La experiencia abisal,” in *Contra las sagradas formas* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2007), 260.

⁴¹ Juan Goytisolo, prologue to *Obras completas*, vol. 4, *Novelas (1988–2003)* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2007), 9.

impression that someone [who?] had set it in my mind and that I was limited to following dictation; that the author was someone else, and my job was one of a mere scribe).⁴² With this description of oracular expertness, Goytisolo claims that he creates *Las virtudes* out of spontaneous and immediate inspiration.

In opposition to the stultifying effects of hermeneutic and religious orthodoxy, then, Goytisolo's characterization of radical poetics gives rise to a radical mysticism, a John of the Cross as heterodox rebel. Identified interchangeably throughout the novel as the saint, the poet, and the reformer, Goytisolo's John of the Cross is affiliated with the "alumbrados, poetas, dexados místicos, hechiceros, judaizantes, nefandos" who are "sujetos a piras de leña viciosamente verde, asfixiados primero por el humo y achicharrado después por las llamas" (illuminati, poets, unbelievers, mystics, sorcerers, Judaizers, those guilty of the abominable sin; subjected to being burned to death with viciously green wood, asphyxiated first by the smoke and then charred to a crisp by the flames).⁴³ On account of "el conflicto entre la vivencia mística [de unos cuantos poetas e iluminados] y la omnímoda maquinaria eclesiástica," the mystic is connected in lineage to "alguna herejía o secta previamente derrotadas" (the conflict between the mystic experience [of a few poets and illuminati] and the all-powerful ecclesiastical machinery; some previously defeated heresy or sect).⁴⁴ As the character Ben Sida explains, with regards to the Catholic Church, "la radicalidad de un lenguaje que entroncaba con la embriaguez mística, saliva con vino entremezclados en boca del Amado, sacudía la firmeza de su propio suelo" (the radicality of a language that was related to mystic intoxication, saliva commingled with wine in the mouth of the Beloved, shook the very ground under their feet).⁴⁵ In each instance, mysticism is not only linked to poetry; it is also set in opposition to dogmatic and institutionalized Christianity as a radical heresy.

While formulating mysticism in this way is not new, Goytisolo's particular articulation of it amidst the AIDS crisis renders acute a particular problem regarding negative theology's relationship to history. Indeed, this portrayal of mysticism comes close to Michel de Certeau's description of a group facing "social disinheritance" who, as a result, "vacillated between ecstasy and revolt—*mysticism and revolt*."⁴⁶ Associated with an "outside thought," "mystic thinking," for de Certeau grounds a tradition "from the time of Pseudo-Denis, [which] has prowled the borderlands of Christianity; perhaps it has survived over the past millennium or so in the various forms of negative theology."⁴⁷ Inhabiting the margins and facing social dispossession,⁴⁸ the

⁴² Ibid., 10.

⁴³ Goytisolo, *Las virtudes*, 85; 80.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 116; 109.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 88; 83.

⁴⁶ Michel de Certeau, "Mystic Speech," in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 85.

⁴⁷ Michel de Certeau, "The Black Sun of Language: Foucault," in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 180.

⁴⁸ This characterization of mysticism as on the margins of Christianity continues in his later and larger work *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago:

mystic, according to de Certeau, is akin to the queer birds facing social persecution and medical quarantine during the AIDS pandemic. De Certeau's description also illuminates the tendency to associate the radicality of mysticism with negative theology. And Bradley Epps brings this tendency into even sharper relief in his assessment of the particular form of textuality found in *Las virtudes*: "If on one hand it is the textuality of pluralist platitudes and indifferent heterogeneity, on the other hand it approximates what Derrida designates as negative a/theology. Between theism and atheism, a/theology is a practice of paradox and desire, an obscure and passionate practice in which the alluring presence of the center—be it of Book, Humanity, or God—is infinitely sought in absence."⁴⁹ According to this interpretation, we might read Goytisolo's depiction of John of the Cross as participating in the inclination to locate mystical radicality in infinite negation and, therefore, to reduce all forms of mysticism to negative theology.⁵⁰ Ultimately, the text seems to negate even the historical investments that enable identification with John of the Cross in the first place, and what concerns me most about this denial of history *tout court* is the disregard for historical specificity and for the material and embodied lives of the people implicated, yet left behind by the so-called freedom of unshackled and metaphorical language. Only an elision of mysticism with negative theology, it seems, would motivate the clearly dangerous intimation that "la plaga era un don sagrado, el castigo una

University of Chicago Press, 1992). The text persistently invokes, according to Brenna Moore, "the terms exile, nostalgia, and mourning," which speak to the general sense of discontinuity that undergird his historical method—a method that comes to stand in stark contrast to the continuity of the *ressourcement* project heralded by de Certeau's mentor Henri de Lubac. For an insightful analysis of these differences, see Brenna Moore, "How to Awaken the Dead: Michel de Certeau, Henri de Lubac, and the Instabilities between the Past and the Present," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12, no. 2 (fall 2012): 172–179. I should also note, though, that if de Certeau forwards a revolutionary mysticism, he does not ground it in the spontaneity or immediacy of mystical language. As he makes especially clear in his reading of John of the Cross, "What was important [to mystic phrases] was a *process of fabrication*." De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 140.

