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# The Medievalizing Process: Religious Medievalism in Romantic and Victorian Literature

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The Medievalizing Process:  
Religious Medievalism in Romantic and Victorian Literature

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
with a concentration in Literature  
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## Abstract

### *The Medievalizing Process: Religious Medievalism in Romantic and Victorian Literature*

posits *religious medievalism* as one among many critical paradigms through which we might better understand literary efforts to bring notions of sanctity back into the modern world. As a cultural and artistic practice, medievalism processes the loss of medieval forms of understanding in the modern imagination and resuscitates these lost forms in new and imaginative ways to serve the purposes of the present. My dissertation proposes religious medievalism as a critical method that decodes modern texts' lamentations over a perceived loss of the sacred. My project locates textual moments in select works of John Keats, Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, and Oscar Wilde that reveal concern over the consequences of modern dualism. It examines the ways in which these texts participate in a process of rejoining to enchant a rationalistic epistemology that stymies transcendental unity. I identify the body of Christ, the central organizing principle of medieval devotion, as the cynosure of nineteenth-century religious medievalism. This body offers a non-dualistic alternative that retroactively undermines and heals Cartesian divisions of mind and body and Kantian distinctions between noumenal and knowable realities. Inscribing the dynamic contours of the medieval religious body into a text's linguistic structure, a method I call the "medievalizing process," underscores the spiritual dimensions of its reform efforts and throws into relief a distinctly religious, collective agenda that undergirds many nineteenth-century texts.

## Chapter One: Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Nineteenth-century social reformers, political activists, literary figures, ecclesiastics, historians, and antiquarians of all kinds pressed the Middle Ages into service to cure modern ills. Mainline Anglicanism, as a church and as an *ethos*, was failing. This failure could be measured ostensibly in declining attendance at its services across England, and it could be sensed by those who did attend in the vague, dry sermons of its ministers. Rifts in church-state relations forced the church to the periphery of social and political affairs, leaving the state unsanctified, the church disenfranchised, and neither as socially responsible for loss of the other. The embodied religion of the Middle Ages had long been replaced by a disembodied, abstract, enlightened religion that stripped the body of believers of the corporeal bonds which joined them together in Christ; stripped the body of the individual believer of the corporeal envelope through which union with the incarnate Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the saints was possible; and stripped the material world, in particular the world of images, of the intrinsic capacity to share in the signifiatory power of Christ's body. A dualistic epistemology theorized these severances, but for many in the nineteenth century no amount of rationalizing could compensate for such spiritual evacuation, no accounts of denying the metaphysical could make the supernatural less needed. They longed for re-enchantment.

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter have been previously published in *Studies in Medievalism XXVII: Authenticity, Medievalism, Music*, D. S. Brewer, 2018, and have been reproduced here. Permission from Boydell & Brewer Publishers to reproduce material in a personal dissertation is not required. For email verification that obtaining permission is not necessary in this case, see Appendix.

Interested parties representing particular aspects of the Condition of England question adopted figures of spiritual loss through which they articulated their plight and campaigned for reform. The Camden Society, founded in 1838 for publishing documents in English history, wished to resurrect the faith of the Middle Ages to reinvigorate the reformed, disembodied theology of the time. Inspiring piety in religious experience meant resuscitating medieval liturgical forms and reinstituting Catholic sacraments, and this could begin, Camden members reasoned, through church redecoration (Dellheim, *Face* 81-2). Desire for mediievally-inspired ritualism was taken up by aristocrats like Ambrose Phillipps De Lisle, who wished to reconnect England with Rome. Benjamin Disraeli and Young England, on the other hand, imagined the Anglo-Catholic revival enhancing the conditions of the poor. Reestablishing medieval religious institutions would elevate the poor intellectually through ceremony and bodily in their focus on health and charity. John Ruskin and William Morris saw in medieval architecture an ideal of the happy craftsman working selflessly for the glory of God, an ideal irrevocably lost to history and which brought about intense sadness and nostalgia. Their abstract lamentations were given practical form in the work of Augustus Pugin, whose architectural projects sought to reinvigorate the authentically sacred and enable the fullest expression of worship through the construction of traditional Gothic churches.

In the wake of pastoral England's rapid disappearance at the dawn of the nineteenth century, William Cobbett came to exemplify "the reaction of the average rural Briton to the new nonfeudal world" (Chandler, *Order* 59). The Middle Ages attracted Cobbett as an antidote to all that he found wanting about modern Britain, namely, industrialism and the proliferation of popular religious movements (Chandler, *Order* 64-5). He believed in a medieval "golden age" (R. J. Smith, "Cobbett" 121), a time when there was no hunger, all were cared for, and all had a

roof overhead. He praised the feudal system for making many of these social benefits possible, but it was the pre-Reformation church that was truly responsible for the maintenance of an ideal society (R. J. Smith, “Cobbet” 132). Embodied religious experience peculiar to the Middle Ages even appealed to thoroughly modern historians like Thomas Babington Macaulay, a most unlikely candidate for medievalism, perhaps, given Leslie Stephen’s view of him as the “Prince of Philistines” (Jann 66). Macaulay, champion of progressivist history, found something in the past to look fondly upon: Macaulay the materialist was drawn to Dante because Dante’s own materialism grants what Macaulay calls “a reality effect” (Milbank 25). Dante reminds the contemporary historian of a truth long since discarded of the transcendent quality of things. This appealed to Macaulay’s notions of historical materialism and progress (Milbank 25-6).

Writers invoked the flexible discourse of medievalism to legitimate all strata of society. It was used as readily to justify entrenched hierarchical structures as to challenge them. A prominent strand of Romantic- and Victorian-era medievalism worked on behalf of the underprivileged classes asphyxiated by their alienating conditions (Simmons, “Introduction” 6; Dellheim, *Face* 25). For Clare Broome Saunders, women medievalists like Anna Gurney, who translated the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in 1819, and Louisa Stuart Costello, who wrote *Specimens of the English Poetry of France* in 1835 (5), weighed in on debates concerning women in the nineteenth century by way of their discussions of women in the Middle Ages (1). This distinctly “‘female’ medievalism” (Saunders 1) is “a discourse [that] facilitate[d] a hidden and acceptable means of subversion” (Saunders 9), providing a means for women to participate in the Condition of England question.

*The Medievalizing Process: Religious Medievalism in Romantic and Victorian Literature* posits *religious medievalism* as one among many critical paradigms through which we might



better understand literary efforts to bring notions of sanctity back into the modern world. As a cultural and artistic practice, medievalism processes the loss of medieval forms of understanding in the modern imagination and resuscitates these lost forms in new and imaginative ways to serve the purposes of the present. My dissertation proposes religious medievalism as a critical method that decodes modern texts' lamentations over a perceived loss of the sacred. My project locates textual moments in select works of John Keats, Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, and Oscar Wilde that reveal concern over the consequences of modern dualism. It examines the ways in which these texts participate in a process of rejoining to enchant a rationalistic epistemology that stymies transcendental unity. I identify the body of Christ, the central organizing principle of medieval devotion, as the cynosure of nineteenth-century religious medievalism. This body offers a non-dualistic alternative that retroactively undermines and heals Cartesian divisions of mind and body and Kantian distinctions between noumenal and knowable realities. Inscribing the dynamic contours of the medieval religious body into a text's linguistic structure, a method I call the "medievalizing process," underscores the spiritual dimensions of its reform efforts and throws into relief a distinctly religious, collectivist agenda that undergirds many nineteenth-century texts.

Unification lies at the heart of religious medievalism. Just as medievalism seeks to reforge historical continuities severed by an overdetermined periodizing, religious medievalism overcomes epistemological dualism, the dominant philosophical phenomenon of the modern imagination. My project broadly considers the premodern/modern binary that has hampered meaningful dialogue between the modern and medieval world and fragmented historical continuity into restrictive, independent periodicities. More specifically, I will construct religious medievalism as a form of medievalism that applies devotional discourses of the medieval

religious body to nineteenth-century texts. Each bodily inscription catalyzes a reciprocal reaction of recovery in the primary text: reading Keats's *Eve of St. Agnes*, Byron's *Manfred*, Dickens's *Bleak House*, and Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* through a religious lens illumines social, political, or artistic goals at work therein even as these secular aims call upon the sacred to assist in their realization. If medievalism *in toto* can be seen as a modality which processes loss, I conceive religious medievalism as a discursive apparatus meant to compensate for *loss of the sacred*, loss that manifests, for instance, in the substitution of absence for presence or in the autonomization of matter at the expense of incarnational metaphysics. But in this formulation, to "lose" the sacred is merely to fragment its foundations, so this loss is never absolute. Sacred operations underpin the dualistic modern imaginary: they persist, though they are altered; they work, but not always as intended; and while they often appear perverse, and at times even grotesque, they are not beyond saving. It is in this sense that the modern assumes characteristics of the gothic. Religious medievalism is a corrective mechanism by which gothicized modernity may be overcome: it shores up the "polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens" (Stevenson 53) that is the alienated consequence of modern dualism and integrates this multiplicity into one spiritualized body, a holy collectivity.

I identify the body of Christ—the central organizing principle of medieval devotion, whose powerful plasticity promised to extend outwards and touch the body of the individual worshipper as it enveloped the bodies of the faithful into one *corpus*—as the cynosure of nineteenth-century religious medievalism. It is the spatio-conceptual locus in which the authors I treat join what the modern had separated and through which they exalt both individual and corporate bodies to operate in accordance with divine energy. The sacred body revered during acts of medieval piety, whose sensuality the form of the *Logos* elevates by virtue of the mystery

of the Incarnation and whose flesh might absorb the very “spiritual and intelligible goods by means of which man is sanctified” (Aquinas Q.60, A.4), offers a non-dualistic alternative that retroactively undermines and mends Enlightenment bifurcation, reminds modernity of the potential for unity it has lost, and acts as the means by which the healing process may, at the very least, commence. When reading modern texts through the prism of religious medievalism, narratological acts of historical remembering become acts of *re-mem-bering* which reinscribe the dynamic contours of the sacred body into the poem’s or novel’s linguistic structure. The act of reading texts in this way activates latent medieval symbolic categories embedded in their narratives and turns the bodies therein into medieval bodies. This *medievalizing process* is a transformative, sanctified embodiment that grounds nineteenth-century quests to find spiritual consolation. The remedy for what writers such as Keats, Byron, Dickens, and Wilde saw as abstracted modern stagnation, I suggest, *is* the premodern religious body, a body that captures the complexity of human experience as it makes that complexity possible in the first place. Thus, the medievalizing process discussed here is materially grounded: re-enchantment takes place through narrative acts of bodily inscription, and the body so inscribed is the historicized body of Christ. The conflict pulsating at the heart of each text’s unstable bodies is an embattled process of recovering the totalized and totalizing body of Christ and inculcating that body into itself so that it might be made whole.

For Regina Schwartz, modern “sacramental poetry” (*Sacramental Poetics* 6) plots a transition from premodern sacraments to the modern imaginary (*Sacramental Poetics* 7) that precludes any kind of authentic sacramental recovery (*Sacramental Poetics* 13). This text is “effective” (Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics* 7), however, in that through its appropriation and deployment of *sacramental logic* “it expresses far more than it contains” (Schwartz, *Sacramental*

*Poetics* 6). Indeed, under no circumstances can the modern claim to be authentically medieval; the authors I examine in this project are not theologians, neither of the ecclesiastical traditions with which they would have been familiar, nor of contemporary Catholicism, and certainly not of medieval Christianity; and the texts themselves do not explicitly enlist medieval theology to solve modern problems. But the profound distrust these nineteenth-century writers felt toward a secular, dualistic worldview that had become reductively rationalistic and susceptible to the allure of an all-encompassing scientific materialism compelled them to seek answers amid the very categories of knowledge and experience that modern skepticism had worked most feverishly to eradicate. I propose religious medievalism to help uncover and underscore these answers. Constructed elaborations of medieval devotional discourses will frame each of my author's reform projects, providing an eschatological context within which their claims about the body and spirit might be systematically articulated. Such discursive framing will catalyze the sacred potential that lurks in many cases unrealized in the foundations of the texts I examine, giving form to their matter, spiritual significance to their bodies, and a hope that transcendence might still be possible.

I have identified a tension in the treatment of religion in nineteenth-century literary scholarship that roughly posits a dichotomy of past belief and modern skepticism. For nineteenth-century medievalists, artists of the Middle Ages believed in the religion they espoused, and had little doubt upon what foundation they should build their verse. For many twentieth- and twenty-first century literary critics, Romantic and Victorian writers laced their religious draughts with skepticism, irony, parody, or indifference, or replaced the religious element altogether with substitutes more worthy of pursuit in the modern world. There is, of course, no doubt that certain writers made the denigration of religion an object of some of their

projects; alternatively, there were certain writers who viewed artistic enterprise primarily as a means of bringing glory to God. But assuming that skepticism pervades nineteenth-century poems, novels, and plays seems to indict these narratives as being complicit in extra-literary secularizing efforts instead of recognizing them as bulwarks against such cultural trends. I want to suggest that many writers whose work has been subject to secularizing arguments longed for modern man to believe again—to believe in the transcendental nature of love, in the higher nature of the self, in the sacred mission of public institutions, in the divine capacity of art—and I argue that reading their works within the paradigm of religious medievalism accents this desire they shared.

The critical narrative of skepticism in the twentieth century has attempted to write secularism back into nineteenth-century texts. I challenge this popular constructionist technique and hope to offer an alternative construction that writes religion back into select texts of the period as a means of emblazoning the social and epistemological aims of their authors. Antony Harrison's reading of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem "The Blessed Damozel," for example, participates in an established critical tradition that positions modernity in contradistinction to evacuated medieval codes. For Harrison, Rossetti uses "medievalizing language" (*Victorian Poets* 35) in ways that might seem inappropriate for his readers, effectively eroticizing Christianity as he Christianizes the courtly love lyric. This move desacralizes Christian verse, "drain[ing] [it] of traditional Christian meaning" (Harrison, *Victorian Poets* 36). This method of reading has been often repeated, from Hans Blumenberg's claim of the total incommensurability between premodern and modern philosophical and semiotic systems to Stephen Greenblatt's argument for the secularization of medieval forms across the Reformation divide.<sup>2</sup> Though

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<sup>2</sup> Though Greenblatt's argument has been strongly opposed, it participates in and perpetuates a secularizing tradition in scholarship that continues into the present, and it is this well-established tradition against which I wage my

referring specifically to romance as a literary genre, Fredric Jameson's notions of modern secular manifestations of the medieval imagination line up with those of Blumenburg and Greenblatt. Jameson suggests that romance must secularize over time if it is to survive in a society which renders its content "so many dead languages" (143). Psychology emerges to save antique medieval codes from linguistic extinction (Jameson 143-4).

While Blumenburg, Greenblatt, and Jameson have tended to historicize modern secularizing efforts to the Renaissance, or more specifically to those revolutionary thinkers who shared in Petrarch's demystification of sacred spaces preserved from Augustine to Aquinas, other critics insist that there is more work to be done in the twenty-first century. Bruce Holsinger, for instance, advises that scholars of historicism adopt "a detheologizing vision of liturgy" (297) for two reasons: first, it may be the best way to accurately conceptualize the reach of liturgy's power—that is, once it has been sufficiently "localized, particularized, decentralized, and miniaturized" (298)—and second, to reveal its potentiality for historicism by exploding its silent insistence on its own extra-discursivity and atemporality (298-9). Richard Utz largely echoes Holsinger's vision: since medievalism is necessarily delimited to discourses of historicity, medievalism as such seems to preclude the sempiternal, which is fundamental to religious discourse ("Can We Talk" 4-5). Utz wishes to discover ways to overcome religion's sempiternality by making it temporal; in doing so he hopes to transfer religion to a discursive plane that is critically workable for the historicist ("Subject of Religion" 16-8). And yet, the transcendental claims of medieval religion may indeed be its greatest boon for solvency in medievalism studies. Historicism seems to admit the possibility of transcendence *as* it promotes temporal compartmentalization; in other words, it seems to want to stretch historical boundaries

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critique. I am not necessarily challenging Greenblatt—or Blumenburg, Jameson *et al.*—so much as I am challenging the discourse to which they have contributed.

and draw attention to the permeability of era-markers, yet it all the while reinscribes these boundaries by insisting on the past's irretrievable pastness and the inevitability of presentness. I suggest that religious medievalism allows for this both-and historical transcendence through its appropriation of the medieval sacramental body, a profoundly liminal body that admits sempiternality and temporality simultaneously. The body of Christ, I argue, is the dynamic vehicle through which we as readers might come to better understand the reach and complexity of nineteenth-century religious historicism.

The image of Christ's body in the medieval imagination was complexly material and immaterial, flesh and spirit, both the body that suffered and died on the cross and the collective body of Christ that is the Church. It is a nexus of diversity which, like a language, unlocks a wide range of possibilities for meaning; as such, Christ's body exists in—and is constitutive of—a complex “network of associations” fraught with “oppositions” (Beckwith, *Signifying God* 29). And yet, this body nevertheless boldly achieves the union of sign and referent: it *is* that which it signifies. This has the effect of intensifying the binaries previously mentioned: the body of Christ is profoundly material (the very flesh of the Godhead) as it is profoundly immaterial (the representation of the collective body of Christ on earth). The indissoluble nature of the material body conceptualized by medieval theologians and lay believers alike depends upon a deeply corporeal, incarnational framework, an eschatology the core of which proclaims that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The *corpus* of medieval theology itself reflects the abstruseness of the symbol with which it was ultimately preoccupied. The body of Christ as exemplified in the Eucharist and, by extension granted through the Incarnation, in the bodies of saints and their relics, in the materiality of holy images, and in bodies engaged in mystical

practices of affective piety was subject to constant reconstruction and reinterpretation throughout the Middle Ages.

Religion, of course, is but one arena in which nineteenth-century writers dissatisfied with the secular “march of history” (to borrow a term from Thomas Arnold) sought relief from burgeoning materialisms, spiritual enervation, and an industrial *ethos* that demeaned the human body to the status of a machine. Similarly, religious medievalism is but one theoretical apparatus that can tease out what Jerome McGann calls “intentional agents” (x) from “social texts” (ix) whose fields of interpretation, like Schwartz’s “sacramental” text, are constituted by exchanges between their writers and readers. In other words, the meanings of the “social text” cannot be monopolized by any one description. McGann’s figuration is particularly useful because it self-consciously permits the notion of “textual authority” (x) as it recognizes the text as “always ‘incommensurate’” (x). I suggest that pre-Reformation religion is the “design” (McGann x) by which each text in my study “never ceases to operate” (McGann x), yet even as these textual verities surface they disappear into the field from whence they came, as mist in a mirror—or as the medieval in the modern’s historical memory.

The remaining sections of Chapter 1 detail the variety of ways in which nineteenth-century writers who engaged in the struggle against modern skepticism, rationalism, utilitarianism, industrialism, and commercialism found solace in the medieval body. For some, the chivalric body of the knight-errant or the sinewy body of the muscular Christian reclaimed a devout heroism lost to the modern imagination. For others, reviving the energy and independence of the Saxon body or the self-sacrificial asceticism of the Norman body would encourage modern Britons to integrate similar elements of spiritual fortitude into their own politics. Still others explicitly made use of the medieval religious body resurrected by Coleridge,



the Camden Society, members of the Oxford Movement, and Anglo-Catholic ritualists for the purposes of mending fissures carved by epistemological dualisms that sundered the natural from the supernatural, the body from the soul, and the autonomous subject from God. I provide this detailed overview for two reasons. First, I will show that the essential characteristic of the nineteenth-century medieval revival is one of bodily inscription. The chivalric body, the muscular Christian body, the body of Young England, and Saxon and Norman bodies share an incarnational ethic with Tractarian bodies, Anglo-Catholic bodies, and, for my authors, saintly, mystic, Eucharistic, and iconic bodies. Thus, my construction of religious medievalism contributes to body studies generally and to material criticism within medievalism studies. Medievalism studies has long been preoccupied with constructions that instantiate the medieval body in a variety of ways to satisfy social, political, or ethical ends. My project adds the medieval religious body to the list of bodily medievalisms and seeks to demonstrate how that body might offer yet another way for us to see how nineteenth-century writers endeavored to re-enchant the world. Second, the material that follows is meant to provide a context within which the medieval religious body can be sustained, and in which it can be effective, in the nineteenth century. It is meant to provide a context of explicitly medievalist and religious nineteenth-century literature beside which to situate the less explicit works I consider in detail. By surveying the more direct calls for spiritual revival in chivalric literature, the Oxford Movement, and Muscular Christianity, I evoke a climate of religious awareness that could plausibly affect and attract writers and readers of less focused texts. The remaining sections of this chapter provide such a context. Before filling them in, I offer an overview of the remaining chapters that complete the study.

In Chapter 2, “Medieval Veneration, Romantic Translation: Keats, Relics, and the Exaltation of the Body in *The Eve of St. Agnes*,” I argue for the poem’s indebtedness to medieval Christian figurations of living materiality. Taking seriously the poem’s theological context—that is, a mediievally-inspired cultural milieu whose rules are necessarily theological and within which bodies think, act, and live in medieval ways—I argue that *The Eve of St. Agnes* can be best understood when read as a modern articulation of medieval relic devotion. In adopting the conventional forms of medieval saints’ *vitae*, Keats narrativizes and thus recreates a discourse of relic veneration which reinscribes, in the very act of writing, the salvific power of the cult of saints into the poem’s “pseudo-medieval world” (Garofalo 356). Such an inscription elevates the lovers’ bodies to holiness, Madeline’s by nature, Porphyro’s by proximity to and physical contact with Madeline’s body. Reading *The Eve of St. Agnes* as a *vita* of a modern saint—one which chronicles the pilgrim’s visitation and ritual performance at the saint’s shrine, the awakening or *elevatio* of the desired relic, the *translatio* away from the saint’s original home, and the implied *depositio* in a new shrine—reveals Keats’s transcendental vision of Madeline as a *holy* object, Porphyro as a *devoted* thief, and the human body as a thing which has the capacity to become exalted by means of its very materiality.

Chapter 3, “‘My Music has some Mystic Diapasons’: Byronic Mysticism and Apophatic Discourse in *Manfred*,” rejects claims of Byron’s religious skepticism and reads *Manfred* as one of his religio-poetic contributions to the greater “re-supernaturalization” (Slykhuis 189) project of Romanticism. I argue that Byron inscribes the body of the medieval mystic—an intensely ambivalent body that ascends in divine exaltation toward the light as it descends into the darkness of hopelessness and despair, straddles epistemological boundaries of knowing and unknowing, resides both inside and outside of the prevailing religious discourse, and strides

against an ecclesiological order that predicates divine union on human mediation—as a vehicle in and through which he might collapse modern dualisms that threatened to separate irredeemably the body from the soul, and the soul from divine energy. Tapping into an eschatological framework that permits the conceptualization of God as a female figure, a vision of spiritual *agape* that establishment Anglicanism denied him, the archetypal Romantic lover writes his quest-romance as a mystic’s quest to attain spiritual marriage by means of affective piety, in which the body that seeks models itself on the body sought through traditional methods of *imitatio Christi*. A “heroically independent heterodox thinker” who “tilt[ed] against the orthodox establishment” (Beatty 30), Byron himself performs an *imitatio*, as the body he appropriates mirrors his own religious ambivalence and his yearning to quell the sins that oppressed him so to melt eternally with the divine feminine. Byron reifies his signature paradoxes in a mystic body which grants him the flexibility to be religious while being unorthodox, to loose, but in the very act of loosing, to bind, and to show the impossibility of reclaiming lost love while divinizing both the pursuit and that which is pursued. When read in the apophatic mystical tradition of Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and the *Cloud of Unknowing*, *Manfred* turns from a text that articulates the malaise of modern spiritualism and the desperate, panic-stricken independence of the automatized self to one that spiritualizes the self through repeated acts of becoming God.