⁴⁹ Brad Epps, "The Ecstasy of Disease: Mysticism, Metaphor, and AIDS in *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario*," in *Bodies and Biases: Sexualities in Hispanic Cultures and Literatures*, eds. David Foster and Roberto Reis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 387. Cf. Epps, *Significant Violence*, 425. I cite this earlier version of Epps's monograph chapter on *Las virtudes* because he ultimately amends his claim by locating "negative a/theology" in the works of Mark Taylor and John Caputo. Epps's association of this term with Derrida is understandable and telling, since it rehearses a popular claim that Derrida embraces apophysis or, more specifically, negative theology. For an analysis of Derrida's association of mysticism with apophysis, see Amy Hollywood, "Derrida's Noble Unfaith, or What Reading Hadewijch Can Teach You about Reading Derrida," *Minnesota Review*, no. 80 (2013): 102.

⁵⁰ For examples of this tendency to emphasize the negative theological aspect of John of the Cross's work, see Grégoire Polet, "Mística e intertextualidad: La estética paradójica de Juan Goytisolo," in *Actas del XV Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas*, vol. 3, eds. Beatriz Mariscal and Blanca López de Mariscal, (Monterrey, Mexico: Asociación Internacional de Hispanista, 2007), 349–356; and Luis M. Girón-Negrón, "Dionysian Thought in Sixteenth-Century Spanish Mystical Theology," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 4 (October 2008): 693–706.

bendición” (the plague was a sacred gift, the punishment a benediction).⁵¹ If the defense for this kind of claim is articulated as the simple recourse to metaphorical language, then how can we not ask what kind of privilege (as a seronegative person) or psychic resistance (to the atrocities of AIDS) enables Goytisolo’s recourse to metaphor as a putative escape from history? If radical mysticism requires a break from history, which takes place, in this case, as a distancing from the realities of the AIDS crisis, I’m not sure it is worth the risk.

THE CÁNTICO ESPIRITUAL IN COMMUNITY

“There is no ‘apophatic theology’ within Christianity,” Amy Hollywood teaches us.⁵² Within the scope of this chapter, this claim reminds us that there is another John of the Cross, who is more than a negative theologian, if such a character exists in the first place. Or, as Hans Urs von Balthasar explains in *The Glory of the Lord*, “When later on we analyze the Areopagite and John of the Cross—the two theologians who relied most consistently on the apophatic method—we will see that they never divorced it from the cataphatic approach. [...] For this reason they can be considered the two most decidedly aesthetic theologians of Christian history.”⁵³ While for Goytisolo, John of the Cross’s aesthetic exemplarity rests in a radical poetics of infinite negation and unsaying, von Balthasar identifies John of the Cross’s aesthetic exemplarity in his deployment of both cataphatic and apophatic methods, in his vacillation between an adherence to form and its very undoing. In other words, an alternative to the radical John of the Cross exists but only in conjunction with an alternative view of aesthetics. Following both Hollywood and von Balthasar, we will turn to the texts attributed to the historical John of the Cross in order to sketch an image of mysticism that is not singularly exceptional, but rather grounded in devotional practices performed in community.

Of course, the figure of the rebellious John of the Cross is not without precedent and derives, in large part, from conflicts over the jurisdiction of monastic reform in Spain. The reform of the Carmelite order initiated by Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) was largely aided by the Dominican visitators Pedro Fernández and Francisco Vargas, the latter of whom especially encouraged the reform movement in Andalusia. In response to these developments, a chapter of the order convened in Piacenza, Italy, in May 1575 and effectively ended the Dominican visitation by appointing Jerónimo Tostado the official visitator of Spain and the representative of the chapter. Nicolás Ormaneto, the papal nuncio working closely with King Phillip II of Spain and a Teresian sympathizer, however, was also assured that he and, by extension, the king retained authority over reform. Although tensions rose between Tostado and Ormaneto, the latter guaranteed the protection of Teresa of Ávila and her collaborator, John of the Cross. But when Ormaneto died in June 1577, John was seized by a group of unreformed Carmelites and

⁵¹ Goytisolo, *Las virtudes*, 163; 149.

⁵² Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 15.

⁵³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, ed. John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 124–125.

ultimately declared “rebelde y contumaz” (rebellious and contumacious). As a result, he was imprisoned for nine months in Toledo until he escaped in August 1578.⁵⁴ It is important to note that, as Crisógono de Jesús Sacramentado describes, John of the Cross’s imprisonment “is not, then, about the capriciousness of the vicar general: it is a formal and solemn ruling of the chapter. The vicar does no more than obey a sanctioned order with grave penalties.”⁵⁵ To be clear, my point is not to overlook either any possible animosity between particular persons or the structural violence imposed through this set of penalties.⁵⁶ Instead, it is to highlight the importance of communal regulation, including the response to infractions, and to demonstrate that even if declared “rebellious and contumacious,” a Carmelite is still subject to the order’s *Constitutions* and, therefore, implicated in community.⁵⁷ Contrary, then, to Goytisolo’s depiction of a radical mystic in direct opposition to the unreformed Carmelites, John of the Cross, even in prison and despite the conflicts of jurisdiction, was still bound to the Carmelite community.

After all, monastic reform presumes devotion to, not disavowal of, an order. It was no different for the reform movement of Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, who called for a stricter adherence to the primitive Carmelite *formula vitae*, known as the *Rule of Albert* (ca. 1207). Distinct from the *Rule of Benedict* primarily in its vow of poverty and rejection of Benedictine stability, this *Rule* attested to the rise of mendicant religious communities in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.⁵⁸ Papal approval of the *Rule* was granted in 1229, but it limited Carmelite authority: approval came with an imposition of strict poverty by restricting the ownership of property and livestock and a requirement that priors be installed only through canonical election.⁵⁹ After appeals for dispensation, the *Rule* underwent two sets of mitigations, first by Pope Innocent IV in 1247, then by Pope Eugene IV in 1432. By calling for a return to the “primitive rule,” then, Teresa of Ávila was, in fact, calling for an adherence to the Innocentian version, which, of the three iterations, emphasized most strongly the communal dimensions of

⁵⁴ Crisógono de Jesús Sacramentado, *Vida de San Juan de la Cruz*, ed. Matías del Niño Jesús (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1997), 147–152. This text is still the authoritative biography of John of the Cross on account of its extensive citation of manuscript evidence. It is also the biography that Goytisolo consulted in preparing *Las virtudes*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 150. My translation.

⁵⁶ Indeed, the harshness of John of the Cross’s penalty is underscored by the very scriptural reference of his being found “rebellious and contumacious.” According to Deuteronomy 21:18–21, a rebellious and contumacious son should be stoned to death.

⁵⁷ For an examination of the punishments dictated by the Carmelite *Constitutions*, especially as they were deployed in New Spain, see J. Carlos Vizuite Mendoza, “Penas y castigos corporales entre los primeros Carmelitas descalzos: Los frailes delincuentes y apóstatas en Nueva España,” *Anuario Jurídico y Económico Escurialense* 49 (2016): 523–547.

⁵⁸ Of course, the most well-known orders of these new spiritual developments were the Franciscans, founded in 1209, and the Dominicans, founded in 1216.

⁵⁹ Bede Edwards, introduction to *The Rule of Saint Albert*, eds. and trans. Hugh Clarke and Bede Edwards (London: Carmelite Book Service, 1973), 18–20.

Carmelite life and was, therefore, most attuned to the project of reform.⁶⁰ Innocent IV's mitigations prominently allowed for the foundation of new monastic sites through the acquisition of communal property and livestock.⁶¹

More important for our understanding of John of the Cross's writings is the Innocentian version's emphasis on vocal prayer. Albert's original *Rule* follows a precept on solitude and continual prayer with a specification of the kinds of prayers that should be said by the literate (*ii qui litteras norunt et legere psalmos*) and the illiterate (*qui, vero, litteras non norunt*) respectively.⁶² Because of the arrangement of these precepts, it is not clear that Albert is calling in any way for communal, vocal prayer. Innocent IV, in contrast, makes clear that these two precepts are distinct and that the second calls "those who know how to say the canonical hours [*horas canonicas*] with those in orders [to] do so, in the way those holy forefathers of ours laid down, and according to the Church's approved custom."⁶³ By opting for the *Rule* with Innocent IV's emendations, Teresa of Ávila with John of the Cross return to a Carmelite *formula vitae* that is structured by the Divine Office performed aloud and in community. Like the Benedictines, then, the Discalced Carmelites of the Teresian reform turn to the recitation, singing, and chanting of the Psalms aloud as the organizing ground of monastic life. Through repeated liturgical performance, the Psalms are inculcated into the monastic subject and become, in turn, a fundamental tool in the cultivation of Carmelite emotion, affect, and desire. As a result, we must understand individual mental prayer and the method of *recogimiento* so emblematic of Spanish Carmelite prayer as inseparable from the communal devotion of the Divine Office.