I argue in Chapter 4, “*Bleak House*’s ‘[In]Consequential Ground’: Eucharistic Theology and Bureaucratic Absence in Dickens’s London,” that Dickens’s critique of England’s courts of law in *Bleak House* raises many of the same questions that animated theological debate over the Eucharist since the sixteenth century. I contend that Dickens presents the British system of law operating as a central signifier like the Eucharist, but a Eucharist that is absent when it should be

present, linguistic when it should be embodied. Dickens constructs a Eucharistic drama to deconstruct the courts, as he demonstrates the consequences of stripping ritual of its essential qualities of nourishment for a Reformed Eucharistic system whose mysteries now reside in dust instead of sacrificial bread. He deploys theological language and concepts to instill what Kenneth Sroka calls a “sacramental consciousness” (186) in the Victorian legal system as a cautionary measure against using bureaucratic power at the expense of the citizens whom it exists to serve. The endless stacks of papers that proliferate at the Court of Chancery, covered with thick layers of dust into which the very language contained therein is forever resolving, resist meaning at every turn precisely because they are disembodied and self-consuming. To correct this, the courts should exhibit qualities immaterial *and* material, spiritual *and* corporeal—as does the medieval Eucharist. True participation by members of the *corpus mysticum* occurs, David Grumett suggests, in an encounter with Christ’s physical presence; cut off from that source, the church as body is vulnerable to manipulation by secular forces (10-1). Dickens’s novel mobilizes the medieval Eucharist’s community-building power, as well as its power to negotiate between things worldly and supernatural, to tell a cautionary tale of what happens when an institution falls prey to a dualistic way of thinking and forsakes this Eucharistic model. Dickens detects in the quiet desperation of the victims of Chancery, Tom-all-Alone’s, and the Ghost’s Walk a desire for material presence, and he amplifies these absences in *Bleak House* so that the real presence of its antidote would be made all the more vivid by contrast.

Chapter 5, “Victorian Body-Image: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Medieval Iconography in the *Fin de Siècle*,” argues that Wilde’s only novel posits a counter-aesthetic to Kantian and Paterian discourses of autonomous art, discourses with which Wilde as artistic theorist and Wilde as artist have been conventionally associated. If art “as-such” (Abrams, “Art-

as-Such” 8) can be considered a “formula of creation” (Ojala 104), then I read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a modern recovery of the medieval “doctrine of re-creation” (Ritchey 2) that reconfigures the “logic . . . of a world remade into holy matter, re-created through the incarnation of God in matter” (Ritchey 3). Reading the novel within a framework of the theology of re-creation in which the matter of the canvas lives, bleeds, and acts as its prototype articulates Wilde’s discontent with artistic autonomy. He mends the bifurcation between art and life, as he says in *De Profundis*, by finding “a mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals” (Wilde, *Poems and Essays* 193). Furthermore, I suggest that Wilde’s novel shores up strands of medieval thought on beauty, morality, and art through a narrative that reimagines and rearticulates theologies of the devotional icon that span from the third century to the sixteenth. Dorian Gray, the unchanging idea born in the mind of the artist that nevertheless pre-exists its own conception, is the form that actuates the mere matter of the canvas. Conflating the portrait and narrative icon into a single panel allows for a sequence of events to be shown as one moment, where the past, present, and future coexist in a fixed-yet-fluid sempiternal reality. Situating my reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* within the conceptual framework of theological aesthetics, a paradigm in which beauty is read spiritually as a product of the Incarnation (Garcia-Rivera 9-11), I argue that reading the novel in terms of religious medievalism helps us better understand Wilde’s aesthetic project of exposing the dangers of modern *avant-garde* notions of the autonomy of art. To do this, he salvages the premodern understanding of the relation between art and life: a work of art is coextensive with the divine prototype of which it is a representation.

The sections that follow survey various nineteenth-century constructions of the medieval body. The first two sections provide a brief overview of what I have found to be the most popular bodily constructions in nineteenth-century medievalism studies. “Muscular Inscriptions: The Chivalric Revival in the Nineteenth Century” traces the idealized Christian, male, heroic body to Richard Hurd’s *Letters of Chivalry and Romance* and Edmund Burke’s lamentations over a lost sense of chivalry in the west in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Though iron clad, the chivalric body proved a plastic body as the nineteenth century progressed, taking the form of the Muscular Christian in the writings of Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, the aristocratic male body of Young England under the direction of Disraeli, and the social body of Christian Socialism. “The Medieval Political Revival: Reifying the Saxon and Norman Body” considers the ways in which Britain’s quest for origins was an effort to reclaim—and reconstitute—the Anglo-Saxon or Norman body.<sup>3</sup> Saxonist liberals and Normanist Tories developed historico-political theories from Walter Scott’s fictions and Henry Hallam’s and Francis Palgrave’s histories with the intent of figuring ideal modes of Englishness, often to buoy up their own peculiar prejudices.

The final three sections contextualize the medieval religious revival in the nineteenth century. “The Oxford Movement and the Pre-Reformation *Ethos*” presents the Oxford Movement as the epicenter through which medieval and medievally-inspired doctrine, ornament, and liturgical practices passed into Anglican churches and thence into the popular culture. But much of the theological, philosophical, and aesthetic ground upon which the revival was built had been laid and fertilized by certain Romantic writers. “Romanticism and the Medieval

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<sup>3</sup> Over the past several decades, medievalism studies has taken a political turn. See Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*; Clare Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*; and Elizabeth Fay, *Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal*.

Religious Body” draws attention to the Romantic foundations of the medieval religious revival, focusing on the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Robert Southey, as well as on Thomas Chatterton’s and Thomas Percy’s contributions to modern reconstructions of the Middle Ages. Subsequently, sprouts that the Oxford Movement cultivated blossomed in Victorian poetry and prose. “The Medieval Religious Body and Victorian Literature” demonstrates how writers from Matthew Arnold to Gerard Manley Hopkins employed poetic incarnations to give succor to the poor in the world of the slums, to reinstate the worker’s body in the increasingly automatized world of industry, or to bring color into the enlightened world of rationalized faith. Taken together, literary efforts to channel the Christianity of the Middle Ages—whether invoked by Coleridge in his theoretical writings, instituted by Edward Bouverie Pusey and like-minded ecclesiastics in churches, or drawn upon by Wordsworth or Christina Rossetti in their poetry—assumed an embodied, incarnational character in the nineteenth century.

### **Muscular Inscriptions: The Chivalric Revival in the Nineteenth Century**

David Matthews contends that medievalism as a practice can be divided into two categories: the romantic Middle Ages and the gothic or grotesque Middle Ages. Chivalry, that ethereal dream-vision of noble knights and beautiful damsels, belongs to the romantic version of medievalism in that it idealizes the dignity and goodness of these mythical figures while it laments their modern impossibility (Matthews 24). Burke immortalized the dirge of lost chivalry with his announcement that the age of chivalry has receded into the past, yet in his determination that chivalry was an ideal toward which one continually strives as opposed to something achieved in the present, he opened up the possibility of reclaiming knighthood (Alexander 24-5). That Burke’s detractors called this passionate defender of the Catholic Relief Acts “a latter-day

Don Quixote” (De Bruyn 697) reveals for Frans De Bruyn a deep cultural truth of the late eighteenth century. Though it was meant derogatorily, the regularity with which narratives like *Don Quixote* entered the public discourse is indicative of an increased importance placed on the medieval past and, particularly with reference to Burke, of the rising prominence of the institution of chivalry in public consciousness. Burke fancied himself “beset by hissing monsters and charged with [a] holy calling” (De Bruyn 706), and he called upon the House of Commons to assist him in his knightly quests. His *Reflections* conceptualize chivalry as essential to the west’s civilizing process and a worthy conduit of heroic Christianity (De Bruyn 712-3). “Burke is not arguing for a return to the [M]iddle [A]ges and its religious and social values” (De Bruyn 717), De Bruyn finely delineates; he rather stresses that “to destroy the historical structure built up by older social forms must lead to the destruction of society in its modern character” (qtd. in De Bruyn 717). Burke’s references to chivalry joined forces with Hurd’s popular *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, which, according to Nick Groom, introduced medieval poetry to modern popular culture (*Percy’s Reliques* 82) and created a mystique about chivalry that carried into the nineteenth century, where it found many eager voices.

Taking a different approach to medievalism than does Matthews, Stephanie Trigg,<sup>4</sup> or Umberto Eco,<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Fay configures nineteenth-century medievalism in terms of historical time. The difference between Romantic and Victorian medievalism, Fay insists, is essentially temporal: while certain Romantics saw the troubadours of the High Middle Ages as reflections of themselves, Victorian medievalists found their precursors in the fourteenth century as advocates

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<sup>4</sup> Trigg locates three kinds of medievalism: traditional medievalism, which references medieval practice as true and present, both then and now; modernist medievalism, or forms of reconstruction that appeal to historiography and antiquarianism; and postmodern medievalism, an ahistorical pastiche that aims not to represent the past faithfully but to reference it ironically (Matthews 16-8).

<sup>5</sup> Eco’s well-known theory of the “ten little Middle Ages” conceives of the Middle Ages variously as pretext, ironical visitation, barbarian age, Romanticism, neo-Thomism, national identities, Decadentism, philological reconstruction, so-called Tradition, and the expectation of the millennium (*Faith in Fakes* 68-70).



of feudalism fighting to stave off encroaching commercialism. She ascribes chivalric preoccupations to the Victorians and juxtaposes the troubadour—the medieval hero of the Romantics, the embodiment of their poetic spirit—against the knight, who represents tradition, patriotism, and hierarchical ideals (Fay 3-5). It is certainly true that chivalric constructions pervade Victorian medievalism. Alfred Lord Tennyson, for example, depicts King Arthur as a modern gentleman, striking an ideal balance between the medieval knight and quintessential Victorian notions of masculinity in his poem “Morte D’Arthur.” Kingsley and Hughes drew heavily on chivalric discourse in their cultivation of Muscular Christianity, a movement whose goal was to locate and radically emphasize the natural confluence of religion and the robust body. Muscular Christianity appropriated the male “body as a site for the contestation and resolution of socio-political conflicts” (Hall, “Muscular Christianity” 5). Fay claims that appropriation of chivalry was primarily a Victorian affair, but David Duff has argued that chivalry was mobilized in the service of revolution among certain second-generation Romantics (117-8). While Byron satirizes chivalry in *Childe Harold*, Percy Bysshe Shelley, under the influence of William Godwin, eventually viewed the chivalric system as a necessary historical phenomenon (Duff 135-6).

In fact, chivalric constructions abound in the Romantic era. Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*, published by William Caxton in 1485, was republished in 1816, and Southey’s scholarly edition of *Morte* appeared a year later. But perhaps the most powerful defense on behalf of chivalry came in 1822 when the eccentric, hopelessly romantic antiquarian Kenelm Digby published *The Broad Stone of Honor; or Rules for the Gentlemen of England*.<sup>6</sup> Chivalry, he bombastically proclaimed, is “conversant with all that is beautiful and sublime in the

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<sup>6</sup> Upon converting to Catholicism in 1825, Digby revised the work to demonstrate the interconnections between chivalry and Catholicism (Girouard 60).

intellectual world” (qtd. in Chandler, *Order* 155). Catering to young men of the aristocratic class, Digby made it possible for domestic gentlemen to imagine fighting in foreign lands for a noble cause, and he endeavored to train this class of gentlemen warriors in the perpetual fight against evil (Girourard 60). Romantic though it was, *The Broad Stone of Honor* postured as objective historical analysis. The new critical attitude to history, which entailed sifting through the documents and physical relics of the Middle Ages, sought to reveal “what had actually happened” (Girourard 20).

One of the major conduits of medieval ideas in the nineteenth century was Scott. “To have been alive and literate in the nineteenth century,” John Henry Raleigh asserts, “was to have been affected in some way by the Waverley novels” (10). Scott’s major influence was Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, a collection of “ancient”<sup>7</sup> ballads that Scott read at thirteen. As Hoxie Neale Fairchild puts it, there was no need for Scott to journey back to the Middle Ages—“he was there already” (*Romantic Quest* 257). Scott developed a method for his brand of historicism that navigates a “middle course between antiquarianism and anachronism” (Culler 23). Central to his method is an emphasis on man’s fundamental impulses that exist beneath the temporal accidents of society and era of birth, the same impulses that connect a modern person and a medieval knight because they are, as he says in *Waverley*, “common to men in all stages of society” (qtd. in Culler 23). More than anything else, perhaps, Scott ignited a fascination for the Middle Ages because he presents the medieval in the modern and the modern in the medieval.

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<sup>7</sup> Medieval antiquarianism of the eighteenth century featured three famous forgeries: Chatterton invented late-medieval cleric Thomas Rowley, whose manuscripts he found in St. Mary Redcliffe Church; Percy invented a tradition of poetry that provided a missing link to the Middle Ages; and James Macpherson invented a third-century Celtic bard named Ossian in his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*. For more on these three nineteenth-century medievalists, see *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture*, ed. Nick Groom, and Groom’s own study *The Making of Percy’s Reliques*.

This gave his readers, and those medievalist writers after him, a sense that the Middle Ages were still alive deep within themselves, and one only had to be in earnest to regain them.

The ways in which Scott's medieval novels affected Victorian readers were multifarious and far-reaching. In addition to expanding the cast of characters to include kings and princes as well as farmers and peasants (Raleigh 13)—while of course preserving the middle class as “the center of gravity” (Raleigh 14)—what really appealed to Victorians, as evinced in the reviews of Nassau Senior and Walter Bagehot, was Scott's conflation of romance and *realism*. There was a feeling that his novels presented historical moments truthfully (Raleigh 16).<sup>8</sup> Eschewing abstraction for the flesh and blood of the past earned Thomas Carlyle's commendation that “[h]e understood what history meant” (qtd. in Raleigh 23), namely, that the past is a living thing subsisting in the present. Yet what was the medieval past, “really,” for Victorian readers? For some, it was the idealized Middle Ages that has become conventional in scholarship on Scott, but for others, as P. D. Garside points out, Scott's “Rationalist” (150) approach in some of his miscellaneous writings exposed the medieval power structure as corrupt and barbaric (154). What the Middle Ages “really were” to the Victorian reader, then, depended on the particular circumstances under which that individual reader encountered Scott.

Nineteenth-century chivalric discourses took root in several popular movements that influenced writers from Carlyle and Kingsley to F. D. Maurice and Robert Browning. One such movement, which derived its ideas as much from the metaphysics of Coleridge as Digby's chivalry, is Muscular Christianity, a discipline-oriented philosophy that took the “manliness” (Vance 6) of Christ for its model. Burke was a progenitor of the movement, wedding manliness

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<sup>8</sup> Barbara Bell humorously relates that Victorian audiences at mock-medieval jousting tournaments, spoiled by the intense, heroic battles between knights in Scott's *Ivanhoe*, were quite disenchanted with the tame contemporary reenactments (201).

to morality,<sup>9</sup> and once Kingsley expanded the repertoire, the prototypical Muscular Christian became “patriotic, generous, broad-minded, decent, chivalrous and free-spirited by turns” (Vance 8). Hughes, drawing from Carlyle’s emphasis on the intensely human Christ (from whom modern men could learn the art of true manliness), introduced radical politics to the discourse by making the figure of Christ a Christian Socialist and a fearless knight battling on behalf of the good and true (Vance 21). Victorian Muscular Christians were disturbed by separations between the church and the greater society; thus, they sought to unite the two by providing a religious foundation upon which the secular tradition of the gentleman could rest. This led them to elevate the gentleman to a spiritual status (Vance 26-8). Coleridge supplied Muscular Christianity with a theology. The flesh of the human body is infused with the *Logos*, which at the Incarnation became flesh and thereby enabled each individual body to participate in divinity (Vance 46-8). Maurice’s *Kingdom of Christ* flowed from Coleridge and argues that the human body extends in a certain sense from the divine body as a result of the Incarnation (Vance 54). Appropriating Coleridge’s and Maurice’s theologies of the body permitted Kingsley and Hughes to sanctify the Carlylian hero (Vance 67) by reveling in the body’s true strength: a balance of Kingsley’s physical strength of body, Digby’s chivalrous strength of soul, and Coleridge’s enfleshed *Logos*. The last unifies the other two elements in the manly Christian.

The medieval ethos appealed to men and women of all socio-economic strata, though the nature of their appropriation was contingent, in many cases, on the specific class from which the

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<sup>9</sup> Burke traces the pathology of the revolutionaries in France to a fundamental lack of masculine sentimentality. Focusing on that immortal part of the *Reflections* where Burke speaks of chivalry, Mike Goode observes reciprocity between “historical epistemology” (831), on the one hand, and “manly feeling” (831), on the other, to the extent that historicism is coextensive with a peculiarly masculine sentimental judgment. Goode calls this negotiation the “erotics of historicism” (831). His argument hinges on Burke’s preference for sentimental as opposed to “visceral historicism” (Goode 841), the latter an exercise in hypersexualized masculinity practiced by the rebels and the former an expression of ancient codes of chivalry. Burke’s lament over lost chivalry bespeaks a need for the preservation of such antique codes through applications of “male sentimental deference” (Goode 840).

appeals emanated. Aristocratic Tories and Nonconformist Liberals alike looked to the Middle Ages for guidance, solace, and inspiration. One group of romantic aristocrats idealized the feudal past when it became painfully clear that aristocratic influence was waning, as people flocked to the industrial cities to begin new lives shaped by industrial commercialism (Dellheim, “Victorian Medievalism” 43-5). Established by Disraeli in 1842, this youthful and energetic group called itself Young England.<sup>10</sup> Its members maintained a noble hope that their place in the old world, though temporarily lost, might be regained through the very earnestness of hereditary entreaty. Yet they did not want to separate themselves from the lower classes, even if their desires were far from egalitarian.<sup>11</sup> The Tory group championed “a new feudalism” (Chandler, *Order* 158) that would fuse the gentry and the working classes as they were of old, when feudal lords provided for those who worked their land in a rapprochement that meant happiness for all. A similar movement to Disraeli’s Young England was Christian Socialism. Maurice founded the Christian Socialist weekly *Politics for the People* in 1848 and in it laid out the platform for the movement: sacramentalizing the English social body. This was to be achieved through a peculiarly muscular pedagogy (Hall, “On the Making” 47). The upper body, or the classical body of dominant groups, commands the “monster body of the lower classes” (Hall, “On the Making” 51). But Maurice’s ideal social body, whose contours he outlines in *The Kingdom of Christ*, is one body held together by sacramental bonds (Hall, “On the Making” 50).

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<sup>10</sup> Dennis Allen reads the body of Christ as the structural center of Hughes’s novel *Tom Brown’s School Days*. Allen argues that the novel bears out the “ideological tensions” (114) intrinsic to this sacred body in a pitched battle between athleticism, on the one hand, and spirituality, on the other. Hughes reconciles these tensions under the banner of Young England, a political body within which material and transcendental properties are allowed to merge (Allen 114-5).

<sup>11</sup> Their relationship to their nobility was complex. The most revealing—and ridiculed—articulation of this confusion was uttered by the effusive John Manners, 7<sup>th</sup> Duke of Rutland and Young England standard-bearer: “Let wealth and commerce, laws and learning die / But leave us still our old Nobility!” (qtd. in Girourard 83).

## The Medieval Political Revival: Reifying the Saxon and Norman Body

Medievalism at its heart is a quest for origins. The Anglo-Saxon ideal celebrated the Teutonic blood that flows in the veins of Englishmen; this ideal was challenged by neo-feudalism throughout the nineteenth century. The Saxonist, who tended to be politically liberal, argued for the persistence of Teutonic traits generally characterized as individualistic, energetic, independent, and honest. The Normanist, or Tory neo-feudal advocate, claimed chivalry, self-sacrifice, asceticism, and deference (Chandler, "Carlyle" 175).<sup>12</sup> That the Saxons were precursors to the Church of England gained widespread popularity in the sixteenth century and persisted through to the nineteenth, at times more out of a fear of Norman "taint" (R. J. Smith, *Gothic Bequest* 5), perhaps, than pure fellow-feeling with a Saxon people who lived during a period cloaked in vague suspicions of barbarism. But for others, the age of the Normans embodied the notion of English freedom itself. R. J. Smith outlines three historical views of the Magna Carta, that founding document which became synonymous with Englishness: first, Immemorialism is an historical school of thought that dismisses the Norman Conquest as inconsequential and favors continuity (*Gothic Bequest* 6); second, Gothic Theory bypasses the Normans and reaches back to the freedom-loving Goths (*Gothic Bequest* 6); and third, the Norman Yoke identifies the oppressive aspects of the feudal system as the consequence of the Conquest (*Gothic Bequest* 8).

Although *Ivanhoe* claims to dissolve distinctions between the Saxonist and Normanist camps, it actually lays the groundwork for a century of oppositions between the Saxons, a people often seen as original Britons since the Reformation popularized this notion, and the Normans, a

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<sup>12</sup> Purists were few and far between due to constant discursive cross-fertilization. Carlyle ranks among those writers who seem ambivalent in the Saxon-Norman controversy. Chandler makes the case for Carlylian Saxonism, reasoning that the influence of German thought, as well as his knowledge of Norse and Icelandic materials, combine to make Carlyle a Saxonist ("Carlyle" 177).

group that had nobility—and the Magna Carta<sup>13</sup>—on its side. Scott presents the Normans as licentious and insipid, whose chivalrous posturing consistently fails to live up to the ideal laid down by Hurd and Digby (Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest* 77-80). Scott's pejorative constructions of Normans have plenty of "scholarly" backing. The first few decades of the nineteenth century produced a bevy of historical research seeking to locate Britain's genuine origins. Sharon Turner fought on behalf of the Saxons in his *History of the Anglo-Saxons from the Earliest Period to the Norman Conquest* with such a degree of affection that he was even sympathetic toward their relations with Rome (Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest* 58).<sup>14</sup> Dutifully following his chronicle sources, Turner depicts King John as depraved. John certainly signed the Magna Carta, Turner admits, but only out of lust for power (Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest* 81). It was perhaps in light of this history that Scott rewrote Robin Hood, originally a Norman nobleman, as a Saxon commoner—a portrayal that appears to have stuck, if Morris's *Dream of John Ball* can be considered typical of Victorian constructions of the popular folk-hero. But perhaps Turner's lasting contribution was made on behalf of the Middle Ages more generally: at the turn of the nineteenth century, the prevailing bias condemned the medieval period's supposed barbarism, but historians like Turner helped make the Middle Ages more accessible and its study more reputable (Saunders 3). Increased respectability meant that medieval study was sanctioned as an activity fit for a gentleman.

Hallam, considered by many to be the greatest Whig historian of the age, took into account what he saw as the undesirable elements of Norman rule but also saw feudalism's

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, claims to the Magna Carta were many, heated, and complex. Those adhering to either group sought justification by landing the rights enshrined in the constitution in their respective camp.

<sup>14</sup> Simmons points out that Turner puzzled over King Alfred's translations of the works of Gregory the Great. Turner explained it away, however, as indicative of the King's profound sense of duty, that he would overlook the popery involved so that he might rescue valuable moral teachings for the sake of posterity (Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest* 59).

potential to safeguard freedom (Carlyle, *Order* 88). His *View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages* is an apology for feudalism and the primary inspiration for Coleridge's *On the Constitution of Church and State*.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Turner, who besmirched the Normans, Hallam was much more diplomatic and took the line of the Immemorialists: the Magna Carta initiated a process of growth that follows through to the present moment, but he envisions a Saxon "root" to this "noble plant" (qtd. in R. J. Smith, *Gothic Bequest* 141). But Hallam fell short of being a true Immemorialist because he ultimately favored one over the other—the Normans over the Saxons—and acknowledged the efficacy of the Conquest in facilitating a change toward a more idealistic politics. Palgrave, on the other hand, is perhaps the quintessential Immemorialist. Noble birth is essential to Palgrave, and noble birth is what the Normans had in their favor, but he also considers aristocracy as indispensable to Anglo-Saxon government (R. J. Smith, *Gothic Bequest* 143-6). This allowed the Normanists to assume a privileged position and posit that the Conquest preserved what had always been (Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest* 62). The Middle Ages is a continuity bound by the aristocracy—and it should remain so in the present, Palgrave implies.

Whether Saxonist or Normanist, Romantic poet-troubadour or Victorian knightly novelist, exponents of medievalism have employed a variety of concrete, ideologically-charged images and figures to embody their specific brand of historicism. Favorites range from Kings Arthur and Alfred to Saints Becket and Cuthbert. The famous tale of Henry II and Thomas Becket, for example, has experienced countless resurrections since the thirteenth century. In the nineteenth century, historians like Augustin Thierry took up Becket and dressed him in either

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<sup>15</sup> For Coleridge, feudalism realigned liberty, law, and religion (Chandler, *Order* 92). The Anglican Church of the nineteenth century should adopt the universal scope of the medieval church, argued Coleridge. Chandler suggests that Coleridge gleaned these notions from his readings of Thomas Aquinas regarding the church and the body politic (*Order* 96).



Saxon or Norman clothes. For Thierry, the argument between King and Archbishop fomented because of race: Henry was a Norman, while Becket symbolized an uncanny rebirth of Saxon power (Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest* 117), as if “the soul of King Harold had descended into the body of [Becket]” (qtd. in Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest* 117). Palgrave later challenged this assessment, dismissing Thierry’s claim on the grounds of opinion. He promptly took Becket back over to the Norman side (Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest* 120). Many Saxonists did not miss Becket on religious grounds; in fact, they adduced that he could not possibly have been a Saxon, for the hair-shirt he wore underneath his popish regalia is positively “un-English” (Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest* 128). But other medievalists—one may call them ritualists—embraced these pious signs of bodily devotion.

Not many myths rose to such monumental proportions in the nineteenth century as did the cult of ninth-century King Alfred of Wessex. Featured prominently in Turner’s *History*, Alfred was looked upon as the ideal Christian ruler, who reigned in a state so real it was as if he were present in the flesh. He was nearly canonized at the turn of the century amid the romantic fervor of his millenary celebrations in 1901. Joanne Parker records several of his seemingly endless accolades: Arthur Conan Doyle, present at the millenary, declared that the English “empire . . . is one stupendous monument” (qtd. in Parker 6) to Alfred; Lord Roseberry honored Alfred as at once a captain of enterprise, an industrial foreman, a schoolmaster, bishop, general and legislator (11); Hughes proclaimed the site of Alfred’s victory at Edington to be “sacred ground” (qtd. in Parker 21); G. A. Henty solemnly pronounced him a martyr (97); and Frederic Harrison confessed that devotion to the Alfred Jewel was equivalent to “a medieval Christian kissing a fragment of the True Cross” (qtd. in Parker 9). Omnipresent yet ensconced in an idealized past, Alfred assumed a sacramental presence, his ubiquity shrouded in sacred mystery

while simultaneously embodied in a person. In his epilogue to the Jubilee celebrations of 1897, Walter Besant captured this curious presence in a request proposing that a monument of Alfred be erected, saying that Alfred “is everywhere. But he is invisible. But the people do not know him. The boys do not learn about him. There is nothing to show him. We want a monument to Alfred” (qtd. in Parker 4). Alms for Alfred that manifested in religious devotion were the most common—and the most revealing—form of reverence paid his memory by his adoring pilgrims.

### **Romanticism and the Medieval Religious Body**

No other period in modern Britain did so much to reinscribe medieval symbolic systems, reinforce medieval religious practices, reinstate medieval hierarchies, and reacquaint the people with the power of the sacred than the nineteenth century. A general language of crisis dominated Anglican dialogue in the 1820s and 30s, and the Oxford Movement, while it may have been the loudest on issues which it considered particularly momentous, was only one voice among many clamoring to reclaim a lost solemnity in religious practice. Church reformers viewed the eighteenth century as a period of religious stagnation and decay, which propounded vague and dry doctrine under the guise of rational religion. Catholic liturgy, with its external flourishes and aesthetic allure, offered a tantalizing alternative. In a letter to Cardinal Manning in 1839, John Henry Newman professed his apprehension that the Tractarians were rousing yearnings and cultivating tastes that were not necessarily theirs to inflame, but pious individuals disenchanted with the Church of England “were searching for what the Oxford Movement had to offer, even if they did not know it” (Pereiro 78).

But a proper assessment of the Oxford Movement, the Anglo-Catholic movement, and the ritualism they engendered must begin with a consideration of their Romantic origins. Writers like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey supplied the raw material from which the medieval

religious revival was built. Many poets of the Romantic era sought to resurrect aspects of ancient thought they deemed valuable for their creative projects. Romanticism and medievalism share a desire to breathe life into an enlightened age (Alexander 13); both discourses attempt to enliven the world and make man “feel at home in the universe” (Chandler, *Order* 51). Though largely discredited by the eighteenth-century rationalists, certain folkloric strands and legends of the medieval patrimony brought down through the ages as parts of an *ethos* of heroism and sacred duty galvanized aspects of the new Romanticism (Chandler, *Order* 125). If Romantic thought can be interpreted as an “imaginative fusion of the familiar and the strange, the known and the unknown, the real and the ideal, the finite and the infinite, the material and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural” (Fairchild, *Romantic Quest* 251)—as Wordsworth and Coleridge outline in their Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*—then Romanticism is a movement of medievalism. For Romantics to whom a medieval revival appealed, the Middle Ages represented a *way of life* which offered quite different possibilities than were supposed by those Enlightenment thinkers who tended to view the Middle Ages as first and foremost a *period*—and a barbarous one at that (Stock 64). These Romantic writers identified with an idealized past, but for all their idealization, Brian Stock insists, they remained ambivalent, harboring an escapist tendency that manifested in pushing the medieval away as they reeled it in. Despite—or perhaps due to—this ambivalence, medieval structures underpin Romantic thought (Stock 66, 70). Unlike Stock (and James Simpson, for whom Romantic privileging of the imagination constitutes a form of escapism (10)<sup>16</sup>), Robert Ryan asserts that it was in the arena of religion that Romantic poets sought to stage their most influential and public revolutions. Their

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<sup>16</sup> Simpson sees the Romantic imagination as a space that “wholly contains the medieval” (11). To reenter the imagination, the poet must turn away from the rationality of the modern era and step back, at his own peril, to the medieval, which *is* the imagination (Simpson 10-1).

engagement with religion does not indicate an eschewal of social responsibility; rather, “their religious interests are what kept [them] in touch with the real world” (Ryan, *Romantic Reformation* 6). Criticism abounds delineating Romantic skepticism, but Ryan counters this trend to suggest that it was the religious *belief* of certain Romantics that had the most profound impact on the social life of the time (*Romantic Reformation* 7).

In the years following the French Revolution, rituals and ornaments of medieval Catholicism were reintroduced to stimulate an intensity of belief reminiscent of the Middle Ages. This inspired a new religious sense that adorned the private life of individual minds and worked to alter the present landscape from the outside in. This effort began, in large part, with Coleridge, whose metaphysical and theological writings offered a rich, attractive theoretical grounding that nourished the revival intellectually and spiritually from its infancy through to its blossoming in the second half of the nineteenth century. Despite Veronica Ortenberg’s claim that there is little undiluted medievalism in Coleridge (neither, she adds, is there much in Wordsworth or Byron) (45), he is, according to Jonathan Wordsworth, “at all times a Christian thinker” (31) whose theories of imagination, I suggest, partake of imagery derived from medieval theologies of sacraments. The imagination is for Coleridge the vehicle through which humans can experience God. The Coleridgean symbol is a space of interpenetration where the immanent and transcendent touch (Barth, *Symbolic Imagination* 26); it is an ineffable reality embodied; it is the point at which an encounter takes place; it is efficacious, in that it makes present that which it represents; and, most importantly, it is a matrix within which communication with the divine is made possible (Barth, *Symbolic Imagination* 39-40).

If it is conceivable to situate Romanticism in contradistinction to Enlightenment rationalism while at the same time acknowledging its sympathy with medieval aesthetics, it must

also be possible to identify a fundamentally religious impetus near the heart of the Romantic enterprise. Coleridge requested “some Sun to ignite heat & Light” (qtd. in Alexander 102) in Anglican theology and liturgical practice. Coleridge’s eschewal of the Enlightenment’s linear view of history led him to substitute a Kantian dialectic that is essentially metaphysical rather than historical in the modern sense (R. J. Smith, *Gothic Bequest* 137), so to “recognize[e] eternal verities behind obsolete forms” (R. J. Smith, *Gothic Bequest* 155). Emphasizing metaphysics at the expense of linear, progressivist history is but one instance where Coleridge actively advances medieval precedent. Coleridge’s metaphysico-political conceptualization predicates society’s decay on a loss of ancient values such as faith in the transcendent. Newman considered Coleridge’s work on the imagination a great boon toward the wider acceptance of traditional Catholic theology, despite its obvious doctrinal errors. His embodied symbolic figurations at the very least “prepar[ed] minds for something higher” (Pereiro 98), and in this he gave succor to the religious revival.

Perhaps the Romantic poet-medievalist with the most extensive and dedicated *scholarly* tendency was Southey. His private library contained an impressive collection of medieval works, but it also included a well-read volume of Percy’s *Reliques*, so it is difficult to know for sure which kind of medieval source most influenced him as he penned *Harold*, *Joan of Arc*, and, later in his career, *Sir Thomas More; or Colloquies on the Progress and Practices of Society*, a poem published in the year of Catholic Emancipation.<sup>17</sup> Southey’s nationalism led him to embrace an anti-Catholic stance in public life, but his respect for the medieval church only grew

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<sup>17</sup> A testament to the adaptability of medievalism projects, Southey appropriated the Middle Ages in both his early radical *and* later conservative periods (Chandler, *Order* 102-3). When his 1794 radical medievalist play *Wat Tyler* was published in 1817—after he had renounced his revolutionary views—he was made the subject of a critical firestorm. Although he deployed medieval topoi in different ways, depending, of course, on his present social and political leanings, Southey continually attributed the voice of reason to the Middle Ages: both *Wat Tyler* and *Thomas More* share a moral tone that can teach modern industrialized man how to be truly human (Chandler, *Order* 108).

stronger through his conservative turn; even his nationalism, as it happens, was founded on his admiration of the cult of Alfred (Ortenberg 45). In light of this it is difficult to imagine Southey's distaste for medieval religion to have run exceptionally deep. His Preface to "St. Michael's Chair" substantiates this theory: traditional Catholicism is a faith which "deal[s] more in exteriors than our own, operating more than our own, through the body, upon the soul; and so leaving, perhaps, a more sensible impression upon the spirits" (qtd. in Morris 52). Wordsworth was more ambivalent, though he does pay homage to the memory of the saints in his poem "Saints," censure iconoclasts in "Dissolution of the Monasteries," and rue the undermining of the cult of Mary in "The Virgin" (Morris 57-8). Wordsworth's intimations on what Kevin Morris calls the poet's "Imagination-Catholicism-medievalism nexus" (59) are difficult to distinguish. While these writers might have expressed aversion toward medieval religion they were certainly not anti-medievalist, which, for Morris, calls their anti-Catholicism into question (61).

Simmons identifies Romantic-era drama as a conduit for medievalist representations into popular culture. While certain plays of the era are structured around anti-medievalist assumptions—George Colman's *Feudal Times* (Norman) and Joanna Baillie's two Ethwald plays (Saxon) present oppressive and superstitious aspects of medieval England that are not conducive to Romantic nostalgia (Simmons, *Popular Medievalism* 81)—others, like Colman's *The Battle of Hexam* and *The Iron Chest*, negotiate between a Middle Ages that is deserving of nostalgic idealization or rationalization and a Gothic genre that does not eschew problematic allusions to the medieval past (Simmons, *Popular Medievalism* 99). Certain Romantic-era playwrights incorporated the gothic into their dramas to offer audiences escape from the real dangers of their time. Others used its familiar tropes and devices to engage with this turmoil indirectly. Baillie, for whom teaching about the moral life appealed as a cornerstone of dramatic pedagogy,

employs the gothic to demonstrate for her audience the consequences of confounding Christian and worldly values. Christine Colon argues that embodying passion in its extreme forms would inspire in her viewers the desire to tame their own passions (129-30). Colon's choice to read modern gothic narratives positively adds complexity to Simmons's thesis on gothicism and medievalism:<sup>18</sup> while the gothic *qua* gothic translates negatively for both critics, Baillie's moralistic vision makes the gothic a place worth inhabiting, at least for a time. Seen in a different way, though, squaring the gothic with morality may well be interpreted as an act of medievalism, a positive discourse for Simmons.

Yet it was above all through the medium of poetry that Romanticism negotiated historical memory. James Pereiro's triumvirate of Romantic-era writers who did most to prepare the way for the religious revival is Scott, Wordsworth, and Coleridge: Scott elevated his readers' consciousness to a higher plane and inspired within them a fondness for deep tradition, Wordsworth molded emotional tempers amenable to a religious revival, and Coleridge constructed a philosophical apparatus that organized Scott's nostalgia and Wordsworth's sentiment (79). Wordsworth felt that "Percy's *Reliques* did much to restore simplicity and sincerity to poetry" (Fairchild, *Romantic Quest* 278).<sup>19</sup> Blake vouched for Chatterton's and Macpherson's credibility, believing, with the steadfast trust of faith, "that what they say is Ancient Is so" (783). Appeals to poetry are significant here because early-Romantic articulations of metaphysics, philosophy, and theology underscore the poetry many of these writers produced. Taking their religiosity seriously entails seeing the poetic as a catalyst of religious experience, wherein the theological and the aesthetic are combined in a meaningful union of internal and

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<sup>18</sup> The Gothic, Simmons suggests, displays the Middle Ages pejoratively, while medievalism promotes a positive view, "a world in which the reader might desire to have a part" (*Popular Medievalism* 145).

<sup>19</sup> Great was his admiration for Percy, yet Wordsworth did not hesitate to condemn Macpherson on the grounds of forgery (Fairchild, *Romantic Quest* 281-2).

external (Prickett 5). As Stephen Prickett notes, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's "poetic 'creativity'" (7) was actually a reclaiming of a peculiarly Christian form of expression (7). In his "Essay Supplementary to the Preface," Wordsworth aligns "religion—whose element is infinitude . . . submitting herself to circumscription and reconciled to substitutions; and poetry—ethereal and transcendent, yet incapable to sustain her existence without sensuous incarnation" (qtd. in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* 395, ellipses in original), a relationship later iterated by poet-leader of the Oxford Movement John Keble, whose pious verse weaved together his Christian audience and Tractarian cause.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Oxford Movement and the Pre-Reformation *Ethos***

Keble shunned what many church reformers considered a stale, flavorless rationalism left over from the eighteenth century. Having reached a general consensus that High Churchmanship failed to signify as a "model for the Church of all time" (Pereiro 81), many Tractarians sought to reassemble fundamental aspects of the "primitive Catholic *ethos*" (Pereiro 81), an *ethos* that was at once a substantive locus of principles and doctrine that could stand the test of time and a fragile collection of archaisms fading into an obscure past (Pereiro 81). The Tractarians noted well the religious facility of Romantic poetry in making the absent present; Keble went so far as to suggest that the Romantics had reclaimed this Catholic *ethos* and delivered it to the world in God's preferred medium: poetry (Pereiro 97). Keble prized tradition, but one that reached back beyond the eighteenth century, one that was steeped in mystery and demanded a level of reverence lost to nineteenth-century mainline Anglicanism (Prickett 95). His own reverence for tradition inclined him toward *religious* Immemorialism, which was rapidly gaining popularity among those who yearned for change within the Church of England. Convinced that the

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<sup>20</sup> Fairchild considers Keble's *Christian Year* the transitional point from Romanticism to the Oxford Movement ("Religious Revival" 333).



Anglican Church inherited in the Church of Rome, Keble delivered his famous Assize sermon on 14 July 1833 on National Apostasy, and so christened the Oxford Movement. The church was thus made, in the words of John Henry Newman and the spirit of Coleridge, “poetical” (qtd. in Prickett 119). In 1841 Newman<sup>21</sup> shocked the Protestant world with the publication of his infamous Tract XC, which he penned, in part, from fear of heresy. Upon looking more closely into the writings of the patristics, whom he admired profoundly, he peered into the “mirror” (Newman, *Apologia* 108) of history and saw a Monophysite<sup>22</sup> leering back—“a spirit rising from the troubled waters of the old world” (Newman, *Apologia* 109), a distant past that did not seem so distant to Newman.<sup>23</sup>

From the 1830s onward, thanks in large part to Catholic Emancipation in 1829, there was introduced into the Church of England a pre-Reformation *ethos* which expressed itself in embodied ceremonial practices within its services and the creation of monastic houses outside them. The Oxford Movement put into motion a particular form of reverence not seen since the Reformation, a piety characterized by an increased sense of the centrality of sacraments like the Eucharist and confession, a renewed respect for the religious life, an encouragement to study medieval saints’ lives, and a growth in religious mysticism that reflected medieval ecclesiastical controversies over devotional standardization. According to John Shelton Reed,

[F]rom early in the course of the Oxford Movement, the impulse to restore old churches and to build new ones on old models became identified in the public mind and in fact with Tractarianism. So did the impulse to ornament the ministers of those churches in pre-Reformation style, to restore the worship of the Church to old patterns, to reintroduce

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<sup>21</sup> Seeing Rome produced overwhelming feelings of awe in Newman. He removed his shoes in the manner of a medieval pilgrim before walking into the city (Morse-Boycott 53).

<sup>22</sup> Monophysitism is the Christological position that Christ possesses one nature—either wholly divine or only human—as opposed to the orthodox position, established at the Council of Calcedon in 451, that Christ maintained two natures, one divine and one human, after the Incarnation.

<sup>23</sup> Later, in a famous 1852 sermon at the synod of Westminster, Newman preached, “I listen, I hear the sound of voices, grave and musical renewing the old chant, with which Augustine greeted Ethelbert in the free air upon the Kentish strand . . . it is the coming of a second spring; it is a restoration in the moral world” (“Second Spring” 175).

old practices like sacramental confession and old institutions like religious orders, to revitalize or (in some cases) to reintroduce old beliefs and doctrines—apostolic succession of bishops, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the invocation of the saints, [and] Purgatory. (28)

There has been much debate over exactly which *ethos* the Oxford Movement was determined to recall. Some critics situate Tractarian interest solely in the early church and thus exclude their work from discussions of medievalism. This claim is untenable, I suggest, because it purports to distinguish absolutely the early church of Augustine from the church of the high and late Middle Ages. Augustinian thought loomed larger than that of any other theologian throughout the entirety of the Middle Ages; indeed, as Anthony Kemp has pointed out, Augustine's Christian history (built in conjunction with Eusebius's history before him) constructed an historical domain within which subsequent medieval histories were confined (4). J. Derek Holmes acknowledges that Newman's first love was the primitive church, but he suggests that this could only be understood in light of *later* Christian history; isolated, these early expressions form no coherent theological system for Newman to usefully adopt (205). The Oxford Movement, then, must be included when thinking about religious medievalism.

Critics of the Tractarians both in the nineteenth century and now have tended to brand the Oxford Movement as an escapist, abstract, disembodied enterprise that was deliberately removed from social life. Its advocates were too clerical and academic to share any real connection with the common people (Skinner 1-3). But one fundamental aim of the religious revival was to rehabilitate the spirit of *corpus mysticum* to combat the individuality of the Reformation. Reintegration into the shared communion in Christ's mystical body seemed a pragmatic solution to the problem (Pereiro 62-3). S. A. Skinner calls attention to the political work of the Oxford

Movement, whose members, he suggests, were preoccupied with social issues.<sup>24</sup> The Tractarians expounded an “incarnational politics” (Skinner 10) that welded together theology and social activism. Tractarians like Newman and Pusey stressed the church’s responsibility to society and bemoaned the secular danger of the state. It was the church’s obligation to Christianize the state (Skinner 90-2), and they justified this mission in their claim to find and resurrect a religious institution continuous with the primitive church, a church which for Newman had always been Anglican since Rome had veered at the Council of Trent but which was becoming more Catholic with each warning he perceived from the Fathers (Culler 93). The Catholic faith, announced Keble, is “the continued presence and manifestation of Jesus Christ in the world, through the medium of that society which is called His mystical body” (qtd. in Skinner 111).

The Oxford Movement initiated and encouraged a general taste for ritualism that had found its way into the highest London society by mid-century. St. Thomas, Regent Street, the prototypical Anglo-Catholic Victorian church, carried on as it might have done prior to the Reformation. A visitor might have been taken aback, Reed observes, by its use of Gregorian chant, or by such devotional signaling as genuflecting, bowing, and crossing (John Shelton Reed 6). By far the most common Anglo-Catholic devotion by mid-century (and well beyond) was the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, an extra-liturgical devotion that Mary Heimann considers “as distinctly Catholic as a service in a Protestant country could be” (50). A practice that meditates on transubstantiation, Benediction in Victorian churches largely followed medieval precedent, with minor differences (Heimann 46-7).<sup>25</sup> Having witnessed Anglo-Catholicism, the

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<sup>24</sup> Inspired by the Oxford Movement, a large contingent of Anglo-Catholic “slum priests” (John Shelton Reed 13) dedicated themselves to the service of the poor.

<sup>25</sup> One of the only differences Heimann cites with any degree of specificity to distinguish the Victorian practice of Benediction from its medieval predecessors is the “O Salutaris Hostia” (47), but, interestingly, this Eucharistic hymn was written by Aquinas for the feast of Corpus Christi. While the legitimacy of the difference Heimann establishes here is beyond doubt, it does show, perhaps, how modern novelty in the realm of sacraments cannot stray too far away from medieval precedent.

Oxford Movement, and ritualism, Benjamin Jowett wrote in 1865 of “a sort of aesthetico-Catholic revival going on” (qtd. in John Shelton Reed 61), one tinged with sacramental devotion, processions with relics, Eucharistic real presence, prayers to the Blessed Virgin and the saints, pilgrimages, and belief in purgatory. Pusey, an enthusiastic proponent of the Anglican Church’s adoption of medieval ceremonials, came to embody the ritualist arm of the movement in many churchgoers’ imaginations. A “Puseyite” came to denote an “excessively ritualist believer” (Mason 118) for many High Church Anglicans, while Pusey the man was held responsible for such unconventional behavior as wearing hair-shirts, fasting disproportionately and unnecessarily, and communicating with Rome as a secret agent (Mason 118).<sup>26</sup> His 1843 sermon “The Real Objective Presence of Christ in the Eucharist” received immediate condemnation and led to a two-year suspension from preaching at Oxford. Frederick Faber was one of many Oxonians thought to be “tainted . . . with Puseyism” (qtd. in Morse-Boycott 95) in the 1840s. On top of fasting, taking communion frequently, and supporting auricular confession, Faber wore a knotted horse-hair cord as a penance. Saturating himself in Catholicism, he wished to run his parish in the spirit of medieval saints, in particular St. Phillip Neri.<sup>27</sup> Medievalizing his parish was to Faber like “pouring old wine into a new bottle” (Morse-Boycott 98).

Ritualism, or the manifestation of aspects of pre-Reformation theology and liturgy in the Church of England, was in many ways the outgrowth of the Oxford Movement. Some early-nineteenth-century reformers, such as members of the High Church Hackney Phalanx, believed that the Book of Common Prayer was, in the words of bishop Lloyd of Oxford, “but a reflection

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<sup>26</sup> Rumors spread that Pusey had absconded to Rome—he had been spotted climbing a ladder to hear confessions at St. Peter’s (John Shelton Reed 48).

<sup>27</sup> Followers and detractors of the movement frequently made explicit parallels between individual Tractarians and medieval saints and theologians: Cardinal Manning and Augustine, Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Augustine, and Joseph Leycester Lyne and Ignatius of Loyola were often yoked together.

of medieval and primitive devotion, still embodied in its Latin form in the Roman service books” (qtd. in Yates 31); in such cases, ritualism was cast as a survival as opposed to revival. Still, many of the movement’s enthusiasts and propagators viewed their effort above all as one of recovery, where aesthetics wedded with scholarly research to showcase, first, the positive contributions of the medieval Church, and second, the theological and practical reasons why it would contribute positively to nineteenth-century life (Yates 41-2). Off-shoots of the Oxford Movement abound as this effort gained popularity. The Ecclesiological Movement, which ran parallel to Tractarianism, combined medievalism and Romanticism to facilitate ecclesiastical reform (Yates 44). Ecclesiologists called for such things as stone altars for liturgical use—one of many alarming “‘popish’ innovations” (Yates 52) that gestured rather too decidedly toward a belief in Eucharistic real presence for its critics. Other markers of ritualist churches included priestly vestments, lighted candles, surpliced choir with music, frequent (even daily) Holy Communion, incense, and rood screens. The more public aspects of renewed Catholic worship include recitation of the rosary, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, participation in pilgrimages, and Marian devotions.

By the passing of the Public Worship Regulation Act of 1874, most dioceses across England could claim a ritualist parish (Yates 83). But this general thriving was accompanied by its share of opposition that was encouraged by the press. Lord Shaftesbury’s famous lament following a service at Epiphany in 1866 epitomized the voice of ritualism’s sternest critics: there was “such a scene of theatrical gymnastics, of singing, screaming, genuflections . . . clouds upon clouds of incense . . . one was astounded at the close, that there was no fall of the curtain” (qtd. in Yates 96, ellipses in original). Less frequently, yet all the more notable for their violence, these kinds of sentiments sparked riots: W. J. E. Bennett, priest-in-charge of St. Paul’s,

Knightsbridge, and St. Barnabas, Pimlico, was threatened with his life by anti-ritualist protestors, who vandalized his parsonage, mocked him in the street, and eventually forced him to resign (Yates 92).