Set against the backdrop of this communal and embodied practice, John of the Cross's poems call, literally, for a rereading. What the practice of psalter recitation makes available for the Carmelite reformer is a program of devotional singing within which to ground the related practice of reading and writing poetry. Because no one is capable of putting mystical understanding or experience into words, explains John of the Cross in the prologue to his *Cántico espiritual*, "con figuras, comparaciones y semejanza, antes rebosan algo de lo que sienten y de la abundancia del espíritu vierten secretos y misterioso, que con razones lo declaran" (these persons let something of their experience overflow in figures, comparisons and similitudes, and from the abundance of their spirit pour out secrets and mysteries rather than rational explanations).⁶⁴ These figures, comparisons, and similitudes—the very stuff of poetic expression—signal *that* one has been touched by "algún fervor de amor de Dios" (a certain

⁶⁰ Steven Payne, *The Carmelite Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 4.

⁶¹ *The Rule of Saint Albert*, eds. and trans. Hugh Clarke and Bede Edwards (London: Carmelite Book Service, 1973), 4a, 10a. Numbers and letters refer to the section of the *Rule* consistent in both Latin and English translation.

⁶² Rule of Saint Albert, 8, 9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁴ John of the Cross, *Noche oscura*, in *Obras completas*, eds. José Vicente Rodríguez and Federico Ruiz Salvador, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1980), 678. All English translations are from John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ed. and trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 469.

burning love of God), but they do not serve as direct representations of this love's component affects.⁶⁵ In other words, John of the Cross's poems are not simply texts to be interpreted, decoded, or mined for meaning because they are not direct expressions of the authors personal emotions. The proliferation of images and tropes in his poetry, instead, bespeak the overabundance of God's burning love. Ultimately, the mystical knowledge of this love is not to be understood, but to be felt: "*La sabiduría mística, la cual es por amor, de que las presentas Canciones tratan, no ha menester distintamente entenderse para hacer efecto de amor y afición en el alma*" (Mystical wisdom, which comes through love and is the subject of these stanzas, need not be understood distinctly in order to cause love and affection in the soul).⁶⁶ "To cause love and affection in the soul"—this, over any pretense of expressing the ineffable, is the aim of John of the Cross's poems. Thus, his *canciones* (stanzas or songs) can be thought of as akin to the Psalms in their ability to amplify and cultivate loving desire for God. Rather than texts that represent a prior and singular mystical experience, they are paraliturgical tools to be read again and again in order to aid in the spiritual movement through "los tres estados o vías de ejercicio espiritual" (the three states or ways of spiritual exercise)—the purgative, illuminative, and unitive.⁶⁷

His poetry's continual reference to its own aurality further corroborates its alignment with the program of sensory and affective training performed through the recitation of the Psalms. For example, a famous line from the seventh stanza of the *Cántico espiritual* names, "un no sé qué que quedan balbuciendo" (an I-don't-know-what behind their stammering). The babbling, stuttering, and stammering described by the verb *balbucir* are literalized by the repetition three times over of the phoneme "que." What is more, this repetition also challenges language's capacity to signify by reducing it to a set of sounds. This unworking of language, though, is not spontaneous, but rather achieved through the cultivation and labor of poetic craft. Enabled through an appeal to the sense of hearing, this effect attests both to the poem's orality—that it was likely sung aloud—and, more importantly, its aurality—that it asked to be heard whether it was sung aloud or "heard" in mental prayer with the inner ear. A different kind of aurality emerges in stanzas fourteen and fifteen:

Mi Amado las montañas
 los valles solitarios nemorosos
 las ínsulas extrañas
 los ríos sonorosos
 el silbo de los aires amorosos

la noche sosegada
 en par de los levantes de la aurora
 la música callada
 la soledad sonora

⁶⁵ Ibid., 677; 469.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 678; 470.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 685; 477.

la cena que recrea y enamora.

[My Beloved, the mountains,
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands,
and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes,

the tranquil night
at the time of the rising dawn,
silent music
sounding solitude,
the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.]

The fourteenth stanza achieves a similar effect as stanza seven: through the repetition of the consonant “s,” this stanza literalizes onomatopoeically “the whistling of love-stirring breezes.” As a result, it reminds us of its aural qualities. By invoking the paired oxymorons *la música callada* (silent music) and *la soledad sonora* (sounding silence), however, the fifteenth stanza introduces a conceptual chiasmus to indicate a cross-over or passage into a different register of meaning. John of the Cross’s recourse to poetic trope, then, signals a turn away from the world of the outer or natural senses and paves a way not necessarily to understand, but to be moved by and into the domain of the inner or spiritual senses. In his commentary, he explicitly states that sounding solitude “es casi lo mismo que *la música callada*; porque aunque aquella *música* es *callada* cuanto a los sentidos y potencias naturales, es *soledad* muy *sonora* para las potencias espirituales” (is nearly identical with silent music, for even though that music is silent to the natural senses and faculties, it is sounding solitude for the spiritual faculties).⁶⁸ The poem, thus, moves from the outer performance of song sung aloud to the inner song of mental prayer, through the process of musical inculcation incited by the recitation of the Psalms and supported by acts of poetic production. Rather than identify solitary contemplation as the privileged mode of acquiring mystical knowledge, the poem’s movement renders inner and outer song inseparable.