### **The Medieval Religious Body in Victorian Literature**

Thus in the teeth of vehement anti-Catholic sentiment in England in the 1840s arose a countermovement that explored the ways in which modern people could “liv[e] mediievally” (Matthews 96). But for Lord Acton, who in 1859 pronounced that the great dualism of history consists in the divide between antiquity and the Middle Ages, medievalism is so pervasive in the modern era—and in the nineteenth century especially—that it is, in the words of Leslie Workman, “almost too endemic to be recognized” (34). Matthews suggests that medievalism trickles even into those nineteenth-century novels, poems, plays, and essays that seem most absorbed in their own cultural moments (141). Naming Dante “the central man of all the world” (qtd. in Milbank 1), Ruskin found in the medieval poet’s metaphysics a way of articulating his own lamentations over the state of contemporary England. Dante’s works were the site of a long-lost “theological realism” (Milbank 5) that had been rendered all but impossible in the modern industrial world. Francesco Marroni suggests that the Dante with whom the nineteenth century was enamored was largely a Carlylean one (2). Ruskin honored Dante in the spirit of Carlyle, for whom “Dante speaks to the noble, the pure, the great, in all times and places . . . Dante burns as a pure star, fixed there in the firmament, at which the great and the high of all ages kindle themselves: he is the possession of all the chosen of the world for uncounted time” (qtd. in Marroni 2). Victorian scholars have long shown interest in teasing out references to Dante in Victorian novels. From Wilkie Collins to Charlotte Bronte, novelists found in the *Inferno* a doomed world they felt paralleled the social unrest and socioeconomic turbulence of

their own time. Algernon Charles Swinburne, like Macaulay, admired Dante's materialism: "Give Dante a moral image," Swinburne observed, and "he will make of it a living man" (qtd. in Harrison, *Swinburne's Medievalism* 12). Swinburne familiarized himself with texts from the Middle Ages. In the spirit of his uncle, the Earl of Ashburnham, who was an expert reader of medieval manuscripts, he began collecting medieval documents and even writing Latin hymns in various medieval styles in 1859. He subsequently incorporated their content, theology and all, into his poetry (Harrison, *Swinburne's Medievalism* 6-9).

Like many Victorian Catholic intellectuals, Hopkins carried out his repudiation of England's religious tradition by adopting Carlyle's and Ruskin's views of an idealized preindustrial society while at the same time reading the work of medieval theologians (Muller 3). The "sacramental landscape" (Muller 4) he inscribes in his poems demonstrates this fusion of past and present, as vestiges of the Pre-Raphaelites' medievalistic aesthetic and the clerical influences of Faber mingle with the theologies of founding Jesuit Ignatius of Loyola, thirteenth-century Franciscan Duns Scotus, and medieval German mystic Gertrude of Helfta (Muller 7-8). Though a great deal of research on Hopkins's poetry has tried to claim him either for modernism or Victorianism, Franco Marucci argues that he is a thorough medievalist who reconstructs medieval categories of meaning. Victorian codes, which are at variance with what he terms "semantico-symbolic" (Marucci 94) codes that structure medieval discourse, deny the fusion of signifier and signified Marucci attributes to medieval semiotics. Hopkins, deriving his philosophy of aesthetics and religion from Coleridge (like so many Victorian religionists did), slowly divested himself of contemporary forms and styles until, after 1870, his poetry was thoroughly medieval (Marucci 112).

Though critics like Emma Mason locate Christina Rossetti within the London ritualist scene (116), Esther Hu and Mary Arsenau feel as though the devotional aspect of Rossetti's poetics has been underestimated in recent scholarship (Hu 155; Arsenau 1).<sup>28</sup> Rossetti's plight as a female artist, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, is to resolve herself bodily and aesthetically to a life where strength shares an inverse relationship with pain (573-5). Hu challenges this popular feminist view by placing Rossetti's works in their religious, specifically Tractarian, context, wherein human suffering is not an expression of individual temperament or pathology but a means to attain Christ's presence (156). Rossetti's religious verse, then—what Arsenau calls her “incarnational poetics” (7)—was not indicative of mystic ravings but was rather born of an Anglo-Catholicism shaped by Tractarian theology and aesthetics. The Incarnation, which activates symbolic potential in the world of things, elevates the poet's expression of poetic symbolism to an act of devotion, a notion consistent with Tractarian aesthetics (Arsenau 33). In this way, Rossetti contributes to what Arsenau views as “a pervasive Victorian revival of typological and sacramental ways of thinking about nature and art” (102).

The poetry of Robert Browning teems with religious allusions that reveal the poet's intimate knowledge of sacred doctrine and a profound interest in Catholic matters (Hecimovich 261). As a “vaguely Dissenting . . . vaguely liberal” (Heady 147) non-conformist, Browning did not wish to “catholiciz[e]” (Hecimovich 261) the Church of England, but his awareness of ecclesiastical affairs led him to say of his medieval poem “The Tomb at St. Praxed's” that it was “just the thing for the time—what with the Oxford business, and the Camden Society and other embroilments” (Browning 35-6). Browning placed himself in the thick of the religious debate by

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<sup>28</sup> The diagnosis of Dr. Charles Hare echoed that of several different physicians who observed Rossetti in her early years: Christina was “more or less out of her mind (suffering, in fact, from a form of insanity, I believe a kind of religious mania)” (qtd. in Mason 120).



staging a mock sacramental ritual that involves inverse transubstantiation and secularized resurrection. In the poem, sacramental ministration—a subject dear to the heart of the Tractarians—becomes an opportunity for self-indulgence (Hecimovich 263-6). But his radicalism with regard to religious matters did not always translate into deliberate heresy. Emily Heady, who calls Browning a theologian, points out that in poems like “Fra Lippo Lippi” the doctrine of the Incarnation occupies a space between the high theology generally attributed to the Oxford Movement and the pragmatism of the scientific materialists (147). Heady suggests that the Prior in “Fra Lippo” misunderstands Lippo’s elevation of the flesh precisely because it is radically orthodox: the sixteenth-century painter’s incarnational statement of the union of flesh and spirit corrects the modern proclivity to separate these elements (151).

Matthew Arnold uses medievalism to comment on what his father Thomas Arnold famously called “the march of history.” If we are to be free and know how to contribute to the great progression of history, we must have a sound understanding of both the present and the past. The Middle Ages, while it lacked certain modern advantages, has its place in developmental history, and it is the duty of the teacher of history to illuminate the place it occupied and the reasons it was unsustainable (Zelenka 33-4). Arnold dramatizes the medieval spirit in his poem *Tristram and Iseult*: the image of the Celt embodies liveliness, passionate sensuality, emotion, and adventure, while the Christian ascetic is more restrained, spiritual, and prone to embrace suffering and the death of the body. Ruth Zelenka suggests that the latter resides in the character of Iseult, who is caught inside the medieval imagination which prizes suffering over progress (42); ascetic Christianity enervates Tristram’s Celtic passion, as he overvalues it and stymies progress (37). Ultimately for Arnold, to “edify” (Zelenka 39) is to “modernize” (Zelenka 39).

Ruskin's notion of "theological realism" derived from the Middle Ages extends into Victorian fiction, perhaps the nineteenth-century literary form least likely to appropriate medieval theology. Recent work includes Judith Johnston's reexamination of George Eliot's feminism through hagiography: medieval hagiography acts as a mode or mediating space in which Dorothea can shift between her ordinary body and the extraordinary body of St. Theresa (56).<sup>29</sup> In keeping with the aesthetic dimension of the Oxford Movement, which itself was a movement engendered in the poetic imagination of the Romantics, a flurry of didactic novels appeared on the literary scene to negotiate contemporary religious controversies. The novel offered a fresh, popular medium through which to communicate pre-Reformation thought and recreate the medieval liturgy (Rhodes 26) in a way that is, in Newman's phrase, "really new, while it is old" (qtd. in Rhodes 25).<sup>30</sup> But didactic implies that these novels were consciously—if not zealously—written in a pro-Tractarian vein, which fails to recognize the pervasiveness of these issues in the literary culture of the time. Royal Rhodes makes the case that all Victorian writers negotiated (however tangentially for some) with the theological issues of the day regardless of their status as religious novelist (1). Still, some of them *were* consciously Tractarian and participated in what Rhodes calls a "reeschatologizing" (7) effort that revived the pre-Reformation theology that the Enlightenment had discredited. Politics and religion coalesce in the fiction of Charlotte Yonge, the unofficial novelist of the Oxford Movement. While she is

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<sup>29</sup> Matthews suggests that Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, in particular *Mary Barton*, deal extensively with the Middle Ages in various forms and demonstrate a thorough knowledge of medieval literature thanks in part to her husband, who was a medieval scholar. The couple possessed an impressive collection of medieval materials in their library. Drawn from contemporary Norman-Saxon histories, Gaskell validates certain groups of people as authentically English, as the historical accuracy of characters' medieval English dialects, for example, serves to measure their nationalism (Matthews 153-5).

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Wiseman's hagiographical novel *Fabiola; or, The Church of the Catacombs* enjoyed a diverse reception: it was acclaimed by the general public, the clergy, and even the pope. Reversing popular Victorian conceptualizations of the zeitgeist, Wiseman viewed this reception as "a great triumph of the 'spirit of the age'" (qtd. in Rhodes 113).

best known for *The Heir of Redclyffe*, Sarah Wakefield draws attention to *The Little Duke*, a child's history of England that looks favorably upon the Norman aristocracy. An Anglo-Catholic who was also staunchly in favor of the English nobility, Yonge attempts to vindicate the Norman conquerors by portraying them as "model citizens" (Wakefield 66). Regarding religion specifically, Yonge weaves subtle references to the sacraments, above all the Eucharist (Barbara Dennis 55), into the subtext of her novels. Encoding her language avoids overt references to doctrine, which would have been perceived by many Tractarians—most importantly, in Yonge's case, by Keble, whom she revered as a father (Barbara Dennis 39)—as an indiscretion (Barbara Dennis 2).

The Victorian theological novel, which was much more popular and pervasive than is often realized, reconstructs historical narrative in ways that alter and undermine the epistemological speculations of the contemporary secular historical novel (Burstein 3). If the Reformation destabilized history, then Catholic history, so these novelists claim, can be seen as British history (Burstein 16), despite Scott's historical view that the Catholic past was void in a Protestant world (Burstein 25). Disenchanted and emptied of meaning, the medieval past—insofar as it can be thought about in a post-Reformation context—is suspended in a state of "ruins and broken icons" (Burstein 50) in Scott's novel *The Abbot*. Miriam Burstein's theological novelists interact with the medieval past on one of two levels: some approach the Middle Ages cautiously, intending to retrieve the monstrous "Protestant . . . counter-element" (54), while others appeal to what they saw as an embattled faith ensconced in a living history (142). As we can see, ambivalences like that which Burstein describes underwrite medievalism discourse, both in the writings of nineteenth-century medievalists themselves and in the scholarship that analyzes their writings.

Each of the authors I investigate in this study uses the body of Christ as the central mediating symbol of his respective text. Christ's body is the text's ideal body whose permeable contours are nevertheless determinate, combining the best of classical and grotesque in a dynamic fulcrum of supernatural power. Recent scholarly emphasis on material criticism presents an opportunity for a timely reassessment of nineteenth-century efforts to re-theologize a world in which the body had been de-theologized, efforts that participate in and add to well-established trends recognizing Romantic-era writers to have been socially engaged and that challenge the hegemonic narrative of secularization in Victorian studies. Though the transmission of information from the Middle Ages has always varied depending on the specific cultural needs of the moment—and, indeed, the specific personal needs of the writer—the works I treat share fundamental narrative trajectories that deploy constructs of sacred bodies strategically, in ways that their authors may have imagined or wanted medieval theology to signify. But each text reserves its own methodology of inscription. They all desire a better world, a world in which the body is once again afforded a transcendental capacity that overcomes dualism in spiritualizing mere matter: Keats celebrates the sacred potential in man to become exalted by means of his very fleshiness, as Madeline and Porphyro meld together bodily and spiritually and escape the dreary castle *en route* to a more promising future; Byron spiritualizes his hero's journey to unite with his beloved, as Manfred encounters the true depths of the self and develops the ability to transcend the material world; Dickens exposes the consequences of removing spiritual responsibility from public institutions, as Chancery's unsustainable absence gives way to the presence of a happier institution; and Wilde reveals the dangers of cavalier *avant-garde* theories of the autonomous artwork, as he conjoins the painting of Dorian and Dorian himself in a way that reveals the sacred obligations of artistic enterprise.

Applying religious medievalism to these texts allow fresh readings to emerge, readings that testify to the facility of the medieval to articulate solutions to modern problems.

Chapter Two: Medieval Veneration, Romantic Translation: Keats, Relics, and the  
Exaltation of the Body in *The Eve of St. Agnes*

Criticism of John Keats's metaphysically "gorgeous" (Wasserman 16), symbolically rich poem *The Eve of St. Agnes* has always been a house divided. Is the poem a metaphysical exploration of "high seriousness" (Wasserman 17) meant to embrace Christianity, or is it an ironized rejection of it? Should Porphyro be read as a self-indulgent voyeur who intrudes, unwanted and uninvited, into Madeline's chamber, or is it possible for us to see him as he desires to be seen, as a devoted lover responding to his innocent love's call? Does Madeline choose to flee the castle or does Porphyro leave her no choice? Questions regarding Keats's motivation for writing, Porphyro's motivation for looking, and Madeline's motivation for leaving have haunted scholarship on this controversial poem for half a century. Critical interpretation on the whole has remained for the past few decades delineated into two broad camps. The first has followed the precedent established by Earl Wasserman and the "metaphysical critics" (Stillinger 52) (a title attributed to them pejoratively by Jack Stillinger), who take the poem's religiosity seriously and see in its appropriation of religious language a theologizing enterprise. Wasserman's metaphysical version of the poem is a vision in which Keats melds together the spiritual Madeline and the human Porphyro by way of a mystic, ecstatic, transcendental union (30). Here the agency belongs to Madeline, who raises the "merely human Porphyro" (Wasserman 21) through an experience of "superhuman intensity" (Wasserman 21) to immortality, a state in which she always-already consists. Alone she is "self-contained" (Wasserman 21) and the "perfection of form" (Wasserman 21), but the miracle of the poem occurs when Porphyro's

corporeal nature, raised to the ethereal plane in which Madeline dwells, is allowed to unite with the spiritual Madeline. The second camp, in the tradition of Stillinger, has favored material readings that emphasize Porphyro's villainy and Madeline's victimization. According to Stillinger, what the "metaphysical critics" fail to see is, first, that Keats's use of religious language matters only insofar as it participates in a long poetic tradition that has employed such language to hyperbolize feelings of love (53-4), and second, that the pleasure Porphyro experiences is "earthly" (53) rather than "spiritual" (53), with "a grosser, rather than a finer, tone" (53). Far from an affirmation of romantic love, this "serious poem" (Stillinger 62) looks on as Porphyro, more villain than pilgrim, takes advantage of Madeline's self-deception and "rape[s]" (Stillinger 57) the "tongueless nightingale"<sup>31</sup> while his victim idealizes him. Though Stillinger conceptualizes Keats's strained lovers as protagonist and antagonist, he nevertheless warns that we should not entirely sympathize with Madeline—after all, "Madeline the self-hoodwinked dreamer" (63) endangered herself with superstitious fantasies. He does make it a point, however, to repeatedly condemn Porphyro's actions, calling them "wrong" (Stillinger 62) at best and "evil" (Stillinger 58) at worst.

Studies that have since taken up these general topics have naturally expanded, amended, modified, and qualified the arguments that characterized the Wasserman-Stillinger debate, yet certain assumptions have proved curiously resilient. Contrary to the claims of most scholars who have written on the poem, I hope to show that acknowledging the poem's materiality does not of necessity preclude its spiritualism any more than seeking for its ethereality inevitably dissolves its matter. I have perceived a critical undercurrent in treatments of *The Eve of St. Agnes* that announces Keats's secularizing move for the very reasons that I argue reinforce his indebtedness

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<sup>31</sup> Keats, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, line 206. Subsequent citations to this work are cited in the text as *ESA*, followed by the line number.

to medieval Christian figurations of living materiality. Wasserman's argument, though foundational in its consideration of the supernatural implications of the poem, has abetted a critical tendency to read into its miracle a vague spiritualism that enlists terms like "mysticism" and "transcendental union" without direct reference to the religious traditions that might structure Keats's medievalism. Similarly, Stillinger's discrimination of Porphyro's actions as "gross" has encouraged others to distinguish absolutely between matter and spirit, a dualistic conceptualization made easy, perhaps, once Keats's use of religious language is dismissed. However, the Romantics inherited the Christian imagination that perceives the physical world "as both manifest and covert, literal and figurative" (Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* 36). While certain scholars have described Romantic poets' engagement with medieval religion merely as opaque and atmospheric (Ortenberg 37), my reading of *The Eve of St. Agnes* takes into account Kevin Morris's insistence that religious medievalism in the Romantic era involved the medieval church and the language of its theology (1). I want to suggest that reading the poem in the traditional theological context to which it lends itself—that is, a mediievally-inspired cultural milieu the rules of which are theological and within which bodies think, act, and live in medieval ways—will not only assist in bringing together dichotomous critical approaches to the poem but may provide answers to the confounding questions with which this chapter began: Keats's motivations to write, Porphyro's motivations to look, and Madeline's motivations to leave. Approaching the poem in a way that reads bodies "mediievally" (Matthews 96) may indeed serve to vindicate the decisions of all three.

Specifically, I argue that *The Eve of St. Agnes* can be best understood when read as a modern articulation of medieval relic devotion. In a fourth-century homily on St. Theodore the Recruit, Gregory of Nyssa describes why and how his congregants should approach the saint's



remains: “For, as if it is the same body, still alive and flourishing, those beholding it embrace it with the eyes, the mouth, the ears. And when they have approached it with all the senses, they pour tears out over it from piety and emotion” (qtd. in Krueger 5). Indeed, Porphyro’s multi-sensory performance schematically reproduces this description, but while Andrew Bennett has privileged the visual,<sup>32</sup> Rhonda Ray Kerckmar the oral,<sup>33</sup> and Heidi Thomson the aural<sup>34</sup> aspects of Madeline and Porphyro’s relationship, no study has yet attempted to holistically analyze the poem’s sensory *tour de force*.<sup>35</sup> Cycling the poem through processes of secularization has stripped Porphyro of his status as adoring and devoted pilgrim, divested his actions of all sacred intention and obligation, and left his character vulnerable to condemnation and disgust; Madeline has been on the one hand elevated to a supernatural object without adequate explanations as to the sources of her power, while demoted on the other to a human object without agency; and the lovers’ consummation has been variously understood as a sexual encounter without grace, an epistemological dupe, a path to disenchantment, and a linguistic failure. Reading *The Eve of St. Agnes* as a medieval saint’s *vita*, I argue that the poem narrativizes and thus recreates a discourse of relic veneration which reinscribes, in the very act of writing, the salvific power of the cult of saints into its “pseudo-medieval world” (Garofalo 356). Such an inscription elevates the lovers’ bodies to holiness, Madeline’s by nature, Porphyro’s by proximity to and physical contact with Madeline’s body. Conceptualizing the lovers’ consummation as a union bound by the laws of

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<sup>32</sup> See Bennett, “‘Hazardous Magic’: Vision and Inscription in Keats’s ‘The Eve of St. Agnes.’”

<sup>33</sup> See Kerckmar, “Keats’s Violation of Romance: Transgression in ‘The Eve of St. Agnes.’”

<sup>34</sup> See Thomson, “Eaves-Dropping on ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’: Madeline’s Sensual Ear and Porphyro’s Ancient Ditty.”

<sup>35</sup> Unity is achieved through a “quasi-religious” (Boulger 254) Eucharistic performance, according to James Boulger: Madeline submits willingly on the bed-altar (256), whereupon Porphyro-as-priest (257) claims the agency from Madeline (256), initiates the transubstantiative climax, and together they gain “a glimpse of an existence possible above the world of flesh, space, and time” (258) by his melting into her dream. Boulger’s unity, however, amounts to “sacred parody” (256). While this reading may come near the kind of holistic analysis of the poem’s sensuous aspects to which I refer, its explications merely touch upon Keats’s complex use of sensation that I will examine more closely in this chapter and view from a more historically medieval theological perspective.

medieval theology permits us to examine more closely one of Keats's humanistic *and* spiritual aspirations: the divinization of love through the exaltation of the fleshly body.

Activating a body as relic requires that that body be “made literary” (Clymer 92). Lacking a narrative, the body is deprived of its meaning, on the one hand, or it is never assigned a meaning, on the other (Clymer 92). A relic depends upon external documentation to declare its authenticity (Geary 5-6) and tell its story. Theft of relics, or their surreptitious movement from one location to another, was a common way relics obtained their identity in the Middle Ages (Geary 8). Written accounts of relic movements, known as *translationes* (relic translations), are in many cases the focal point of saints' *vitae* and tell stories about how the saint, acting through—or more precisely *as*—her relic, sanctions her possession by a desiring pilgrim, willingly undergoes the act of theft, and agrees to be taken to a new and more desirable community (Geary 153-4). Reading *The Eve of St. Agnes* as a *vita* of a modern saint—one which chronicles the pilgrim's visitation and ritual performance at the saint's shrine, the awakening or *elevatio* of the desired relic, the *translatio* away from the saint's original home, and the implied *depositio* in a new shrine—reveals Keats's transcendental vision of Madeline as a *holy* object, Porphyro as a *devoted* thief, and the human body as a thing which has the capacity to become exalted by means of its very materiality.

### **Christianity and Medievalism in Keats**

Romantic historicism has been prey to secularizing theses in the second half of the twentieth century. M. H. Abrams's book *Natural Supernaturalism* documents at length the theological substructure of Romantic thought and detects in the period's poetic effusions “a displaced and reconstituted theology, or else a secularized form of devotional experience” (*Natural Supernaturalism* 65). To salvage traditional religion, Romantic writers had to alter it.

This is in a real sense what the modern in general *is* for Abrams (*Natural Supernaturalism* 66), but the Romantic era in particular is notable for its concerted effort “to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine” (*Natural Supernaturalism* 68).<sup>36</sup> Keats’s poetry in particular has been a popular target for secularization theses. Humanism replaces Christianity in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Ronald Sharp maintains, which translates into a “humanized religion of beauty” (38) wherein religious language is stripped of its metaphysical meaning and used only to counterpoint the poem’s alternative religion (38-9). Sharp conceives of the poem’s religious evacuation in terms of replacement (the human in place of the metaphysical), but for John Collick nothing fills the void, as Keats’s haphazard assemblage of hollowed-out pseudo-Catholic images (43) is meant to demonstrate the inability of Madeline and Porphyro to unite in the poem’s “oppressive and authoritarian quasi-Gothic world” (42). There is no replacement here—only an evacuative process that precludes unity and obfuscates meaning.<sup>37</sup>

Keats’s critique of modern-day Anglicanism should not be reduced to mere opposition, John Savarese observes (389). Taking seriously Charles Taylor’s claim in *A Secular Age* that secularism is an outgrowth of Christian logic (18-9), Savarese reasons that Keats’s “secularist program” (390) does not depart from the Christian paradigm but participates in its inevitable progression toward “orthodox” (395) secularism. Savarese is not alone in arguing for Keats’s secular-religious poetics. Mark Canuel reads the poems’ acts of worship as Keats’s way of circumventing the need to impose religious doctrine on his readers (220). His poetry always

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<sup>36</sup> Secularizing arguments like Abrams’s have influenced the way we think about genre, for example. Rising interest in orality in the early nineteenth century led to the resurrection of the term “legend” (Simmons, “Golden Legends” 233) in altered form, divorced from its traditional connotations. Legends were stripped of their devotional meanings, Clare Simmons observes, and assumed a humorous tone that lightened the gravity of religious ritual (“Golden Legends” 233).

<sup>37</sup> Yet another example of secularization in *The Eve of St. Agnes* is Gail McMurray Gibson’s discussion of the Christian Annunciation. Keats invokes and ironizes the Annunciation (the moment of Incarnation when matter is endowed with spiritual properties), implicating it within a human drama (Gibson 42-3). Porphyro’s “fire” (Gibson 45), for example, is “human rather than celestial” (Gibson 45).

exceeds the bounds of any single system of devotion, but this does not amount to satire, Canuel assures: Keats desires to neither satirize religion nor convert his readers but to construct “responses” (224) to various religious controversies that navigate a middle way (224). *The Eve of St. Agnes* bears out this peculiar theory of toleration, as Madeline’s superstition in fact demonstrates the poem’s opposition to those very superstitions (Canuel 227-8). Canuel suggests that belief is repurposed in a way that condemns conventional religious practices, thus the poem “free[s] [the saint] from . . . traditional kinships established through blood and belief” (233).

Amid a bevy of Romantic-era studies that toe the secularist line, Robert Ryan asserts that it was in the arena of religion that Romantic poets sought to stage their most influential and public revolutions. Criticism abounds delineating Romantic skepticism, but Ryan counters this trend to suggest that it was the religious *belief* of certain Romantics that had the most profound impact on the social life of the time (*Romantic Reformation* 6-7). From the outbreak of the French Revolution to Keats’s death in 1821, segments of the English population entertained a renewed interest in religion, which manifested in a heightened religious sense in the minds of men and women and an increased attendance in churches. This revival of religion came as a response to the rather unfortunate state in which the church found itself at the turn of the century: it was, according to its reformers, spiritually and intellectually stagnant (Ryan, *Keats* 11-3). In the wake of furious debates in the seventeenth century, Augustan divines propounded a simplified Christianity that stressed rationality at the expense of mystery. Those with more imaginative sensibilities rejected this pared-down Christianity (Ryan, *Keats* 16-7). Many clergymen were indifferent to or unversed in theology; in fact, the church in general tended to eschew doctrinal matters either out of convenience or out of a strong adherence to Enlightenment principles (Ryan, *Keats* 17-8). Ignoring doctrine coincided with a growing predilection for

austerity over beauty, where anything perceived to be popish was discarded. Keats, living before the Oxford Movement restored artistic consciousness in the church, saw beauty ignored to the point of outright condemnation (Ryan, *Keats* 20).

The Church of England represented the orthodoxy that Keats would come to reject. He first set his mind on the classical past and second to formulating an alternative system of religion. Distinguishing between the religion of the Greeks and modern Christianity, William Hazlitt writes that the former was essentially material and embodied, linked to the senses and to human forms, whereas the latter is by contrast essentially spiritual, disembodied, and preoccupied with spectral forms (353). Ryan suspects that the material quality of Greek mythology that Hazlitt describes appealed to Keats in its stirring of the imagination. Modern Anglicanism failed to challenge the imagination in the same material, bodily way as did Greek paganism (Ryan, *Keats* 160-1). After commiserating with Hazlitt as to the proper configuration of his own metaphysics, Keats began to develop the system he called “Soul-making” (Keats, *Works* 473). Soul-making is a “system of Spirit-creation” (Keats, *Works* 473) Keats devises to justify a “World of Pains and troubles” (*Works* 473) in a way that “does not affront our reason and humanity” (*Works* 474). For an individual, unique soul to be created, we must “school” (Keats, *Works* 473) our “intelligences” (Keats, *Works* 473), which are not amenable to a soul’s maturation because they are conforming mechanisms indistinguishable from other intelligences (Keats, *Works* 473-4). Our intelligences must be transcended to become a soul. “To make a soul is to transform life into art,” Eric Wilson notes, “to face suffering honestly, with as much empathy as possible, while interpreting the pain so that it [does not] debilitate but empowers, becomes significant, instructive, beautiful” (113).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Keats’s notion of soul-making has tended of late to catch the attention of scholars of psychology rather than of religion. Walter Reed calls for a critical reappropriation of soul-making on the part of religionists in order to

That Keats took theological speculation seriously is clear to J. Robert Barth, who designates Keats “an inveterate searcher after truth” (“Keats’s Way” 285), a thinker deeply engaged in metaphysics. Wherefore, then, the tenacious critical proclivity in the twentieth century to view Keats as a skeptic? Robert Prescott has provided a compelling hypothesis: some critics begin by extracting anti-religious sentiments from the letters, and *then* they filter Christian language and concepts through the secularist lens they have created (8). Prescott reverses this scholarly tendency, taking Keats’s anticlericalism in the humorous way it was intended while reassessing the religious material (10). Scholars who have declared Keats a modern skeptic have operated on what Prescott calls a “subtle exclusion principle” (23) that privileges moments of doubt and expands them to create a lens through which all other religious content must pass. Thus, religious content found in the same letter or poem has been typically disregarded (Prescott 23). As a reader of religion in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, I intend to underscore, rather than subtly exclude, its moments of spiritual efficacy.

While there has been much ado regarding Keats’s religion and the religious element in his writings, very little has been said about his engagement with *medieval* religion. Keats’s general medievalism, which appears most obviously in his medieval poems “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and “The Eve of Saint Mark,” is well documented. Having reduced Keats’s historical imagination to a sweeping fixation on “olden things” (Fairchild, *Romantic Quest* 306) and “the genius of the past” (Fairchild, *Romantic Quest* 306), Hoxie Neale Fairchild acknowledges the poet’s appeal to the Middle Ages in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, but

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reclaim the concept for religious experience and allow it to perform in ways Keats originally intended (1-2). Psychological applications have stymied individual identity formation for the creation of a general psychic wholeness. By contrast, a more pointedly theological application to Keats’s metaphysics—a system that is distinctly Christian and has precedent in biblical tradition—brings into relief the relationship between suffering and creation that is the drama of *poesis* (Walter Reed 3-4).

Keats's gaze is really to Chatterton and Spencer, tinged with a "hint from Burton" (*Romantic Quest* 315) while taking "glances at Ann Radcliffe" (*Romantic Quest* 315) along the way. But Elizabeth Fay traces the development of Keats's medievalism from a Spencerianism steeped in nostalgia and preoccupied with the historicized self to a troubadourian *ethos* that recognizes the dangers of escapism (110-1). Once he makes this move, he dissolves the modern/premodern binary (Fay 112) so that, *a la* Chatterton, the past and present could become one narrative within the same temporal frame (Fay 117-8). Problematizing loss affords Keats's medievalism an acute presence in the face of absence; this powerful presence is why Fay sees in Keats "the real, spiritually medievalized Chatterton" (125) as opposed to "the faking Chatterton" (125) whose forgery forsook presence for absence (124-5).

Although Alain Chartier's medieval work is often thought to be the source for Keats's poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci," J. Caitlin Finlayson suggests an alternative source: Richard Roos's "La Belle Dame sans Mercy," a poem once attributed to Chaucer that was in Keats's library. Roos's poem, along with Chaucer's courtly pieces, influenced Keats's medievalism at the level of form (Finlayson 225). "The Eve of Saint Mark," the other of his medieval poems, was a favorite of the Pre-Raphaelites because it "shew[s]," for Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "astonishingly real medievalism" (Rossetti 9). H. Buxton Forman brought to light a fragment of Middle English lines written in Keats's hand that tells of the superstition of the Eve of St. Mark; thereafter, the superstition and the poem have generally been published separately (Luke 162-3). Though critics have largely ignored the superstition on the grounds that Keats reconsidered his intent for it to accompany the poem (Luke 164), David Luke reads the poem in light of the superstition and in so doing sheds light on Keats's medievalism: Keats engages with the

medieval church by “subordinating” (174) church history and theology “to the energies of the human imagination” (174).<sup>39</sup>

As is perhaps clear from these few emblematic examples, the powerful secularization model has permeated even those studies that presume a connection between Keats and medieval Christianity. In resisting the secularization model, however, I do not intend to override certain of its essential manifestations in Keatsian scholarship, such as his disenchantment with early nineteenth-century Anglicanism. Keats’s desires to substitute antique, embodied forms of religious experience for the abstract phenomena of modern religion and to rethink the ways in which art might interpellate such religious forms to serve the purposes of the present are desires that take ancient religion seriously. In ways similar to Hazlitt’s vision of Greece’s embodied mythology, I suggest that medieval Christianity’s embodied ritual practices appealed to Keats’s sensibilities. I argue that Keats celebrates the sacred potential in man to become exalted by means of his very fleshiness, as Madeline and Porphyro meld together bodily and spiritually and escape the dreary castle to a more promising future. In *The Eve of St. Agnes* Keats configures a negotiation between literary praxis and the premodern religious body that his act of writing inscribes in a way that uplifts and enchants the modern body. He enacts this negotiation by drawing on the spiritual and semiotic power of the relic, “the most literary of all devotional objects” (Zysk, “Relics” 403) whose spirituality is grafted to its materiality and whose efficacy is granted by a written record that, like Fay’s troubadour, collapses the past into the present. But

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<sup>39</sup> Detections of medieval presences in Keats’s work extend beyond his medieval poems. Strategic revisions of his sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” for instance, reveal Keats’s indebtedness to Dante, since both questing poets encounter Homer through a mediating figure: Dante through Virgil, and Keats through Dante himself. Dante looking into Virgil’s Homer becomes Keats looking into Chapman’s Homer through Dante’s vision (Pollack-Pelzner 41-2). Daniel Pollack-Pelzner supports this connection by pointing out Keats’s revision of “wond’ring eyes” to “eagle eyes,” a phrase that appears in the fourth canto of Cary’s 1805 translation of the *Inferno* that describes Homer; Keats’s phrase “pure serene” can also be found in Cary’s *Paradiso* (43-4).



unlike the troubadour, who temporalizes the present at the expense of the past, Keats's modern *vita* etherealizes the present by means of the past.

### **Relics, Medieval and Modern**

The relic does not merely represent or symbolize the body, but it *is* the body—"its holy origin *is what it is*" (McCracken 49, my emphasis), the saint's body present before the adoring pilgrim. Arnold Angenendt gleans from Theofrid of Echternach, twelfth-century theologian and a leading authority on relics in the Middle Ages, the condition of saints' remains: they are "'complete,' 'as if untouched,' 'as if still living,' 'only sleeping,' with 'fresh blood' and looking 'rose-colored or lily-colored,' and also filled with 'heavenly aroma' and the 'scent of paradise'" (Angenendt 22). Virginity, a common explanation for incorruptibility and seen as a locus of sacred power throughout the Middle Ages, embodied for many the spirit conquering fallen flesh (Duffy 175). The body of a virgin saint was thought to contain and emanate a holiness more powerful and perfect than that of other sacred bodies. The saint's *virtus* is present in her bodily relics, at the shrine in which she is contained, in the clothing she wore, and even in the bed in which she had slept (Snoek 11-2). The latter three examples are of contact relics, or secondary relics, which belong to a different class of relic than the body itself but are nevertheless infused with sacred power as a result of their contact with the saint. A similar sacred transfer occurs with reliquaries. As containers that house sacred objects, reliquaries function like the Eucharistic species after transubstantiation in that they display the sacred "in a way that ordinary people would find palatable" (Bagnoli 137).

Enlightenment historians like Edward Gibbon, disturbed by popular medieval religion generally—and the adoration of saints' relics in particular—suggested that Catholic cults of

saints were outgrowths of pagan practices with little change having occurred in transmission.<sup>40</sup>

Yet Peter Brown argues that the theology of saint cults blurred the strict borderline ancient religions placed between heaven and earth (20-1). Contrary to Gibbon's presumption, a shift did occur between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages regarding the value of holy bodies: while deceased bodies were once considered untouchable, many theologians of the early Middle Ages began to reinterpret their physical status and even permit interaction between these bodies and the pilgrims who wished to venerate them (McCulloh 145).<sup>41</sup> In the early Middle Ages, relic translations were conducted primarily in the eastern part of the empire, and it was not until the ninth century that western piety officially adopted translation practices of saints' bodies.<sup>42</sup> At the turn of the seventh century, Pope Gregory the Great ostensibly shared an opinion that reflected the attitudes of late antiquity regarding the transposition of holy bodies. Rather than moving a body, which could not be touched, it was more advisable to exchange *brandea*, or pieces of cloth placed near or on the body. Even though *brandea* are second class relics, Gregory determined that "these relics have the same miraculous potency as the saint's corpse" (McCulloh 149). Though the west disapproved of *translatio* in the early Middle Ages, Ambrose sanctioned the opening of martyrs' graves in the fourth century; certain Gallic ecclesiastics followed suit, and eventually Rome accepted the practices of *elevatio* and *translatio* (Angenendt 21).

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<sup>40</sup> A number of critics have suggested that Keats's preferences for pre-Christian cultures inform his poetry generally. With particular regard to *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Robin Mayhead observes a conflation of Christian and pagan in Madeline's superstition and Porphyro's "unsanctified" (50) humanness (50). Judith Arcana goes further to suggest that Keats by-passes Christianity altogether and recovers faery ritual, "Craft" celebration, and other ritual practices of the ancient Britons (43-4).

<sup>41</sup> I contend, in suit with Peter Brown's study on late antique and early medieval saints, that no real connection exists between attitudes toward holy bodies in antiquity and discourses of sacred materiality and saints' bodies in the Middle Ages. This nullifies, in my view, the possibility that Keats drew significantly from antiquity in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, since the poem mobilizes discourses that were rejected in the ancient world.

<sup>42</sup> Relic translations did occur in the west, clandestinely, even before the practice was made official in the ninth century.

Eamon Duffy proffers a distinction between early and late medieval devotion: relics held devotional primacy in the early Middle Ages, but as the period progressed reverence of saints' images—paintings, statues, and other icons—flourished to prominence (167). But Patrick Geary points out that relics were important to all during the whole of the Middle Ages (4). The saints are always-already glorified, in life as in death, and are completely present in every particle of their remains, in keeping with the semiotic logic of *pars pro toto* that proclaims Christ's body to be present in each particle of the transubstantiated host (Zysk, "Relics" 404-5). By Gregory's papacy, a saint's grave contributed to the life-blood of the church, since the saint was believed to be present in heaven *and* in the tomb (Peter Brown 3). While there is some truth to a movement toward inner piety in the later Middle Ages, much compelling evidence suggests that *matter* remained the primary spiritual conduit (Bynum 19). Caroline Walker Bynum argues that popularization of inner devotion in the late Middle Ages merely responded to discourses on the power of holy bodies that considered these bodies to be alive, in the present, imbued with an agency more potent than bodies ostensibly living and breathing (20-1). Inventories of holy matter right up to the Reformation included relics, the Eucharist, artistic creations like stained glass and altar pieces, and enduring miracles (*Dauerwunder*) (Bynum 25). Medieval religion can be seen as "one long effort of internalization" (Le Goff 5), yet the medieval imagination, according to Jacques Le Goff, was always physical at its root, insisting on the fundamental correlation of inside and outside (4-5).

The origin of *translationes*, or accounts of relic movements to more desirable locations, can be traced to the great migrations of sacred bodies from the catacombs to Roman churches. "[N]either entirely hagiography nor entirely history" (Geary 11), *translationes* were typically recorded decades, even centuries, after translations actually occurred. *Translationes* often

involve some form of theft, but rather than conceal, downplay, or condemn the theft as a sinful act, they tend to confidently proclaim clandestine or devious operations which had been used to acquire stolen relics (Geary 14-5). More often than not, relic thefts were conceived as acts of piety, an opinion shared by ordinary pilgrims and the ecclesiastical hierarchy alike (Geary 69). Most translation accounts consist of the following conventions: the visitation commences the ceremony, during which preparations are made to honor the saint to be exhumed; the *elevatio* follows, after which the *translation* sees the relic to its new location; and the ceremony concludes with the *depositio*, where the relic is buried, inserted, or placed into its new shrine. At each point during this process the devotee kneels or prostrates himself before the relic, kisses and caresses it, and envelopes it in incense (Snoek 227). Differences in devotional formation of cults often followed from the cult's origins in oral or written tradition. For example, the *Vita Corentini*, the written account attesting to the miracles of the patron saint of Quimper in Brittany, is a document created by oral tradition, whereas the *Vita Ronani*, which records the miracles of Quimper's ecclesiastically-approved saint-in-residence, is a controlled text that creates St. Ronan and his cult by giving him a new identity upon translation of his relics to Quimper (Julia M. H. Smith 328-30). St. Malo's identity, as with Ronan's, is the creation of a written *vita*. The account of the *translatio* of Malo's relics in deacon Bili's *Vita Machutis* aligns with Carolingian conventions: a miracle at the tomb of origin validates Malo's holiness, and a *iudicium Dei*—a sequence of testing or questioning during which the relic agrees to be moved or demands to stay—follows the *elevatio* (Julia M. H. Smith 334). As in the cases of Ronan and Malo, *writing* establishes an identity for relics which is quite different from the time when the miracles were first performed to authenticate their holiness (Julia M. H. Smith 337).

Driven by the pressure of competition and the prestige of possessing “top-class saint[s]” (Freeman 59), many churches and monasteries from the ninth century onward relied on the cunning plans of relic thieves, professional shrine burglars whose methods, though at times devious, were justified by the saint’s approbation (Freeman 60). Dominated by private rather than public looting, such clandestine behavior was considered a “holy cause” (qtd. in Freeman 126) by many clerics (Freeman 126).<sup>43</sup> Connected men like Einhard controlled vast underground relic-trade networks the tentacles of which stretched throughout the empire. Einhard engaged the services of highly organized groups of relic merchants to gain access to the catacombs, Roman cemeteries, and abbey reserves through whatever means.<sup>44</sup> Shrines teemed with “spiritual capital” (Freeman 28) before relic thieves, many of whom were locked in fierce rivalries that often erupted into holy competitions that commodified sacred matter. Soon, the relic trade became politicized: fame drove relic exchange, and strategies to acquire them developed with more complexity and urgency as the Middle Ages progressed (Freeman 79).<sup>45</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising, then, why Aelfred, a particularly resourceful eleventh-century relic-hunter, “conducted himself like a person who had secured the object of his desires” (qtd. in Kendall 3) after taking the Venerable Bede’s relics from Jarrow *en route* to the Cathedral at Durham

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<sup>43</sup> This kind of holy plunder often occurred between individual (in many cases rival) monasteries, but it also took place on a more global scale in the beginning of the twelfth century—and it was enough to fell a kingdom. In the mid-eleventh century the Greek Orthodox Church, whose holdings boasted the richest and most extensive relic collection in the world, was accused of heresy by Rome for its position on icons. Its heretical status opened up its store of relics for desiring Christians to plunder at will (Freeman 121-2). This initiated waves of pillaging throughout the twelfth century, culminating in the infamous relic-crusade of 1204 that toppled Constantinople (Freeman 125).

<sup>44</sup> Geary lists the features present in each Einhard *translatio* as follows: “a German abbot or monk goes to Italy on business; there he is inflamed with the desire for a certain saint’s remains; he enters a church at night and with greater or lesser difficulty is able to remove the body of the martyr, which he brings back with him to his monastery” (100).

<sup>45</sup> Holger Klein notes that while collecting and trading relics for political purposes certainly occurred among secular leaders (57), some of the most competitive exchanges in holy objects included reliquaries for use during Mass (62).

(Kendall 1).<sup>46</sup> Despite the politicization of relic acquisition, however, I suggest that desire for relics was also driven by devotion and love for the saint. Many relic thieves were compelled as much out of passionate zeal for the happiness of the saint than by visions of profit and political acclaim. The medieval pilgrim sought intimate physical contact with his saintly protector. Upon contact, the saint becomes caretaker to the identity of the self (Peter Brown 51), and at times the devotee could sense “the closeness of [the saint] with all the inevitability of a link in the tranquil structure of the universe” (Peter Brown 57).

The atmosphere for medieval ritual to breathe, and for relics to speak, did not dissolve upon contact with the modern world. The demolition of monasteries, and the images and relics contained therein, augmented the value of these spaces and objects for those with an antiquarian fascination or who wished to keep old customs alive. This, in part, was the unintended consequence of the Reformation (Chandler, *Order* 2). Catholic beliefs and practices were not eliminated at the Reformation, Robyn Malo insists. Her hagiographical exegesis demonstrates how English reformations encouraged relic cults that were even more intimate and accessible than those of the medieval past (Malo 531-3). Leaving aside comparative interpretations of devotional intimacy that pit the medieval against the modern, what is crucial here is that the texts Malo discusses bear witness to the centrality of the sacred body even after the Reformation (532).<sup>47</sup> In the seventeenth century, the head of Oliver Cromwell, a grotesque reminder—and

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<sup>46</sup> Fay distinguishes Romantic from Victorian medievalism in temporal terms: Romantic medievalism looked to the high Middle Ages and the radical troubadours, while Victorian medievalism takes on the later medieval period and the struggle between feudal and industrial structures (3). I suggest that *The Eve of St. Agnes* makes no such temporal discrimination but rather conflates aspects of commodity capitalism and feudal themes in ways that align with the histories of relic production, dissemination, and exchange.

<sup>47</sup> Jay Zysk supports Malo’s thesis that holy bodies and objects were not made irrelevant after the Reformation, but rather than testifying to the continuance of devotions such as pilgrimages and hagiographical recordings of saints’ lives, he instead focuses on the transferal of relics’ “ideological and aesthetic energies” (“Relics” 401) from the shrine to the theater. Zysk points to *The Changeling* as a prime example of the staging of relics after the Reformation (“Relics” 400-1).

remainder—of the Interregnum that made its way around England, behaved like a relic: it established an uncanny presence of the man himself. Cromwell’s circulating body metonymically represents and reforges a lost history (Clymer 91-2).<sup>48</sup> There was no real need, then, for nineteenth-century writers interested in such medieval *topoi* to ignore Renaissance and Restoration cultures wholesale, as traces of relic discourse and conventional devotional practices filtered through the intervening centuries.<sup>49</sup> The scene of relic worship in Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* is crucial to the narrative: caressing St. Edmund’s corpse leads the narrator to believe that “the Body of a Man . . . is the most revered phenomenon under this Sun,” for “[w]e touch Heaven when we lay our hand on a human Body” (126). Terry Robinson reads in the skeleton in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* an implicit confrontation between the ways Protestants and Catholics perceive and understand bodies. Catherine Morland interprets the skeleton as a Catholic might, as an object in which resides subjectivity and agency (Robinson 216). My reading of Keats’s *Eve of St. Agnes* offers yet another example of the ways in which relics can be heard in the modern world.

### **Relic Veneration, Romantic Translation in *The Eve of St. Agnes***

Porphyro’s many desires—his desire to enter the house of his enemies, to risk the aid of one who may expose his plan to penetrate his lady’s chamber, to watch quietly from the closet as Madeline performs her evening ritual, and, most of all, to bring himself into amorous contact with the object he desires—has proved the “touchy subject” with which Keatsian critics insist on

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<sup>48</sup> Upon reaching the museum at Mead Court, Cromwell’s head was exhibited with an accompanying advertisement. The display—the head, the narrative describing it, and the narrative’s frame—rendered the head a relic (Clymer 100-2). In this way, the written display acted similarly to a *translatio*. The Reformation did not eliminate the traditional (and at the time *common*) understanding of the status of objects within relic discourse; rather, collecting bodily remains was alive and well in the seventeenth century.

<sup>49</sup> A distinction must be made here, of course, concerning officially sanctioned practices embraced by political and ecclesiastical authorities up and against practices preserved through folk tradition at the level of individual communities. Still, though, it is surprising how high up the medieval religious revival reached.

wrestling. It is easier, say the “metaphysical critics,” to wrestle with an idea, a vision, an abstraction, or an epistemology; it is awkward, groan some “physical critics,” when Porphyro erotically engages with an unwitting Madeline. Yet Porphyro conflates the physical and spiritual, and the senses of sight and touch, when he first articulates his desire: Porphyro bids

[a]ll saints to give him sight of Madeline,  
But for one moment in the tedious hours,  
That he might gaze and worship all unseen;  
Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—in sooth such things have been. (*ESA* 77-81)

Male desire defers, at least for a moment, to a gaze heavenward and a plaintive entreaty that the saints may assist him on a quest described in terms of spiritual pilgrimage. So like that of a pilgrim, in fact, his worship regimen involves all of the senses, a sequence that begins with sight and proceeds—before the poem is over—to smell, hearing, touch, and taste. But he also entreats the aid of an earthly helper, and Angela, after much deliberation and convincing, leads Porphyro

to Madeline’s chamber, and there hide[s]  
Him in a closet, of such privacy  
That he might see her beauty unespied,  
And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,  
While legion’d fairies pac’d the coverlet,  
And pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed. (*ESA* 164-9)

He desires to see the saint to whom he has devoted his pilgrimage, but as relic-thief he approaches surreptitiously and “unespied” and “hide[s]” himself from view. Like relic thefts of the Middle Ages, Porphyro’s visit is curiously condemned and sanctioned, condemned by the shrine’s owners who do not want to lose a sacred piece of their collection yet sanctioned by the relic herself—if she desires to be moved. From the closet he eyes her, and in so doing commodifies her, yet this transaction is sanctified, at least according to the words recorded *vita*-like by its author, who outlines Madeline’s body with a saintly hue.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Daniela Garofalo offers a reading of the poem in terms of commodity fetishism, arguing that *The Eve of St. Agnes* critiques eighteenth-century commercial culture and presents an alternative through its focus on “lack” (354). Keats



Once safe inside Madeline's shrine, Porphyro luxuriates on the glorious objects around him like an overwhelmed pilgrim kneeling before a decorative shrine in a distant land. "A casement high with triple-arch'd there was, / All garlanded with carven imag'ries / Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass . . . [and] thousand heraldries" (*ESA* 208-10), of "twilight saints . . . dim emblazonings . . . [and a] shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings" (*ESA* 214-6), the space seems to be set up for a liturgy. By the fourth century, it had been decreed that altars were to contain relics, even the saints' whole bodies, and these could be seen beneath the altar participating during Mass. Church space was blessed by their presence (Krueger 10). Reliquaries were often crafted to mirror that which was contained within. Madeline's bedchamber, following Theofrid's descriptions, is "blush'd with blood" to reflect the "fresh blood" of the object inside, and it displays "carven imag'ries" of holy scenes, saints, and other representations of the sacred. Porphyro could also see the relic herself:

Full on this casement shone the wintery moon,  
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,  
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;  
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,  
And on her hair a glory, like a saint, (*ESA* 217-22)

again echoing Theofrid's description of the relic looking "rose-colored" and full of life.