In the end, John of the Cross’s exemplarity as mystic and poet should not be confused with exceptionalism. He does not stand above his brothers and sisters, but rather offers them a model of conduct that renders the burning love of God accessible to all who follow it. Thus, the *Cántico espiritual* is not a representation of John of the Cross’s singular mystical experience, as much as it may be a product of it. Instead, it is a pedagogical tool meant to aid his Carmelite brothers and sisters in their own spiritual exercise and, thus, a testament to monastic community. Written in 1584 at the request of the Carmelite prioress Ana de Jesús, the poem’s commentary attests to the pedagogical purpose of this text as a whole. In other words, while the commentary may provide some instructions on how to read the poem, the poem, too, provides a lesson in how to cultivate burning love for God. This purpose is made clear only if we take the commentary and poem together, for even if “sería ignorancia pensar que los dichos de amor en inteligencia

⁶⁸ Ibid., 764; 536.

mística, cuales son los de las presentes *Canciones*, con alguna manera de palabras se pueden bien explicar” (it would be foolish to think that expressions of love arising from mystical understanding, like these stanzas, are fully explainable), John of the Cross acknowledges the importance of the pedagogical relationship to the apt cultivation of loving desire.⁶⁹ Furthermore, as he suggests, “aunque en alguna manera se declaran, no hay para atarse a la declaración” (though we give some explanation of these stanzas, there is no reason to be bound to this explanation).⁷⁰ John of the Cross’s poems are ultimately inseparable from their commentary. The divergence from Goytisolo is clear here. While Goytisolo expects commentary, criticism, or theory to shut down meaning, John of the Cross does not share the same fears. Critique and creation, theory and praxis, prose and poetry are intimately bound for the Carmelite reformer. As much as Goytisolo wants to cast him as a radical mystic whose poetry is a singular, spontaneous, and immediate representation of mystical experience, John of the Cross’s texts resist this portrayal by affirming a devotional life cultivated through song in community.

CRITICALLY QUEER CONCLUSIONS

As Jane Ackerman plainly states, “John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila have represented many things.”⁷¹ While John of the Cross has vacillated between the orthodox representations of Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo and Pope John Paul II and the heterodox representations of Luce López-Baralt and, of course, Goytisolo—between sainthood and rebellion—what remains largely consistent is the recognition of the Carmelite’s poetic genius. Colin Thompson’s treatment is telling. At the same time that Thompson wants to push against “the temptation [...] to treat [John of the Cross] as a wholly exceptional being who, because of the loftiness of his experience, is quite unconnected with the world of theological debate and literary values around him,” he still recognizes him “as a culminating point in an ancient and influential tradition which has left its mark on the literature of the Golden Age.”⁷² And after working impressively through the debate over the authentic manuscript version of the *Cántico espiritual*, he concludes, “The best guide to San Juan as a poet is [the earlier] CA, because it reflects more nearly the original impulse to sing the divine love.”⁷³ My point is not to refute the significant artistry in John of the Cross’s poems or the impact he has had on Spanish literature, but rather to question whether poetic exemplarity—standing as the culminating point in a poetic tradition—must adhere to a portrait of poetry as the immediate reflection of a spontaneous emotional impulse, as the singular creation of an artist.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 677; 469.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 678; 470.

⁷¹ Jane Ackerman, “John of the Cross, The Difficult Icon,” in *A New Companion to Hispanic Mysticism*, ed. Hilaire Kallendorf (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 149.

⁷² Colin P. Thompson, *The Poet and the Mystic: A Study of the Cántico of San Juan de la Cruz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 2.

⁷³ Ibid. 59.

My attempt throughout has been to wrest the “mystic” and the “poet” from the confines of exceptionalism in order to rethink their exemplarity as grounded and cultivated in community.

As we have seen, Goytisolo’s depiction of John of the Cross’s radical mysticism rests upon a set of rigid oppositions. The opposition between criticism and theory, on the one hand, and the practice of literature, on the other, corroborates the opposition between the philological critique of dogmatic orthodoxy and the radical heresy of mystical poetics. What we find, as a result, is a version of mysticism that locates its radicality in its persistent opposition and negation—a mysticism reduced to a radical apophysis. It seems that there are grounds for this kind of claim, which, in Goytisolo’s case, emerge in response to the totalitarian regime of Francoist Spain. But does this devotion to (literary, theological, political) oppositionality not only further consolidate the monolithic homogeneity of authoritarianism, but also serve to reproduce alterity on the side of “the opposition,” too? For, in *Las virtudes*, the mystical aspect of John of the Cross’s poetry, according to Goytisolo, ultimately derives from its alliance with the texts of Sufi mysticism—Ibn al-Farid’s *Wine Ode* (ca. 13th century), Farid ud-Din Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* (1177), the poetry of Ibn Arabi (1165–1240). While it may be no surprise then that the professor of Arabic, Ben Sida—or, in the English translation, Ben Aïds—not only encourages the narrator to further pursue the Muslim roots of the Carmelite’s mystical poetry, but also bears the novel’s only utterance of the “two-syllabled monster” *Sida*, it is certainly troubling. Far from a radical act, Sufism specifically and mysticism more broadly are not only fetishized but relegated to alterity as a contaminating force. What we are left with is an opposition between Christianity and Islam that insists on the latter’s alterity. Astonishingly, Goytisolo’s fetishistic admiration of the Islamic world also serves to validate his opposition to queer politics. In an interview with Javier Escudero he confesses, “I have never been interested—and some people within the gay movement criticize me for it—in transforming my homosexuality into an instrument of political combat... This type of militancy, outside of decriminalization and what might be discrimination, has never interested me. In Islamic countries it is something totally inconceivable; to them it seems the height of absurdity.”⁷⁴ As if to say, with intentional ignorance, that Islamic countries do not have queers or sexual politics at all, for that matter, Goytisolo implies that the character allied with Islam, Ben Sida, can bear the weight of AIDS, since it should be for him a non-issue. In his exile from Spain, Goytisolo galvanizes an opposition to nation, Church, and queer politics.

I wonder if John of the Cross might offer an alternative to this oppositionality. As I have shown, the mystical knowledge he promotes is gained through loving devotion, the cultivation of self in community. As a result, the Carmelite reform can be seen not as an opposition to authority, but rather as a form of loving critique. Rita Felski suggests that the idiom of critique “narrows and constrains our view of what literature is and does; it highlights the sphere of the agon (conflict and domination) at the expense of eros (love and connection).”⁷⁵ But what John of the Cross seems to open up is the possibility of a critique on the side of eros, a critique from the inside that accounts for its commitments, investments, and affinities. My own hope is that I have made this mode of critique all the more imaginable precisely through a critique of mysticism. In turn, we may arrive at a model of queer critique that is neither resolutely oppositional nor

⁷⁴ Quoted in Epps, *Significant Violence*, 373.

⁷⁵ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 17.

entirely exceptional, but rather lovingly self-critical—that is, critical precisely because it recognizes or believes in the shared investments and desires of queer subjects despite the variety of positions that we assume. As Judith Butler reminds us in *Bodies That Matter*, “The genealogical critique of the queer subject will be central to queer politics to the extent that it constitutes a self-critical dimension within activism.”⁷⁶ It is through an abiding love, then, that this critique of Goytisolo’s radical mysticism concomitantly holds onto Goytisolo as a figure of queerness, despite or precisely because of his rejection of such politics. In the end, by going “a way wherein there is no ecstasy,” that is, by provincializing what is often read as mysticism’s exceptionally negative radicality, perhaps the mystic, the poet, and the queer might ultimately acknowledge that they are also from a people who, when they love, demand more life.

⁷⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 227.

Cauda

Blake and the Benedictines

*The Classics, it is the Classics! & not Goths nor Monks, that Desolate Europe
with Wars.*

—William Blake, “On Homer”

BLAKE GETTING MEDIEVAL

How does the identification of Blake as a poetic genius relate to Blake’s very own formulations of this concept? Two examples from Blake scholarship—one from the very beginning and another from the most recent—will suffice here. The first is from William Michael Rossetti’s “Prefatory Memoir” to *The Poetical Works of William Blake: Lyrical and Miscellaneous* (1890), where, in a section entitled “The Events of Blake’s Life,” Rossetti recounts the following:

London gave birth to William Blake; and, in doing so, produced one of the strangest of all the many-millioned natives of the great city, and one moreover of the most curious and abnormal personages of the later eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries; a man not forestalled by predecessors, nor to be classed with contemporaries, nor to be replaced by known or readily surmisable successors.¹

Under the guise of history, Rossetti offers something closer to a hagiographical *vita* with these opening words. The singular event of Blake’s birth occasions Rossetti’s insistence on Blake’s singularity as a historical character who so “curious” and “abnormal” is he that he is without equal in past, present, or future time. Blake, for Rossetti and for much of Blake’s readers to come, exceeds classification, and this claim has become all too commonplace in his modern reception.

Leo Damrosch’s recent investigation of William Blake, *Eternity’s Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake* (2015), serves another example. It begins with an echo of the convention noted above: “William Blake was a creative genius, one of the most original artists and poets who ever lived.”² The difficulty with scholarship on Blake, marked as it is by this conventional claim to his genius, is that its insistence on the man’s singularity and originality only further exacerbates the already difficult task of assigning Blake and his work to a recognizable category.