Theofrid reasoned that "[b]ecause saints have been transformed from earthly to heavenly clarity, they are able to emit celestial light and cause their earthly remains to shine. They illuminate their . . . bodies from above" (qtd. in Angenendt 20). Preparing for worship, Porphyro had assembled a rich array of pungent delicacies to offer in supplication, as pilgrims were wont:

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gives fetishized objects—especially "circulating objects" (Garofalo 355)—human traits, but in this "pseudo-medieval world" (Garofalo 356) they have been emptied of religious significance and thus can only live in illusory ways. The world Keats creates is a world of fierce competition, where objects are enveloped under veneers of scarcity and obtained through trade networks that sanction stealing for purposes of consumption. Porphyro is for Garofalo "the ultimate thief of enjoyment" (359) who steals delicacies from his enemies in preparation for the main event: absconding with Madeline in his grasp (358-9).

“These delicates he heap’d with glowing hand / On golden dishes and in baskets bright / Of wreathed silver” (*ESA* 271-3), “[f]illing the chilly room with perfume light” (*ESA* 275). Sweet-smelling odors that envelope the embalmed *corpus* are released upon presentation or exhumation of the body before the adoring pilgrim, and mingle with fragrances of the incense and spices already assembled as part of the act of worship. The body of the saint is protected from putrefaction in expectation for the resurrection, thus it emits a sweet fragrance when revealed. In the same way, following the assemblage of Porphyro’s feast it is difficult to determine where the odor of the delicacies heaped in adoration end and Madeline’s own sweet fragrance begins.

The critical fixation on Porphyro’s desire has left Madeline’s desire largely unaccounted for. This is a grave oversight, I argue, because Madeline’s desire drives the text at virtually every stage of its development. Her desire draws Porphyro into her chamber, into herself, and ultimately out “o’er the southern moors” (*ESA* 351). Since the relic was truly the saint, she also had the power to choose when and if she would assist the supplicant, in what manner she would offer help, and when she desired to be moved (Geary 38-9). The saint must give her approval if she is to be taken from her home (Geary 77). Thieves who robbed without consent were punished, haunted, or physically barred from accomplishing the translation. In a very real sense, these relic thefts were not thefts at all—they could not be, in fact, because the saints were would simply not allow affronts like theft against their wills. This requisite acquiescence justified relic theft (Geary 132-3). Requests from saints were common: they had several communicative methods at their disposal that allowed them to visit individuals, as through dream visions (Klein 55), or draw individuals to visit them, as through pilgrimages to their shrines. An apropos example might be St. Theodora of Thessalonike’s *translatio*. In 892, Theodora requested the removal of her relics in a dream; following the *depositio* at her preferred location, her relics

released fragrant oil into the nave of the church (Krueger 14). The pilgrim and saint each have desires, and these desires are not mutually exclusive. Desire for veneration worked in both directions: the saint wished for her devotee to prove his love through pilgrimages, supplications, and prayers (Duffy 183) with as much fervor as her pilgrim felt in performing these devotions. The symbiotic relationship between saint and pilgrim made it impossible to separate feelings of desire of one from the other (Duffy 183). The pilgrim approached the shrine with the hope of interacting with the saint on an intimate level. He experienced “a form of theater” (Freeman 14) in which each party affects the other. Between saint and pilgrim, love is mutual.

Stuart Sperry attests to Madeline’s desire to a point when he observes that Keats makes the reader feel that Madeline has had Porphyro in mind all along (32). But she also has had St. Agnes in mind. Early in the poem Madeline invokes St. Agnes:

They told her how, upon St. Agnes’ Eve,  
Young virgins might have visions of delight,  
And soft adorings from their loves receive  
Upon the honey’d middle of the night,  
If ceremonies due they did aright, (*ESA* 46-50)

ceremonies which she *did* “aright,” for they successfully summoned an obliging pilgrim and, later, a form of St. Agnes herself, as “she dreams awake, and sees, / In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed, / But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled” (*ESA* 232-4). Katherine Garvin argues (alone, it seems, of all the critics who have written on *The Eve of St. Agnes*) for the palpable presence of the *saint* called Agnes in the poem (357). For Garvin, the poem mirrors hagiographical accounts that tell of Agnes’s *choice* of a mystical marriage with Christ (358); consistent with its original, the mystical consummation in the poem requires mutual consent to actualize union (364). That Keats was not Catholic does not preclude his weaving Catholic

allusions in his poetry, yet Garvin submits that the Agnes he presents is a “secularize[d]” (360), “humanized” (360) Agnes.

But the medieval imagination Keats invokes in the poem allows for a one-to-one relationship between Madeline and Agnes, so there is no secularization required to justify Agnes’s presence in a narrative in which she is apparently absent. As a result of the ceremonies performed, Madeline shares a body with Agnes; more exactly, she becomes a bodily synecdoche of the saint in her prayers. In a thirteenth-century anthology of miracle stories called *Miracles de Nostre Dame*, Gautier de Coinci provides a miracle account of an archbishop’s encounter with St. Leocade, a fourth-century virgin martyr whose incorrupt body came to life and revealed itself to the archbishop centuries later. The *vita* weaves together Leocade, whose body is present, and the Virgin Mary, whose body is absent. Leocade’s materiality is “rewrit[ten]” (McCracken 56) in such a way that her relic shares a body with the Blessed Virgin (McCracken 56). Leocade materializes the absence created by the Virgin’s image near the tomb from which she emerges. This is one of innumerable examples attesting to the material nature of the miraculous in the medieval imagination (McCracken 56-7). In similar fashion, the present Madeline and absent Agnes obtain in a bodily union wherein Madeline assumes Agnes’s saintly power, and, again, this transfer is enacted through touch: they both lie in the same bed. She is silent, but her “heart was voluble” (ESA 204), calling with a spiritual voice for Porphyro’s veneration like a “tongueless nightingale.” Her call is not stifled by a sexual attacker, as some critics have suggested, but it resonates with “pain[ed] eloquence” (ESA 205), “in vain” (ESA 207), because she feels “heart-stifled in her dell” (ESA 207). Desiring to leave her “stifl[ing]” home, the saint feels suffocated and bids her pilgrim, in the only way she knows how, to remove her from the “dell” in which she is imprisoned.

To the pronounced strand of criticism identifying Porphyro's seeing as "voyeuristic" (Garofalo 359), I wish to offer a counter-claim: Madeline desires to be seen, and to be seen by Porphyro. It is vision, mediievally-understood, which facilitates and actualizes sacred contact. For Bennett, both desire for vision and vision of desire drive *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Porphyro depends upon visceral visuals to achieve fulfillment, whereas Madeline requires visionary experience of an idealized lover to realize hers, but the lovers' physical union, articulated in the meeting of Porphyro's "seeing" (Bennett 102) and Madeline's "un-seeing" (Bennett 102) eyes, is ultimately stymied and channeled into the language of disembodied vision (Bennett 101-2). But medieval vision, particularly as configured in late-medieval visual theory, stresses the very corporeal dimension which Bennett suggests the characters' sight lacks. Medieval visuality is by nature reciprocal: the eye is understood as vulnerable to penetration, on the one hand, and dynamic and penetrating, on the other (Biernoff 3). In this kind of vision, which Suzannah Biernoff calls "carnal vision" (41), the eye of the observer pierces and is pierced by its object. Carnal vision projects subjectivity through the viewer's own body into other bodies. Sight, a physical act in the medieval imagination, allows one's soul to extend toward an object even as it draws the object's soul into its own (Biernoff 41-3). This mutuality involves desire, where the fleshly eye of the perceiver and the object of the vision emitted both "crave penetration" (Biernoff 54). Theories of carnal vision were vital in relic discourse, since so much depended on sight—especially at first glance. Theories of vision in the early Middle Ages privileged spiritual sight, or the "superimposition of archetypal images on the world" (Bagnoli 141). With the adoption and widespread dissemination of Aristotelian epistemology in the later Middle Ages came the theory of introspection, by which the object discharges light that collides with the viewer's eye and is then interpreted by the brain. Relic discourse accommodates both spiritual

and visceral forms of seeing. Theories of vision from the early Middle Ages do not give way to Aristotelian optics any more than Augustine's Platonically-inspired vision crumbles before Aquinas, but what late medieval visual theories do discredit is the earlier mistrust of carnal sight. Cults of relics participated in these developments to substantiate intellectually their "desire to apprehend divinity by looking at relics" (Bagnoli 141). Late medieval understandings of carnal vision imagine the viewer and the viewed as transformed through the act of seeing. In the process, they become similar to one another in spirit *and in body*.

When Madeline "knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint" (*ESA* 225), "Porphyro grew faint" (*ESA* 224) precisely because he is "gazing on [her] bed" (*ESA* 197), because he is "gaz[ing] and worship[ping] all unseen" (*ESA* 80). In the Middle Ages, "[m]atter gained holiness through contact with other holy matter, like a sacred contagion" (Krueger 5). Contact relics, while categorized as second class relics, were believed to be infused with the spiritual power of the saint, and proximity to these objects was considered a great blessing. Simply looking at Madeline, at her bed, and at her "fragrant boddice" (*ESA* 229) which she let "creep rustling to her knees" (*ESA* 230)<sup>51</sup> affects Porphyro bodily because the medium through which his eyes interact with Madeline's contact relics is itself a body within which subject and object physically touch. According to Charles Freeman, relics "ha[ve] the power to affect the flesh of those who come into contact with [them] and give them new life of a spiritual kind" (Freeman 58). That relics could act this way in the first place can only make sense in a framework which reduces the senses to physical touch. After death the body was believed to live a "double-existence" (Angenendt 20). A connection endures that links the saint's soul, which is in heaven, to her physical body in the tomb through touch. This holy touch was conceptualized more as a

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<sup>51</sup> A saint's clothing was given pride of place among contact relics (Krueger 8).

physical embrace than a purely ethereal, disembodied infusion, thus *praesentia* was not exclusive to the body of the saint but could extend or be transmitted to another body through a similar form of touch (Angenendt 20): “So entranced, / Porphyro gazed upon her empty dress, / And listen’d to her breathing” (*ESA* 244-6), “[w]hich when he heard, that minute did he bless, / *And breath’d himself*” (*ESA* 248-9, my emphasis). As Porphyro gazes on the dress—Madeline’s contact relic—the lovers breathe in sequence, as if sharing the same body.

“Sleep oppress’d” (*ESA* 237), Madeline’s “soothed limbs” (*ESA* 238)—which have already become the very limbs of St. Agnes—“and soul fatigued away” (*ESA* 238), [c]lasp’d like a missal where swart Paynims pray” (*ESA* 241). She is, of course, still living, yet she is also dead. The body of a saint was considered to be asleep throughout the Middle Ages (Freeman 22). Jerome proclaimed that the saints are not dead but sleeping, and their bodies await the general resurrection in the same forms in which they lived. The “dead” bodies of saints are far from dead, John of Damascus echoes centuries later, but rather they are asleep and pulsating with life, incorruptible, emitting sweet aromas framed in hues of gold and silver (Freeman 20-2). Garofalo similarly aligns Madeline’s sleep with suspension in “a deathlike state” (363), but one which thwarts interaction between the lovers. She argues that they cannot see or hear each other because their mutual fantasies project false wholeness onto the other; only when they forsake their illusions of perfection and acknowledge the others’ lack can unity of any kind take place (363-4). Indeed, Porphyro’s hope to stir—or, perhaps more precisely at a shrine, disinter—the sleeping saint at first seems unlikely, since “[’t]was a midnight charm / Impossible to melt as iced stream” (*ESA* 282-3)—“[i]t seem’d he never, never could redeem / From such a steadfast spell his lady’s eyes” (*ESA* 286-7), but

[a]wakening up, he took her hollow lute,—  
Tumultuous,—and, in chords that tenderest be,

He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute,  
 In Provence call'd, "La belle dame sans mercy":  
 Close to her ear touching the melody, (ESA 289-93)

to which "[s]uddenly / Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone" (ESA 295-6). Madeline certainly responds to the call, and her waking, her active reengagement with the world, is in response to a metaphysical event, despite Ross Woodman's claim that metaphysics asphyxiates the breath of life at its source and stymies the development of the dynamic metaphorical body in Keats's poetry (119-20).<sup>52</sup> The miracle in Keats's poem recalls a type of miracle that became popular in the twelfth century and recurred over and over again in the devotional literature of the late Middle Ages: miracles of metamorphosis, when sacred objects experienced lasting changes, such as bleeding, crying, and emitting sweet-smelling odors. While these kinds of miracles were not new, they were recorded to have occurred with much greater frequency in the later Middle Ages (Bynum 128). To refer again to the tale of Leocade, the moment she revealed herself—that is, when she stirred from her holy slumber within the shrine—a sweet odor plumed forth, and the archbishop, after chanting hymns and offering supplications, desired intensely to embrace her. The miraculous revelation of Leocade *permitted* the archbishop to possess her bodily, to make off with a relic (he removed some of her flesh with a knife as she receded back into the tomb), and to display the material effect of the miracle (McCracken 48-9). Like the archbishop's songs, Porphyro's ditty is offered as a part of the devotional performance, and just as the archbishop's

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<sup>52</sup> The shift from metaphysics to metaphor that Woodman detects in poems like *Hyperion* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* is Keats's way of rescuing metaphor by metamorphosing it through "the ceaseless turmoil of Becoming" (122). This way, the metaphorical body avoids calcification by metaphysics (Woodman 120). For the Romantics, argues Woodman, the failure of renouncing metaphysics constitutes poetic death (122). Fay draws from this reading as she contrasts Keats's treatment of the Beadsman and the lovers in *The Eve of St. Agnes* in terms of living historicism. The Beadsman's historicism, like Woodman's metaphysics, consists of a series of fossilized events along a dead rosary, but the poem's transfer to Porphyro and Madeline marks a shift from "past tense to present tense; [from] superstition to romance" (Fay 131). Porphyro saves the narrative from Woodman's dead metaphor, as he sneaks into Madeline's bedchamber *in persona* poet-troubadour, plays upon her lute, and blasts the sleeping Madeline into history. Madeline absconds with her lover into temporality: they choose "presence over the seduction of the past" (Fay 135).



immediate reaction is to embrace the saint whom he loved, so is Porphyro compelled to act as any pilgrim would in response to an *elevatio*: “Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone” (ESA 297), gazing upon her “with joined hands and piteous eye, / Fearing to move or speak” (ESA 304-6).

A relic’s power activates in response to adequate displays of reverence on the part of the devotee. Indeed, the power resides in the object, but a miracle occurs as a result of an *encounter* between pilgrim and object (Bynum 111-2). Some critics only see Porphyro’s side of this encounter and (in the line of Stillinger) read this desire negatively. For Kerckmar, Keats’s highly symbolic, visionary articulation of the lovers’ consummation as epistemological encounter effaces the sexual violence of the act even as it legitimizes this (male) violence (25-6).<sup>53</sup> Nancy Rosenfeld acknowledges that for a fleeting moment Porphyro becomes like an object and, kneeling quietly, is feminized (54). But Rosenfeld makes clear that for the remainder of the poem Keats endows Porphyro with agency: *Porphyro* elevates Madeline to an angelic state (55) and makes the decision to leave at the poem’s conclusion—Madeline has no choice but to follow his lead (63).<sup>54</sup> For Thomson, however, the strategic placement of Porphyro’s ditty within Madeline’s ritual and the complementary play that results facilitates a miracle that can only be described as “a mutual seduction gone right” (339), rather than a rape, on the one hand, or an idealized dream vision, on the other (338-9). Thomson reinscribes Madeline’s desire by focusing on aural perception: it is in the appeals to the ear (340) where the reader can detect both characters’ desire in a “mutual hoodwinking” (345) of ritual and ditty.

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<sup>53</sup> Stillinger critically abets these malign processes of effacement, Kerckmar argues, by mitigating Porphyro’s culpability and suggesting that Madeline is complicit in her own rape (26-7).

<sup>54</sup> Jeong Jang holds Porphyro’s agency responsible for Madeline’s *descent* into humanity and history, a position entirely different from Rosenfeld’s. Madeline might assume a divine aspect during her ritual, and Porphyro might attempt to validate Madeline’s assumed divinity by worshipping her (Jang 213), but Keats, consistent with the secularism that pervades his *oeuvre*, “bring[s] the angel down to earth” (Jang 214) through the humanity of Porphyro, whose ungodly acts save Madeline from superstitious delusions (Jang 217).

Madeline and Porphyro's union is a mutual seduction of sorts, but I maintain that neither party hoodwinks, or is hoodwinked. Madeline entreats her devotee with as much plaintiveness after elevation as did Porphyro when he initially answered his saint's call at the beginning of the poem. Her words "Ah, Porphyro!" (ESA 307), "[h]ow changed thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear! / Give me that voice again, my Porphyro, / Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!" (ESA 311-3) are not words of trepidation before an assault, nor do they lament what has occurred up to this point; rather, they express her desire for Porphyro to continue his veneration. She wants to share her *praesentia* with her devotee and be taken away by him, but this cannot happen if he does not take action. Already in contact with her through carnal sight and galvanized by her forthright entreaty, Porphyro "arose, / Ethereal" (ESA 317-8), "flush'd" (ESA 318) with the same fresh blood with which Madeline "blush'd" (ESA 216) in her reliquary earlier in the poem, and "melted" (ESA 320) flesh with flesh, "blend[ing] [her] odour" (ESA 321)—the sweet odor a saint emits when unearthed from the tomb—with his. The miracle is a dual elevation: as Porphyro raises Madeline in *elevatio*, so does she raise him to the status of contact relic, imbuing him with a holy power that renders him "ethereal." Madeline's desire has not waned, as it is she who utters "[m]y heart is lost in thine" (ESA 331).

The relationship between devotee and saint was often articulated in terms of vassal and feudal lord, particularly in the late Middle Ages. Pronouncements of servitude to the saint were various, including *se mancipare*, *se tradere*, *se devovere*, *se obligare*, *se offere*, and *se commendare*; these were similar to the supplications required of a vassal to his feudal lord (Angenendt 24). Pleading with Madeline to be her vassal—"[s]ay, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?" (ESA 335)—Porphyro pledges "not [to] rob thy nest / Saving of thy sweet self" (ESA

340-1), in keeping with the medieval practice of swearing oaths on relics.<sup>55</sup> An honest relic thief, he makes it clear to the saint that he only wants to bear *her* away, not the miscellaneous booty he may find in the shrine. It is here where he bids her permission to grant him leave to take her away to a new community, for “if [she] think’st well / To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel” (ESA 341-2) Porphyro is prepared to carry her “o’er the southern moors” where a new “home” (ESA 351) awaits. This does not take place in the present, but “ages long ago” (ESA 370); they do not flee, but *have fled*, and “they are gone” (ESA 370). As with most saints’ *vitae*, Keats pens *The Eve of St. Agnes* centuries after the *translatio* occurred, but the poem is a document, like the relic it creates, that is filled with the presence of the past.

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<sup>55</sup> Taking oaths over the *res sacrae*, which were generally relics, was a common method used to bind a vassal to his lord from the early Middle Ages onward (Snoek 132).

### Chapter Three: “My Music Has Some Mystic Diapasons”<sup>56</sup>: Byronic Mysticism and Apophatic Discourse in *Manfred*

Twentieth-century literary criticism has fought long and hard to claim Lord Byron for religious skepticism. Indeed, his reputation for loose morals, his championing of the liberation of the individual, and his ironic—and at times caustic—tone in handling traditional subjects make him a prime candidate, a Romantic skeptic *par excellence*. There has been no end to scholarship that argues for Byron’s skepticism with regard to religion generally and his use of irony when talking about religion,<sup>57</sup> but his ironic playfulness might be what makes him most Christian. Byron’s own preferred method of reasoning reflects theological reasoning insofar as “the inconsistent best shows things existent” (Beatty 33); paradox, not logic, sustains Byron’s belief (Beatty 35).<sup>58</sup> With a slight gesture toward Robert Prescott’s “subtle exclusion principle” (23),<sup>59</sup> Bernard Beatty takes a closer look at Byron’s use of irony *per se*: his “jokey tone” (41) is every bit as comic as a miracle story recounting the heroic action of a saint’s appendage in saving a man from death or preventing a church from burning (41). In other words, it is easy to mistake Byron’s solidarity with traditional religious discourse for satiric playfulness, solidarity he himself admitted to have felt in a letter to Thomas Moore in March 1822, saying “I incline,

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<sup>56</sup> Byron, *Don Juan*, XIV.174.

<sup>57</sup> M. H. Abrams’s omission of Byron from his analysis of the spiritual heritage in Romantic literature and philosophy epitomizes critics’ reluctance to reconcile Byron’s religion with his “ironic counter-voice” (*Natural Supernaturalism* 13). Abrams “omit[s] [Byron] altogether” because he feels that the poet “deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries” (*Natural Supernaturalism* 13).

<sup>58</sup> Byron’s journal explains his tendency to contradiction: “every page should confute, refute, and utterly abjure its predecessor” (qtd. in Marjaram i).

<sup>59</sup> Prescott’s “subtle exclusion principle” is a critical sleight of hand that privileges moments of doubt and expands them to create a lens through which all other religious content must pass. In this way, religious language and imagery found in the same poem is typically disregarded (Prescott 23).

myself, very much to the Catholic doctrines” (*Selected Letters* 283). His pointed questions that brought discomfort to the aristocracy and bourgeois alike, his masked invective searing under shrouds of alienation, his apocalyptic eruptions of supernatural longing—these products of Byron’s vacillation between metaphysical curiosity and distance may have been his greatest contribution to modern spirituality. As might be expected, Byron found vouching for a coherent, finely articulated doctrine of God difficult, but his “skepticism” only lured him deeper into the mystery that lies at the heart of the very doctrine he had trouble accepting. He “preferred even that *mystery* to the contradictions by which other systems endeavored to replace it” (Gregory 85, my emphasis).

Relentless onslaught of Byron’s religious sensibilities has convinced even those scholars sympathetic to the presence of the supernatural in Romantic verse of the poet’s displaced Christianity. Mark Canuel argues that several Romantic-era writers found in poetry a tolerant substitute for organized religion. He perceives in Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* a “poetic solution” (Canuel 208) to the social injustice he cited in his speech before the House of Lords on Catholic Emancipation earlier that same year (Canuel 208). Poetry acts as an ideal surrogate religion, Canuel suggests, precisely because it does not preach—the only belief it advocates is to be tolerant of belief (206). Mary Hurst demonstrates “Byron’s aestheticizing of Catholicism” (95) by reading *The Giaour* as a confessional poem, but she resists (to a point) tendencies to read secularism into Byron’s confessional poetics. While in a monastery, descriptions of the Giaour’s mental state take on a penitential character, and he is relieved through the mediation of a priest. But by precluding absolution the narrative avoids the sacramental undercurrent that threatens it (Hurst 98). The Giaour’s “semi-conscious need” (Hurst 99) of confession is aestheticized, Hurst argues, by his indifference toward redemption and the poem’s ambivalence over the efficacy of

absolution. Like Byron's eponymous sinner-aesthete Manfred, the Giaour ultimately spurns God (Hurst 99-100). Both Canuel and Hurst identify theological echoes in Byron's poetics, but vague tolerance flattens hints of the religious for the former, while the latter acknowledges these hints but reads concomitant elements of struggle, guilt, and stubborn sin as evidence for the poems' dismissal of true and honest religion.