¹ William Rossetti, “Prefatory Memoir,” in *The Poetical Works of William Blake: Lyrical and Miscellaneous* (London: Bell, 1902), xiii.

² Leo Damrosch, *Eternity’s Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 7.

And whether or not we agree with this evaluation of Blake's innovation, we are left either to give Blake little heed at all as an original thinker, as many of his contemporaries seemed to do,³ reducing his work to collected fragments or impenetrable reappropriations of the Bible; or, to praise his genius to the extent that we effectively extricate him from any kind of creative tradition. If we allow our approach to Blake to be governed by an opposition between originality and imitation, Blake, in either case, remains enigmatic. Damrosch, at least, gives us a couple of guiding terms—Blake was an “artist” and a “poet”—as we trace our way around the lineaments of Blake and his work.

In some ways, Blake's claims to formal originality serve to substantiate his readers' insistence on his genius. His discussion “of the Measure, in which / the following Poem is written” seems to insist that the metrical pattern of *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804–1820), Blake's concluding epic to his series of prophetic books, is even further liberated from the monotony of earlier attempts at metrical innovation. “When this Verse was first dictated to me,” he writes,

I consider'd a Monotonous Cadence like that used in Milton & Shakespeare & all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming; to be a necessary and indispensable part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of the true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place: the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts—the mild & gentle for the mild & gentle parts, and the prosaic, for inferior parts: all are necessary to each other. (*J* 3)

While this presentation of Blake's decision to produce “variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables” appears as a rejection of monotony, *tout court*, Blake, in fact, refers to two kinds of monotony, only one of which he explicitly rejects. The first form of monotony is his reference to the English blank verse characteristic of Milton and Shakespeare and marked, according to Blake, by the “Monotonous Cadence” of iambic pentameter. This monotony of cadence emerges at the level of a single verse whose regularity of rhythm exists as the repetition of the iamb. The second form of monotony, superficially marked by the orthographic move from majuscule to miniscule, emerges at the level of multiple verses taken together—ultimately, at the level of the poem in its entirety. “As much a bondage as rhyme itself,” this monotony, like rhyme, is only legible over the exposition of one verse to another. Indeed, it is this monotony against which Blake reacts in producing “a variety in every line”—not, alternatively, a variety *within* every line. Thus, what sounds like a rejection specifically directed towards English blank verse exemplified by Milton and Shakespeare, is rather merely a rejection of its uniform deployment across the entirety of a poetic text. Any measure adopted across a whole text would devolve into monotony.

³ Ibid.

Blake's metrical variety is, therefore, not a rejection of poetic form altogether, and his characterization of blank verse as monotonous is not an outright dismissal of Milton or Shakespeare. Nor, however, does Blake's invocation of blank verse, Milton, or Shakespeare indicate his easy approval. Instead, Blake inhabits an ambivalent relationship towards his predecessors, and this ambivalence comes to organize the converging development of his poetic and theological innovation not as something utterly new, but as a novel engagement with what has come before. In his call for metrical variation cited above, this ambivalence takes the shape of reverent critique especially for Milton since it is Milton, in addition to Shakespeare, who serves as Blake's model for eradicating poetic bondage in the first place. Blake's description of English blank verse as "derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming" draws its language directly from Milton's. In his introduction to the "Revised and Augmented" fourth issue of the first edition of *Paradise Lost* published in 1674, Milton explains how his deployment of "*English Heroic Verse* without Rime, as that of *Homer* in Greek, and *Virgil* in Latin" is an example of "ancient liberty recover'd to heroic Poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of Rimeing." Rhyme, in Milton's words, is an "Invention of a barbarous Age"—meaning the Middle Ages.

However, unlike Milton, Blake in a short piece on Homer exclaims "The Classics, it is the Classics! & not Goths nor Monks, that Desolate Europe with Wars." In other words, while both authors seek poetic liberty, they diverge on the basis of their historical affinities. Milton frames his rejection of rhyme as a turn towards the Ancients from whom he seeks to recover poetic freedom, while Blake turns to Goths and the medieval monk as a resource for poetic liberty. As a result, Blake does not deny any particular poetic device on the basis of its monotony, but rather aims for poetic variety to reflect the vicissitudes of emotion. And in his prologue to the third chapter of *Jerusalem*, Blake's pits the Monk and the Methodist against the Deists: "Voltaire Rousseau Gibbon Hume. Charge the Spiritually Religious with Hypocrisy! But how a Monk or a Methodist either, can be a Hypocrite: I cannot conceive. We are Men of like passions with others & pretend not to be holier than others" (Plate 52). What we see, then, is that Blake juxtaposes the humility of the monk with the vainglory of the deists (or the Angels or Swedenborg for that matter). And in the closing lyric to this prologue, Blake ventriloquizes another criticism of monastic life:

I saw a monk of Charlemaine
Arise before my sight
I talkd with the Grey Monk as we stood
In beams of infernal light

Gibbon arose with a lash of steel
And Voltaire with a wracking wheel
The Schools in clouds of learning rolld
Arose with War in iron & gold.

Thou lazy Monk they sound afar
In vain condemning glorious War
And in your Cell you shall ever dwell

Rise War & bind him in his Cell.

The blood. Red ran from the Grey Monks side
His hands & feet were wounded wide
His body bent, his arms & knees
Like to the roots of ancient trees

When Satan first the black bow bent
And the Moral Law from the Gospel rent
He forgd the Law into a Sword
And spilld the blood of mercys Lord.

Titus! Constantine! Charlemaine!
O Voltaire! Rousseau! Gibbon! Vain
Your Grecian Mocks & Roman Sword
Against the image of his Lord!

For a Tear is an Intellectual thing;
And a Sigh is the Sword of an Angel King
And the bitter groan of a Martyrs woe
Is an Arrow from the Almightyes Bow!
(*Jerusalem*, plate 52)

The monk, according to Blake's Deists, is not only a Hypocrite, but also lazy at least according to dominant empirical modes of production value elaborated by Adam Smith and later Charles Babbage. But this counter-productive form of labor that Blake sees in the monk is precisely what draws Blake in. For just as the monk *seems* lazy, but is really hard at work as this dissertation has show, Blake invents a form relief etching that is not faster but slower in producing prints. And yet he praises it for its artistic possibilities.

By identifying with this "monk of Charlemaine," Blake assumes the position of a martyr. For the monk is not just a monk, but also Christ: "The blood. Red ran from the Grey Monks side / His hands & feet were wounded wide / His body bent, his arms & knees / Like to the roots of ancient trees." Blood dripping from a side-wound, stigmata on his hands and knees, his body bent—Blake performs an *imitatio monachi* as much as an *imitatio Christi*.

Blake's turn to monasticism, I suggest, is, thus, a challenge to his "genius." What I do not mean is that the repetitive life of the monk is opposed to the singularity of artistic or poetic genius. What I mean is that an attachment to monasticism, for Blake, undoes the very idea of singular and exceptional. By turning to the monks, Blake embraces repetition—as his etchings attest—for he sees in it the very grounds for the cultivation of devotion, desire, and exemplarity. Exemplarity, for Blake and for the figures I have read in this project is not a standing apart from the world. Exemplarity is the hope that others see the possibility of reform towards a model of devotion and conduct.

In the end, then, by tracing a more expansive genealogy of mystical poetics—one that includes the poetics of monastic devotion, prose, and song—I hope to have undone some of the dangers that I see in exceptionalism—in all its forms—while still holding onto the notion of exemplarity. The form of devotion that I have traced through the practice and figure of Christian song is not a simple declaration of desire. It emerges in community through the iterative practice of embodied devotion. While the meditation upon Psalms 70:1 may seem, at first, like a rote act, an appreciation for Cassian’s embrace of sensory and affective training reveals just how sensual and laborious the work of contemplation can be. So, too, is the case with the Benedictine labor of obedience whose very expression in rhymed prose questions our assumptions about what it means to be subservient to the abbot. And as I have argued throughout, the cultivated practice of psalter recitation has come to shape so much of what we consider to be spontaneous, immediate, and singular examples of Christian mysticism. Our conclusion should not be that Christian mystical texts are, therefore, mere examples of the ordinary way of life, even if they are embedded deeply in the ordinary. They are anything but. But the ways that we characterize their particular exemplarity carry implications both for our understanding of Christian history and also for the ways that mysticism is redeployed in the modern era.

The mystical poetic tradition—and even the Christian mystical tradition upon which it is grounded—is not, in fact, a product of history, but of historiography. And if this dissertation has explored the ways in which devotion is cultivated through our practices of textual engagement that are embodied and erotic in both material and spiritual modes, then how must we account, as scholars of premodernity, for our own feeling backwards. What responsibility do we as scholars and teachers have to teach the “right” kind of medieval history? We would first have to recognize that what we count as the “right” kind of history is imbued with our own political and ideological devotions. The Middle Ages are back, or they’ve never gone away, or they are always returning according to the same rhythmic pattern of iteration that organizes monastic time. And although these neomedievalisms may excite the medievalists of today, this reaction is not solely on account of an uncritical devotion to a period in which we are expert. There are many reasons to be critical of the Middle Ages or any period for that matter, but this critical position must not necessarily yield detachment. Critique and love, faith and unfaith, austerity and eroticism—such are the terms that monasticism and mysticism, together—that is, in community—help to bridge.

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