Wolf Hirst takes up Beatty's notion of Byron's indirect Christianity, or Christianity by negation, in an attempt to validate *Cain*'s engagement with religious orthodoxy, a move which challenges a long critical history of reading the play as "unorthodox, iconoclastic, or downright sacrilegious" (151). For Hirst, the text critiques Cain's naïve trust in rationalism and "undercut[s]" (152) his hubristic apostasy. Thus, in *Cain*, Byron legitimates religion indirectly by illustrating reason's insufficiency to challenge it (Hirst 151-3). To Alan Rawes's conclusion that *Childe Harold* breaks with Christian tradition when it "loses touch" (125) with and thus undermines its brief "moment of [religious] affirmation" (125), I would pose a qualification similar to the one Hirst puts forward. Rawes juxtaposes the poem's promise of "an affirmation of faith that will contain but surpass all previous affirmations" (132) against its failure to deliver the anticipated confession (132), but I ask how this subversion of affirmation necessarily breaks with Christian tradition? To whose tradition does Rawes refer? The apophatic tradition in Christian mysticism has long depended on negation in the ascent toward God. Robert Ryan observes in Byron's ontology a creator who continually slips beyond the scope of theological systems (*Romantic Reformation* 128) that try to contain divinity (*Romantic Reformation* 133). *Manfred* draws attention to these gaps of unknowing darkness: if man is to encounter the depths of the self, develop his innate capacity to transcend the material world, and unite with his creator in and through love, he must struggle with the unknown in the darkness of his own being. I

suggest that *Manfred* is but one of Byron's religio-poetic contributions to the greater "re-supernaturalization" (Slykhuis 189) project of Romanticism,<sup>60</sup> despite arguments from Gordon Spence and James Twitchell that read Enlightenment rationalism into *Manfred* and privilege psychological interpretations over theology and metaphysics.<sup>61</sup>

Such critical misgivings extend to Byron's medievalism. Hoxie Neale Fairchild observes a strand of "boyish Ossianism" (*Romantic Quest* 303) running through Byron's juvenilia, and while Fairchild insinuates that this interest lasted into adulthood he describes the mature poet as "an exoticist, but hardly a medievalist" (*Romantic Quest* 302). For Veronica Ortenberg, there is "little straight 'medievalism'" (45) in Byron's work, and when he does call upon monks, knights, and damsels he does so with a vicious wit, at times satirizing them to the limits of recognizable medievalism. He often speaks of chivalry as a "sham" (Duff 123) and a "failure" (Schwab 221), but as with religion, he appears to dismiss chivalry even as he endeavors to rescue its ideals for the modern world. He wanted an enlightened chivalry to infiltrate nineteenth-century politics while leaving behind so-called knights whose behaviors were not consistent with the codes they purportedly adopted (Duff 123-5). Deriding the historical from the vantage point of the present as he quests after self-knowledge and historicity, Elizabeth Fay suggests, is "troubadourian" (100) in its very "insincerity" (100). Just as Fay predicates Byron's alignment with liberal troubadourianism on his rejection of the conservative-oriented discourse of the knight (103), so do I predicate his alignment with mysticism—a discourse of liberation that subverts hegemonic

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<sup>60</sup> *Cain* is another such contribution. Matt Slykhuis argues, in the tradition of Hirst, that while Cain's self-indulgent empiricism allows him to see the universe, his panoramic view bears in on the divine love that is his nature and prevents him from seeing what is always-already within (213-4).

<sup>61</sup> Since the Enlightenment had discredited supernatural explanations of phenomena generally, Spence suggests that Byron enveloped his spirits within a psychological discourse that his readers would understand (1). Likewise, for Twitchell the supernatural "world beyond" (601) with which *Manfred* comes into contact reflects the psychological world. Twitchell's Neoplatonist reading relegates the supernatural to a player in a psychological drama that follows *Manfred*'s continual movement inward (602).

orthodoxy—on his resistance to institutionalized clerical mediation. But for Fay, Manfred’s medievalized self is egocentric, enrapt in a “narcissistic dreamstate” (104), and Astarte, far from being a heroine, is merely a “dead woman . . . who cannot be reclaimed” (104). I, however, read Manfred’s self-love as love of the other *through the self*, and Astarte as a living deity whose attainment is impossible but whose spiritualized position validates the unorthodox means by which the lover seeks his love.

I argue that Byron inscribes the body of the medieval mystic—an intensely ambivalent body that ascends in divine exaltation toward the light as it descends into the darkness of hopelessness and despair, straddles epistemological boundaries of knowing and unknowing, resides both inside and outside of the prevailing religious discourse, and strides against an ecclesiological order that bases divine union on human mediation<sup>62</sup>—as a vehicle in and through which he might collapse modern dualisms that threatened to separate irredeemably the body from the soul, and the soul from divine energy. Tapping into an eschatological framework that permits the conceptualization of God as a female figure, a vision of spiritual *agape* that establishment Anglicanism denied him, the archetypal Romantic lover writes his quest-romance as a mystic’s quest to attain spiritual marriage by means of affective piety, in which the body that seeks models itself on the body sought through traditional methods of *imitatio Christi*. Manfred’s “internalization of . . . quest-romance” (Bloom 5) is a dynamic movement whereby the soul projects itself outward toward the divine other insofar as it looks inward at the self.

Thus, my reading reimagines Harold Bloom’s figuration of the romantic quest while maintaining

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<sup>62</sup> Spence situates the poem between the Reformation and the Enlightenment, post-Reformation because of Manfred’s “Protestant” (2) distrust of clerical mediation, and pre-Enlightenment on account of his apparent belief in spirits (2). However, Catholicism’s medieval roots did attract Byron’s gaze. Issues of medieval origins played a focal role in Romanticism, and this most Romantic of poets eagerly mined for useful medieval ideas alongside his peers (Marjaram 71). I argue that his distrust of clerical mediation should rather be historicized to the medieval mystics.



certain of its qualities: the lover's mystic journey "intensif[ies] . . . consciousness" (6), but it expands consciousness outward to include and upward to divinize the other rather than "narrow[ing] consciousness to an acute preoccupation with self" (6). A "heroically independent heterodox thinker" who "tilt[ed] against the orthodox establishment" (Beatty 30), Byron himself performs an *imitatio*, as the body he appropriates mirrors his own religious ambivalence,<sup>63</sup> his strident belief in the "mix'd essence"<sup>64</sup> of man as "half dust, half deity" (I.ii.40), and his yearning to quell the sins that oppressed him so to melt eternally with the divine feminine. Byron reifies his signature paradoxes in a mystic body which grants him the flexibility to be religious while being unorthodox, to loose, but in the very act of loosing, to bind, and to show the impossibility of reclaiming lost love while divinizing both the pursuit and that which is pursued. When read in the apophatic mystical tradition of Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and the *Cloud of Unknowing*, *Manfred* turns from a text that articulates the malaise of modern spiritualism and the desperate, panic-stricken independence of the automatized self to one that spiritualizes the self through repeated acts of becoming God.

### **The Mystical Tradition in the Middle Ages**

Plato's doctrine of contemplation (*theoria*) is the only way for amnesiac man to regain a lost connection with the Forms or Ideas (Louth 1-3). Contemplative awakening facilitates the educative process of *paideia*, or detachment from sensual reality and attachment to perfection, which purifies the body through a form of death to itself (Louth 5-7). The "Form of the Good" (Louth 13)—an ineffable perfection that is the ultimate aim of the contemplative ascent—is "unknowable" (Louth 13), but its unknowability can nevertheless be known during moments of

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<sup>63</sup> Harboring a profound resentment for his Calvinist upbringing, Byron sought a spiritual alternative, and Catholicism roused a fascination that lasted throughout his life and inspired him to fight on behalf of Catholic Emancipation in the House of Lords in 1812 (Gregory 83).

<sup>64</sup> Byron, *Manfred*, I.ii.41. Subsequent citations to this work are cited in the text by act, scene, and line number.

pure ecstasy, when the soul is rapt into the presence of the divine (Louth 13-4).<sup>65</sup> With Origen commences a decidedly Christian mysticism. Origen's delineation of the mystical journey—three stages that are, sequentially, the purificatory, illuminative, and unitive stages (Louth 54-5)—comprises a mysticism of light wherein the soul rids itself of the body and returns to its primordial state as a spiritual being. Origen differs from Plato in affirming the necessity of ascent *per Christum*, an affirmation that acknowledges the reality of the Incarnation (Louth 61-3). At last, for Origen, the soul passes beyond the Incarnation to fuse with the *Logos*, but since the Word has become flesh its encounter with the soul is simultaneously personal and transcendent (Louth 70).

Augustine combines and systematizes Platonic *theoria* and Origen's ascent *per Christum* in a discourse that articulates the contemplative's journey in the official language of doctrine. The efficacy of contemplation in the tradition of Augustine depends upon sacramental mediation within the ecclesiastical structures of the *corpus mysticum*. Augustine's mysticism is three-fold: Christological, since it is Christ's "Godhead toward which, his humanity by which, [the searcher] make[s] progress" (qtd. in McGinn, *Foundations* 248); ecclesiological, in that the searcher may only pass beyond himself to achieve contemplative vision through the agency of the church; and epistemological, on the grounds that contemplative vision is nothing other than a theory of knowledge (McGinn, *Foundations* 234). The brevity of the touch of divine wisdom, a point he repeatedly emphasizes due to man's sinful nature, seems to broaden the distance between the searcher and God, but if he passes beyond himself these brief moments may become ecstatic and touch him like a fire in his soul (McGinn, *Foundations* 235-6). In order to grasp God the searcher must become like Him (McGinn, *Foundations* 240), and if he does he reflects not only

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<sup>65</sup> Plato admits that those who achieve such vision will likely be alienated from society (Louth 16).

Him but also the community of the church, the collective body that makes the union possible in the first place (McGinn, *Foundations* 243). Augustine's mysticism, then, is necessarily communal, since individual mystical fulfillment, or *ecstasis* (McGinn, *Foundations* 254), impinges on the searcher from within the context of the church, strengthening his bond with the Body of Christ (McGinn, *Foundations* 259).

Mystical discourse takes a dark turn in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century. Ultimately ungraspable and inscrutable, God subsists in a divine order that is beyond the reach of creation. No ecstasy on the part of the contemplative can hope to bridge the gap, hence there is no actual point of contact with God; instead, the soul experiences the unknowable God in love as it progresses deeper into the darkness and farther from all that is knowable (Louth 81-3). This journey plunges the contemplative from the light of false reality into a dark space that purges his faith in worldly possessions (Louth 84-5). Gregory reconciles God's unknowable, cloud-like nature with the Incarnate Word in what he proclaims to be the end of *theoria*: contemplation does not lead to union with "God as He is in Himself" (Louth 86-7), which is impossible, but rather to "God as He has manifested Himself through His divine energies" (Louth 87). Gregory describes the final entry into darkness as a "seeing by not seeing" (Louth 88), a "knowing by unknowing" (Louth 88), a satisfaction that is always and by necessity unsatisfactory. Cloaked in darkness, God's presence is expressed as a mirror in which the soul comes to understand that God's image resides, however opaquely, within the self (Louth 91-2). This is a recognition that one's conscience, not reason, can grasp (Louth 95). The ultimate exacter of union is *love*, the paradoxical motivator that desires an unsatisfactory union with an unknowable God (Louth 96). To say that Gregory's light-in-darkness formulation influenced the thought of later medieval mystics understates the seismic political, social, and ecclesiological

disturbances it would produce, as well as its role in the modelling of the autonomous modern self that was to come.

Dionysius the Areopagite's<sup>66</sup> sixth-century work *Mystical Theology* set the foundation for apophatic, or negative, mystical theology and popularized the notion that spiritual *descent* is indeed the only true *ascent* to an unrealizable God. While the mind cannot conceptualize divine being, it can gesture toward its source through a process of self-emptying that denies all pre-conceived notions of God; to know is to jettison knowledge—forsake it completely—and venture into the darkness in ignorance (Bancroft 4-5). In Pseudo-Dionysius, man can only progress to higher forms of knowledge by denying affirmation. He must proceed *negatively* if he is to meet an unrealizable God (Herrera 25). *Mystical Theology's* contemplative progression begins with annihilation of the senses, which lightens the epistemological load, enables an ascent through unintelligible darkness, and finally—and ideally—culminates in a union with the divine that is constitutive of the negation that drives the entire process (Herrera 28). Language becomes an inadequate medium of expression (Herrera 34), as do traditional symbolic representations. Light, which has traditionally symbolized intelligibility and hope for understanding, is for Pseudo-Dionysius an impediment to the darkness that is the essential medium for unity (Herrera 32). Light illuminates the very worldly structures which hinder the soul's aim (Herrera 34-6).

John Scotus Eriugena follows in the apophatic tradition of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius in the ninth century. Since his *Periphyseon* insists upon an infinite multiplicity of meaning inherent in divinity's manifestation, it is no surprise that his notion of *recta ratio*, or right reason when it comes to man's ability for positive speech about things divine, concerns the

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<sup>66</sup> Known as Pseudo-Dionysius because of his claim to be Dionysius the Areopagite from Acts 17:34, this profoundly influential sixth-century mystic weaved a mystical narrative using aspects of Neoplatonism, asceticism, and early Christian theology that valued self-purgation and the denial of ideas (Dan and Lavinia Cohn-Sherbok 100).

intellective process by which one might articulate what God is *not* as opposed to what God is (McGinn, *Growth* 96). Bernard McGinn singles out what is perhaps the apophatic expression *par excellence*, a desperately paradoxical statement that Eriugena constructs to counterbalance his admission of God's positive relation to the world: God "neither was nor shall be nor has become nor becomes nor shall become, nor indeed is" (qtd. in *Growth* 100). McGinn's suggestion that Eriugena's metaphysics is one of light may seem equally paradoxical to modern sensibilities, but one must consider that Eriugena's terms for illumination and darkness occur simultaneously (*Growth* 102). His most valuable contribution to the propagation of apophatic mysticism, however, was his ninth-century translation of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*. Eriugena's repackaging of Pseudo-Dionysius was taken up in the twelfth century by those who sensed a disconnect between ecclesially-approved sacramental structures, on the one hand, and the possibility of an internal encounter with God, on the other. In the ensuing years it was preached, copied, and recirculated (Bancroft 9). Late-medieval apophatic mystical texts like the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* and the works of Meister Eckhart drew inspiration from these translations of the Areopagite.

Sarah Beckwith considers Bernard of Clairvaux to be an architect of late-medieval affective piety. In Bernardine *affectus*, love initiates spiritual transformation into a mold approximating Christ's image (Beckwith, *Christ's Body* 50). This process of "self-modelling" (Beckwith, *Christ's Body* 51) simultaneously engineers a subjectivity founded in love *and* an anxiety-inducing "self-division" (Beckwith, *Christ's Body* 51), the latter of which takes Christ's hybrid identity as a model yet fails to overcome its fragmentation. The contemplative engaged in affective piety inculcates "Christ as lover" (Beckwith, *Christ's Body* 51) into himself, becoming close to Him in likeness. To borrow a phrase from Augustine, one "becomes like what [one]

loves” (qtd. in Beckwith, *Christ’s Body* 51). Bonaventure adopts a distinctly Augustinian mysticism in his description of the ascent. The contemplative journey sees the soul from the material world through to a world beyond the senses, a final ecstatic state which, in Bonaventure’s formulation, is dependent upon the soul’s spiritual sight to lead it deeper into itself (Herrera 58-9). The human soul is the “darkened image of God” (Herrera 59), thus it can only hope to glimpse God indirectly, as language grows unintelligible and falls away, and the angelic choirs are contemplated in their beatific glory (Herrera 59).

### **Mystical Remnants in the Modern World**

For Meister Eckhart, the individual should abandon his self-centeredness (Morgan 86-7). Ben Morgan detects in the mystic’s autonomy and inner experience a kernel of what will become the modern definition of subjectivity, yet mystic selfhood differs from that of the modern in its desire to transcend its fleshy confines toward God (93). Equally foreign to the modern imagination is the notion of object-less awareness; Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is silent on the matter. Kant’s epistemological starting point, that perception relies fundamentally on a negotiation between the perceiving mind and objects external to that mind, makes space a crucial category of experience: while it is not responsible for regulating all inner experiences, space makes our encounters with external objects possible and renders those objects understandable (Forman 57-8). Judgments are possible through our application of *a priori* assumptions to objects of experience, but since this union is exacted within a single consciousness, Robert Forman determines that Kant’s epistemology precludes what he calls a “pure consciousness event” (63), or PCE, by which he means “an event in which no representation [in the external world] is thought or perceived by consciousness” (Forman 63). It is useless, then, to try to analyze PCEs like mystical experiences through a Kantian lens, because the encounter of such an

event is inconsistent with the basic principles of Kantian discourse (Forman 79). Forman goes so far as to say that modern thinkers who subscribe to Kantian and other “constructivist” (64) epistemologies of mysticism lack the fundamental tools necessary for proper analyzations of PCEs (63).<sup>67</sup>

In the teeth of Enlightenment empiricism, nineteenth-century scientific positivism, and twentieth-century skepticism, Christian mysticism nevertheless has gained footholds in the modern world. Nineteenth-century Spiritualists were drawn to mysticism because of its promise to mend the growing bifurcation between religion and materialist science. Mysticism’s materiality—physically identifiable to the senses and therefore quantifiable according to the laws of Newtonian physics—was appropriated by those who desired to square Christianity with pioneering scientific materialism. It was thought to provide empirical proof of the existence of a material soul (Hollenback 33-4, n1). Doubles, ectoplasms, glows emanating from ghosts (Hollenback 73), poltergeist manifestations, and telekinesis (Hollenback 83-4, n23) constitute but a few of the phenomena that captivated nineteenth-century Spiritualists. Morgan traces notions of self, identity, and the real posited by several modernists and postmodernists to their fascination with the apophatic mystical tradition. Mystics’ readiness to “acknowledge their essential incompleteness” (Morgan 12) gave Lacan’s *meconnaissance* historical justification (Morgan 12-4). Slavoj Žižek takes up the Lacanian assumption that misrecognition bedevils the human condition, yet he unexpectedly qualifies his central notion of the Real with an act of grace that he calls a “genuinely ethical act” (Morgan 26). These moments are spontaneous, inscrutable in the present, and ever remain just beyond our purview. Morgan perceives in Žižek’s “ethical act” an indication, however fraught, of an absolute—there must be *something* which we cannot

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<sup>67</sup> Mystical constructivists subscribe to Kant’s assumption that the real is not available to our experience. We create categories through which we see and understand the world (Forman 2).

grasp, a reality that is not appearance (Morgan 27-8). Predictably, Žižek denies such a possibility (Morgan 29), but his denial of light—even a light that is permanently hidden—is not as important as his acceptance of the darkness as central (anti)signifier.

In similar fashion, Derrida's *différance* resides both inside and outside of philosophical systems. *Différance* suggests an interminable cycle of signs the meanings of which can only be spoken about indirectly (Morgan 30). Always-already out of reach, *différance* resembles Theodore Adorno's "empty epiphany" (Morgan 32): epiphany is experienced through negation (Morgan 32). Lurking in deconstruction's most fundamental axioms is something reminiscent of a negative theology that speaks of "the impossible possibility of the impossible" (qtd. in Pokorn 413) insofar as it is concerned with linguistic failure and recognizes the value of the unknowable (413). And yet, negative theologians differ from deconstructivists, not so much in their position relative to the body of western metaphysics, but in their insistence on referentiality. Negative theology is actually affirmative, says Derrida: diametric inversion renders apophatic thought "negativity without negativity" (44).

### **Byronic Mysticism in *Manfred***

"Now to [his] task" (I.i.28)—Manfred succumbs to a slumber that is "not sleep" (I.i.3), and as his eyes "close / To look within" (I.i.6-7) he summons a "Mysterious Agency" (I.i.28) to emerge from "mountains inaccessible" (I.i.33) and appear before him. But he is answered by silence, since he calls upon this power by a "written charm" (I.i.35), a "sign" (I.i.38) the comprehensibility of which, he will soon discover, is confounded by the inadequacy of language within the "subtler essence" (I.i.32) of the cloud in which it "dwell[s]" (I.i.31). Conversing with realms beyond language requires utterances of a "[d]eeper" (I.i.43), more introspective kind that compel Manfred to turn inward "upon [his] soul" (I.i.47), scour the space "within [him] and



around [him]” (I.i.48), and perceive what is already there. Manfred’s soul obliges, his internal incantation works, and what issues forth from “haunts” (I.i.33) distant and unreal is a power—the “Mysterious Agency”—that manifests in seven spirits. Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach examine why the devout in the Middle Ages sought release in mystical activities, with the understanding that the experiences of such persons were the results of both psychopathology and genuine piety (5).<sup>68</sup> When ensconced in what the authors roughly identify as mystical states, the subject often demonstrates an ease with which his mind may become “absorb[ed]” (Kroll and Bachrach 42), that is, to become fixated on an object or event and remove “mental . . . clutter” (Kroll and Bachrach 42) in preparation for such experiences (Kroll and Bachrach 42).<sup>69</sup> To establish contact with the supernatural, Manfred actively appeals to the supernatural *within himself*, as he denies cognition by blocking out the visible world and makes the choice to venture blindly “in darkness and in light” (I.i.30). The ease with which he becomes absorbed is the fruit of a gradual process that begins with active conjuring and culminates in the summoning of demons unawares during the play’s climactic scene, but for now he resolves to stumble in the darkness of unknowing, which, in true apophatic fashion, is paradoxically enveloped in light: the sixth spirit cries out “[m]y dwelling is the shadow of the night, / Why doth thy magic torture me with light?” (I.i.108-9).

The dazzling darkness skews Manfred’s vision, and he voices his desire to “behold [the spirits] face to face” (I.i.175) in their “accustom’d forms” (I.i.180). Though composed of elements such as “earth” (I.i.132), “ocean” (I.i.132), “air” (I.i.132), or “wind” (I.i.132) that seem to exist outside the self in a world conducive to objective measurement, the spirits can boast “no

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<sup>68</sup> For Kroll and Bachrach, psychological and physiological explanations for mystical experience complement, but do not replace, religious explanations (7).

<sup>69</sup> Very rarely do subjects encounter “departures” (Kroll and Bachrach 49) of the Pauline or Augustinian variety, where one is dramatically “rapt” into the presence of Absolute Being” (Kroll and Bachrach 50).

forms beyond the elements / Of which [they] are the mind and principle” (I.i.181-2). Yet their physiological character makes possible their assumption of forms to assist the immaterial soul in contemplative ascent. Jessica Boon understands the mystic’s body according to late medieval physiological models. She asks how the “elemental body” (Boon 246)—which is composed, among other substances, of earth, water, fire, and air—figured in the process of the contemplative’s union with God (Boon 245-6). Physiological metaphors stand in as the building blocks of spiritual ascent (Boon 261): the human being, whose composition is “no better than [that of] a fire-baked brick” (Boon 262), is nothing in relation to God’s glory yet he participates all the same in the human nature of the divinity (Boon 264-5). These physio-spiritual building blocks create an amalgam out of which Manfred’s will subconsciously fashions a divine body in “the shape of a beautiful female figure” (I.i.188)—an image that excites and agitates its creator. His response “Oh God” (I.i.188) is a tremulous exclamation meant literally; as with many medieval mystics, Manfred perceives God as female. He is overcome with the desire to “clasp” (I.i.190) the spectral figure that hovers enigmatically in the mirror. But his distance from the divine energies is at this preliminary stage far too great for hope of unity, as evidenced by his hazy recognition of the projected image, and “the figure vanishes” (I.i.191).

We become worthy of and gain access to God’s presence when we fashion ourselves on Him, and we can do this by imitating the love that is God (Hollenback 524-5) in a “spiritual marriage” (Hollenback 551) with Christ. Bernard conceptualizes contemplative experience as a spiritual marriage, a mystical union in which the contemplative does not forgo his identity but rather merges his will with the will of Christ, in whom the ideal balance of God and man subsists (Hollenback 558-60). Later, Teresa of Avila stresses the incarnational nature of spiritual marriage. Both an ontological state and a set of practices in the world, this marriage is a process

wherein moral axioms are objectified and pious abstractions endowed with flesh (Hollenback 449). But it presupposes a concomitant process of self-forgetting in which the soul casts off its solitude and becomes one with God (Hollenback 557). At this nascent stage of his spiritual journey Manfred cannot hope for mystical marriage, but the self-negation for which he yearns is a necessary precondition to achieving the union he cannot yet articulate. Intuiting that one must desert to fully claim the self, the mystic rejoins the spirits' query of "what wouldst thou with us" (I.i.135) with a wish for "Forgetfulness— . . . / Of that which is within [him]" (I.i.136-7), remnants of worldly knowledge that he "cannot utter" (I.i.138). Manfred's seeming depression, then—his desire not only for "[o]blivion" but "*self*-oblivion" (I.i.144, my emphasis)—takes on a different character when it is understood in terms of Bernard's and Teresa's spiritual marriage. To repeat Meister Eckhart's injunction, the individual should relinquish his self-centeredness. The spirits, acting as Manfred's outer soul-layers, deflect their master's desire to turn toward the darkness and instead offer the world, in all of its earthly glory, in its place: "What we possess we offer; it is thine: / Bethink ere thou dismiss us, ask again— / Kingdom, and sway, and strength, and length of days?" (I.i.166-8). But the embattled Manfred foregoes his dependence on things in order to find "the beingness of [him]self" (Bancroft 6), gestures away from the material realm, pronounces the spirits "[a]ccursed" (I.i.169), and bids them from "[h]ence . . . begone" (I.i.170). And his gesture is effective, for the spirits vanish. They are replaced by a disembodied voice whose melodious chant signals the soul's progression to the second stage of the narrative's mystical journey. Since "it is only possible for the possession of God to become a reward in so far as one dies to the false self" (Clark 127), Manfred's ascent into darkness begins with purification of "false tears" (I.i.232) that course from his "most seeming virtuous eye" (I.i.244) so that his "cold breast" (I.i.242) might come to "shut" (I.i.245) out his "soul's hypocrisy"

(I.i.245). In other words, it is only when the mystic faces the self, with all of its sins and inadequacies, that he may gain access to the cloud.

“By a power to thee unknown” (I.i.206), the disembodied voice of the Incantation continues, “[t]hou canst never be alone; / Thou art wrapt as with a shroud, / Thou art gathered in a cloud” (I.i.207-9). Developed within the apophatic discourse of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius, the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* speaks of the cloud that engulfs the once-active mind in a vale of silence within which mental activity ceases. Its language consists of “figures of speech *in abstracto*” (Pokorn 409) that strives and fails to describe a God whose nothingness circumscribes the mind of the contemplative (Pokorn 408-9). While acknowledging that the identity of the disembodied voice may be forever enigmatic, Ian Dennis is willing to consider the speaker to be “the voice of God” (72), though his reason stems from the very uncertainty and unknowability that causes him to question the voice’s identity in the first place. It should not be attributed to any “specific Other” (Ian Dennis 72), Dennis states definitively, so it is impossible to say from whence the voices comes, from Manfred himself or from God (Ian Dennis 72). I would like to suggest that no such duality exists in this play. Textual moments that critics have most often identified as dualistic are the very places where Byron questions and reconciles dualism through mystic discourse. The disembodied voice is no “specific Other” precisely because it resonates within his own being, but by no means does this preclude the “voice of God,” for in *Manfred* divine presence and the individual wrapped in affective devotion are one in the same. “*Wrapt as in a shroud,*” Manfred is *rapt* into the cloud of unknowing<sup>70</sup> by a Trinitarian “power” that is thus far “unknown” to Manfred:

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<sup>70</sup> Insofar as rapture is a mode in and through which the natural meets the supernatural, it is both an embodied *and* disembodied experience (Elliott 144-5). Augustine, and later Albert the Great and Bonaventure, placed rapture under the category of intellectual vision, but theologians like Alexander of Hales viewed rapture in corporeal terms like “carnal love” (Elliott 147).

Though thou seest me not pass by,  
 Thou shalt feel me with thine eye  
 As a thing that, though unseen,  
 Must be near thee, and hath been;  
 And when in that secret dread  
 Thou hast turn'd around thy head,  
 Thou shalt marvel I am not  
 As thy shadow on the spot,  
 And the power which thou dost feel  
 Shall be what thou must conceal. (I.i.212-21)

Edward Howells reads Augustine's *De Trinitate* as a journey *en route* to an intimate vision of the *imago Dei* by way of contemplation on the Trinity (201). Equipped with the desire to see the "dim reflection" (Howells 202) of God, the mind progresses from doctrinal contemplation, during which it imagines the Trinity's intricate and hidden workings, to a climactic engagement with the divine (Howells 202-3). Crucially, Augustine integrates psychological reasoning with doctrine: since we are fashioned in the image of God, we are endowed always-already with a rational knowledge of the Trinity, but doctrine structures our inherent—if incoherent—knowledge of God (Howells 208-9). Augustine's Trinitarian theology<sup>71</sup> articulates a mystical progression founded in rationality, molded by doctrine, and productive of love that is born of a movement of self-love "out of the self towards another" (Howells 211). Manfred "seest not" the "power" that comes to him as a "shadow" in a mirror, but, in accordance with the Augustinian doctrine of spiritual sight, he "feels" that which always-already "must be near" with his spiritual "eye." Its dim resolution Manfred "must conceal" so that it might be nurtured within a state of intense contemplation.

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<sup>71</sup> Byron included William Jones's *The Catholic Doctrine of the Trinity proved from Scripture* in the collection of books he took to Greece (Beatty 34). Jones's volume contributed to his life-long fascination of the doctrine's "terrifying . . . impossibility" (Beatty 35). To the empiricist who would disregard theology for rationally sound doctrines, Byron retorted "[t]hen what would you do with those Divines . . . who have written so largely on the Trinity, and the fathers of the Church, and the creed of Athanasius, and others?" (Kennedy 101).

Semi-conscious and at the mercy of the elements awhirl within and above him, Manfred's soul looses its fetters to material pseudo-reality and buoys elastically into the cloud. And yet, while the darkness that envelopes the contemplative remains inscrutable to a mind resolutely bound to its preferred linguistic structures, the ways in which medieval mystics articulated their ineffable experiences are surprisingly regular. Beckwith argues with constructivism generally that despite mysticism's transcendental claims it is unwise to dislodge mystic discourses from their socio-political contexts—they are not, in a word, “supralinguistic” (“Material Mysticism” 40). Laurie Finke corroborates Beckwith's position to a point, noting that despite mysticism's claim to circumvent clerical authority, the church nevertheless mediated mystical experience to the extent of providing it with a language (35). Practitioners of mysticism made use of preapproved linguistic structures and imagistic constructs as a way to articulate the cloud. But mystics retained a certain agency, Michel Foucault suggests. The act of subjecting their bodies to extreme forms of physical discipline was their way of practicing techniques Foucault calls “technologies of the self” (367) for the purpose, in this case, of acquiring “perfection, happiness, purity [and] supernatural power” (367). Finke meets Foucault halfway: the *corpus* of mysticism does not consist of individual, autonomous accounts but is rather “a set of cultural and ideological constructs that both share in and subvert orthodox religious institutions” (Finke 29). The disembodied voice that “devotes [Manfred] to this trial” (I.i.253) “pours” (I.i.252) from a “vial” (I.i.252) the “word” (I.i.261) that “pass[es]” (I.i.261) through his soul's frame, the “word” that simultaneously alienates Manfred from the social order (to which he confesses he is not a part) even as it binds him to a mystic discourse that draws from that very social order. Though “the word [has now] been pass'd . . . o'er [his] heart and brain together” (I.i.261-2), as if to delimit the subjective expression of mystical experience, the “clankless chain” (I.i.259) that

binds him is indicative of the mystic's traditionally inside-outside participation in the prevailing discourse. Byron's protagonist follows in the path of Julian of Norwich: in the two texts of her *Showings*, but particularly in the "Long Text," Julian communicates her personal, ostensibly ineffable experiences within the public matrix of contemporary linguistic codes (Staley 114), but this fundamentally communal activity did not necessarily extend into the ecclesiastical quarter. Julian joined with fellow fourteenth-century English mystic Richard Rolle in challenging the ecclesial class by proliferating evidence of individual divine experiences (Staley 125). Similarly, Manfred succumbs to the greater mystic discourse in order to retain his individuality and touches the divine in the face of an ecclesiastical order, later represented by the Abbot, which would have him do neither.

Succumbing to the cloud is for the willing mystic profoundly distressing. Moments of panic threaten to overwhelm Manfred as he contemplates whether to brave the perilous descent. His whetted appetite for union with the divine image is held in abeyance for fear of the whetted rocks below; he suddenly feels forsaken and vulnerable, "baffle[d]" (I.ii.2) by the medium within which (paradoxically) he might realize his deepest desires. "The spirits I have raised abandon me" (I.ii.1), he laments, suspicious of the lack of certainty about him and now unsure that he can "lean" (I.ii.4) reliably "on super-human aid" (I.ii.4). Meister Eckhart's "detachment" (Radler, "Divine Ground" 25) tests the fortitude of the individual by making the subject dependent on a God who is "nothingness" (Radler, "Divine Ground" 28). Peering into the darkness, Eckhart challenges the mystic to brave what he calls the "Nameless Nothing" (qtd. in Bancroft 2) in order to spiritually see "God's 'isness'" (qtd. in Bancroft 2). This paradox alienates the subject and causes him to turn inward upon himself (Radler, "Divine Ground" 29), but if the soul allows itself to be ushered into the awaiting emptiness it will experience a freedom from the shackles of

the world and a likeness to the divine. Letting the soul course into nothingness is to seep into God, for God is that transcendent nothingness from which the soul recoils (Radler, “Divine Ground” 31-2).<sup>72</sup> Manfred “feel[s] the impulse” (I.ii.20) to jump headlong into the abyss, yet he “do[es] not plunge” (I.ii.20), though neither does he “recede” (I.ii.21), to his amazement— “[t]here is a power upon [him] which withholds” (I.ii.23), as if his inner self knows instinctively that it must not be “afraid of [its] own nothingness” (Merton 54). The spirits have not “abandoned” Manfred so much as he has moved beyond them in his spiritual quest.

Having rejected the spirits’ temptations of material wealth, Manfred envisages the world of things anew through the medium of the cloud. In yet another seeming paradox, the contemplative comes to appreciate the “visible world” (I.ii.36) the more it is left behind, as Manfred cries out, “Beautiful! / How beautiful is all this visible world! / How glorious in its action and in itself” (I.ii.35-7). The quest reorients the contemplative’s mind in such a way that he might see the visible world more clearly as the handiwork of the Incarnation. It is this same vision that permits him to recognize more clearly his own “mix’d essence” (I.ii.41), his being “[h]alf dust, half deity” (I.ii.40), which appears in his befuddlement to be a “conflict of elements” (I.ii.42), a battle between “low wants and lofty will / Till [his] mortality predominates” (I.ii.44-5). For Twitchell, division between the external and internal—one of the many binaries he identifies throughout the poem—is coextensive with the division between the supernatural and psychological, the former representing that which is outside of Manfred and the latter representing that which is within him (608-9). Indeed, internalization drives the movement of the narrative, but this inward progression is neither a movement away from external

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<sup>72</sup> Charlotte Radler suggests that the desire for a process in which the self is “de-formed [and] trans-formed” (“Divine Ground” 33) into God is indicative of a failure on the part of the official church to satisfy its spiritual body (“Divine Ground” 38).



supernaturalism nor is it a deistic process facilitated by the spiritual only to end in the realm of the psyche; rather, Manfred's plunge inward is the necessary prerequisite to a fuller spiritual realization and awareness. What makes Twitchell's insistence on the poem's indebtedness to Neoplatonism (603) insufficient in explaining Manfred's journey is the fact that this mystical system is grounded in a fundamental dualism, not only between external and internal—or “inside and outside” (Ian Dennis 69)—but also with regard to the warring elements of which Manfred's nature consists. “Dust” and “deity” catch Manfred in an irreconcilable dualism that Twitchell describes in Platonic terms (614). In a similar way, Dennis conceives the cycle of “pure materiality” (Ian Dennis 74) and “pure thought” (Ian Dennis 74) as *alternating* phenomena of being between which Manfred hopelessly vacillates (Ian Dennis 75), an either-or construction against which I posit a both-and hybrid identity that affords Manfred's body the liminality necessary to optimally navigate the ontological realm—a space wherein Dennis admits that he moves (74). Moving beyond Platonic mysticism to the discourses that replaced it allows us to better understand what the poem means by Manfred's “mix'd essence,” as does moving beyond the Abbot's damning soliloquy in Act III, in which he laments Manfred's confounded composition. Validating the Abbot's dirge may prevent us from seeing how Byron uses mysticism to “*both* share in *and* subvert orthodox religious institutions” (Finke 29, my emphases).

The Abbot does not understand the mystic's quest. When he approaches Manfred in Act III with “[r]umours strange, / And of unholy nature” (III.i.29-30) whispered “abroad” (III.i.30) that he “holdest converse with the things / Which are forbidden to the search of man” (III.i.34-5), the Abbot demonstrates his ignorance of the means by which the “dwellers of the dark abodes”

(III.i.36) can “smooth the path” (III.i.61) to God.<sup>73</sup> Instead, he questions Manfred’s “nob[ility]” (III.i.160) and condemns his penchant for “light and darkness” (III.i.164), “mind and dust” (III.i.165), and “passions and pure thoughts” (III.i.165) as a recipe for “chaos” (III.i.164). Taking pity on these elements unhappily “[m]ix’d” (III.i.166) and “contending without end or order” (III.i.166), the Abbot “come[s] to save” (III.i.47), for “there is still time / For penitence and pity: reconcile thee / With the true church, and through the church to heaven” (III.i.49-51). This representative of the orthodox establishment attempts to corral the defiant mystic into the purview of the ecclesiastically-approved “order” (III.i.155)—that is, *monastic* “order”—against which he “contends” (III.i.166) with an “energy which would have made / A goodly frame of glorious elements, / Had they been wisely mingled” (III.i.161-3). Manfred’s “solitude” (III.i.41), too, has as much potential “as an anchorite’s,”<sup>74</sup> were it but holy” (III.i.42). I suggest that Meister Eckhart’s notion of detachment subtends Byron’s effort to simultaneously bridge the gap between his protagonist and God and break from prevailing orthodoxy. The mystic has successfully detached, according to Eckhart, when his inside and outside are suspended in a dialectic that affords unmediated access to the divine.<sup>75</sup> Radler perceives in Eckhart an avoidance of solipsism, “a journey ‘inwards’” that becomes a “journey ‘outwards’” (“Divine Ground” 26), a liberating process that muddles hierarchical boundaries (“Divine Ground” 26-7).

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<sup>73</sup> The Abbot also shows a lack of decorum. It is uncomfortable for mystics to explain the in-between grotesqueness of their quest, and it is inappropriate for someone who has not experienced such a profoundly alienating journey to ask (Hirsh 122).

<sup>74</sup> Anchorites internalized the wilderness of the hermetic tradition; in doing so, the sanctum of the psyche became “a state of mind” (Jones 8). From the twelfth century, the hermits slowly moved from isolation to public life, and by the late Middle Ages, Anchorites and hermits embodied the perfect balance of the holy servant: Mary the public and Martha the private ideal came together (Jones 16).

<sup>75</sup> Pope John XXII’s bull *In agro dominico* condemned Eckhart for jeopardizing the integrity of sacramental mediation (Radler, “Divine Ground” 25). Radler contends that the value of the theory of detachment *was* that it challenged institutional authority in the fourteenth century and *is* that it “challenges the unproductive and artificial dichotomy between ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority’ . . . which continues to be privileged by many modern and postmodern thinkers” (“Divine Ground” 25) in our own day.

As with Don Juan, Manfred's "music" (*Don Juan* XIV.174) produces "mystic diapasons" (*Don Juan* XIV.174) that confound the Abbot because they contain "much which [cannot] be appreciated / In any manner by the uninitiated" (*Don Juan* XIV.175-6).

Conscious of his mixed nature yet not fully cognizant of its implications, Manfred teeters on the edge of oblivion consumed in potentially "fatal" (I.ii.101) ambivalence. He is "giddy" (I.ii.89) as the "mists boil up around the glaciers" (I.ii.85), and the thickening "clouds" (I.ii.85) that "[r]ise curling fast beneath [him]" (I.ii.86) render him "feeble" (I.ii.114) and "blind" (I.ii.115) on the "brink" (I.ii.102) of the chasm. "Earth! take these atoms!" (I.ii.109) Manfred roars impetuously, and as he gestures to leap, the Chamois Hunter seizes him, extends a hand for him to "lean on" (I.ii.117), and offers to assist the disoriented wanderer to "find a surer footing" (I.ii.122). Willing to "be [Manfred's] guide" (II.i.4), the Hunter is Manfred's Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard enters Dante's *Paradiso* to assist the Dante-character in his climb toward the beatific vision. Bernard's intervention facilitates the protagonist's necessary progression away from his contemplation of Beatrice, a relationship that must end if Dante is to transcend his present condition and see the Virgin Mary (Botterill 72-3). Mary makes for a higher meditation (Botterill 86), to be sure, but this too must give way to the most perfect vision of Christ Himself (Botterill 101). Bernard's presence oversees this development, but only to a point—beyond this, "Dante is on his own" (Botterill 108). The prescient Hunter senses that his new charge "must not yet go forth" (II.i.1) because his "mind and body are alike unfit / To trust each other, for some hours, at least" (II.i.2-3). Before Manfred's mind and body can cooperate in what Michelle Voss Roberts calls a "unified 'sensorium'" (160), a "psychosomatic" (160) concord the harmony of

which might lead the contemplative to assimilate divine alterity within himself,<sup>76</sup> each component must “trust” that the other is there to aid in the soul’s progress. Bernard-like, the Hunter only acts to check Manfred’s precociousness and lead him along “surer footing.” Manfred demands that the Hunter “follow . . . not” (II.i.93) his “path” (II.i.94) once the “mountain peril’s past” (II.i.94), but as Bernard guides Dante toward the Blessed Virgin and from thence to God, the Hunter smooths Manfred’s transition from utter darkness toward the Witch of the Alps, a mature female figure described in Mariological terms<sup>77</sup> whom he encounters *en route* to Astarte.

For Rawes, *Childe Harold* is and is not secular. Appropriating aspects of religious pilgrimage, Byron writes a pseudo-confessional poem that pushes its sin-obsessed protagonist closer toward the idea of redemption through encounters with the Christian confessional mode (Rawes 122-3). Rawes’s argument is deeply ambivalent with regard to the poem’s negotiation between conventional Christian sacramentalism and modern secular appropriations of traditional forms. While confession never explicitly takes place, one cannot ignore the numerous cries of sinfulness projected, if not “towards . . . Augustine’s God” (Rawes 124), then toward an atmospheric, but nevertheless longed for, deity (Rawes 124). Manfred makes a confession of sorts to the Witch of the Alps, but one that bypasses the sacramental structure, for the mystic does “not choose a mortal / To be [his] mediator” (III.i.54-5). Instead, Manfred conjures the benefactress himself and freely reveals his idiosyncratic spirituality to her directly: “From my youth upwards / My spirit walk’d not with the souls of men” (II.ii.50-1); “though I wore the

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<sup>76</sup> Thirteenth-century beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg overcomes mind-body dualism by locking the body and soul in a “unified ‘sensorium’” of physical and spiritual senses (Roberts 160). The body and soul work together; for example, “[s]he sees . . . with her ‘spiritual eyes,’ and she hears . . . with her ‘fleshly ears’” (Roberts 164).

<sup>77</sup> References to the Blessed Virgin appear in several of Byron’s works, most famously in *Don Juan*: the young Juan turned from pictures of “grisly saints, and martyrs hairy / To the sweet portraits of the Virgin Mary” (II.1191-2).

form, / I had no sympathy with breathing flesh (II.ii.56-7), “with men, and with the thoughts of men, / I held but slight communion; but instead, / My joy was in the Wilderness” (II.ii.60-2).

The mystic has long been an ambivalent figure, revered for his courageous and indefatigable questing after God, on the one hand, and suspected of heresy, on the other (Kroll and Bachrach 1). The contemplative mind is politically and socially complex, avoiding both ultraconservatism and radicalism so to connect as much as possible to what he feels is true (Merton 58). He is pulled in one direction by the desires of his own soul and in another by society’s desires that hold him to account (Merton 77). Here we can see Byron speaking through his inimitable creation most clearly. Reading *Manfred* as a mystic—the quintessential holy heretic, a Janus-faced figure who is both politically and religiously indexed—can perhaps make sense of Byron’s own enigmatic confession. The mystic’s body acts *in persona* Byron into which he pours his alienation and through which he obtains not only absolution but communion: reinscribing this body makes Manfred’s “eyes” (II.ii.90), which *are* Byron’s, “familiar with Eternity” (II.ii.90). Thomas Merton vouches that “our awareness of God is a supernatural participation in the light by which He reveals Himself interiorly as dwelling in our inmost self” (12). The contemplative and God meld into a single entity, but since this union is born of “an ‘I’ confronted with a ‘Thou’” (Merton 22), realizing the inner self is not an isolative act, nor is it indicative of selfishness in any pejorative sense. It is rather a “unity in love” (Merton 22) in which the contemplative’s identity is defined in relation to another (Merton 21-2)—in the words of Augustine, the product of unity is “[o]ne Christ loving Himself” (qtd. in Merton 22). Reading *Manfred* through a mystic paradigm may be one way to rescue its author from charges of self-indulgence and self-centeredness.

Who is this divinity, this person who subsists both inside and outside, with whom Manfred seeks union? Wherein lies the essential relation through which Manfred can become one with his inmost self? It is Astarte,

like [to him] in lineaments—her eyes,  
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone  
Even of her voice, they said were like to [his];  
But soften'd all, and temper'd into beauty. (II.ii.105-8)

Manfred's flexible bodily identification with the divine figure he pursues in the darkness links the contemplative to her *via* the affective bonds of *imitatio Christi* in a fashion not unlike to Margery Kempe or Julian of Norwich. That this identification is oriented toward the feminine is unsurprising given that a significant attraction for Byron to traditional Christianity was due to the want of femininity in orthodox Reformation Christianity. The former offers the possibility of "salvation . . . through *agape*" (Beatty 39, my emphasis). The blurring of gender in theology that so appealed to Byron is featured most centrally, Beatty observes, in mysticism (39). Sharing Christ's body, Margery Kempe assumes and in the process "*becomes*" (Beckwith, *Christ's Body* 81, emphasis in original) Christ's crucified body, a change that reconfigures her status and gives her a credible voice (Beckwith, *Christ's Body* 81-3). This substitution lends her body—which is Christ's body—a flexible identity that renders her character mutable (Beckwith, *Christ's Body* 84): "[s]ometimes Christ is Kempe's mother . . . "[s]ometimes . . . Kempe herself is imaged as Christ's father" (Beckwith, *Christ's Body* 86), and at others she is "spouse to her husband, Christ" (Beckwith, *Christ's Body* 87). So too with Julian of Norwich: God is also "Mother" (Bancroft 16), and Christ can be conceived as "Mother" (Bancroft 16) as well as "Brother" (Bancroft 16). Julian implores a distinctly "'feminized' Christ" (Aers 81). She associates herself with Christ's female body that lactates and physically nurtures as does a mother's body (Aers 81). Manfred's *imitatio* is likewise physiologically grounded and behaviorally motivated,

viscerally connected with Astarte's body while also sharing "the same lone thoughts and wanderings, / The quest of hidden knowledge, and a mind / To comprehend the universe" (II.ii.109-11)—their bodies as well as their minds coextend. Lamenting his cruel conduct toward she whom he worships, Manfred invokes what is perhaps the most common image in mystical accounts of *imitatio Christi*: the "blood" (II.ii.120) that was "shed" (II.ii.119) the moment their hearts rent was "not hers—and yet her blood was shed" (II.ii.120). Dennis's observation on Manfred's relationship with Astarte is essentially mystical: "Manfred seeks and finds transcendence in the immediate personal centrality provided by his impatient descent into darkness," during which he "[m]odel[s] himself on Astarte" (Ian Dennis 84).

Proceeding beyond the Witch to the lair of Arimanes, Manfred must "becom[e] God" (Morgan 19)—fully realize God for himself and recognize God's image within—in order to reach what Origen has called the unitive stage (Louth 55).<sup>78</sup> Arimanes reclines on a globe of fire before him in a place close to God for its metaphysical depth, a place "where never human foot / Of common mortal trod" (II.iii.2-3) surrounded by spirits who denounce Manfred's mortality and demand immediate supplication. "Bow down and worship!" (II.iv.30) they shriek at the "rash and fatal wretch" (II.iv.29), to which Manfred, "Child of Earth" (II.iv.35), defiantly retorts that while he "kneel[s] not" (II.iv.36) himself, he would rather "kneel together" (II.iv.49) with the spirits before the "overruling Infinite—the Maker / Who made [Arimanes] not for worship" (II.iv.47-8). In the "fullness of humiliation" (II.iv.40) Manfred has "knelt / To [his] own

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<sup>78</sup> *Sister Catherine* has been cited as a paradigmatic example of the phenomenon, in Catherine's words, "I am become God" (qtd. in Morgan 120). Determined to pursue independence beyond the convent's confines, Catherine must first conquer her "desire for God" (Morgan 120) in order to become God, or to put it another way, she must recognize that this identity has already been forged: the Christian *has become* God, always-already. Any apparent separation between the believer and God is an idea that for mystics like Catherine was institutionally imposed (Morgan 121-3). In the face of ecclesial limitations, she tells her confessor: "When I leave all things behind I must also leave you" (qtd. in Morgan 119). Regarding *Manfred*, Leonard Goldberg writes that "Manfred has learned to inhabit a space as would a god" (155), yet he submits that this occurs *in spite of* "efforts at self-annihilation" (155). I argue that he does so as a result of them.

desolation” (II.iv.41-2), but far from worshipping himself in any self-absorbed sense he actually kneels to that which is above him, for that which is above him is also within him. Arimanes symbolically represents what the Abbot will come to physically represent in the world, the improper mediation of the divine. In fact, Arimanes’s spirits prefigure the Abbot in bemoaning Manfred’s clay as “clog[ing] his ethereal essence” (II.iv.57), though they do perceive that he is “of no common order, as his port / And presence here denote” (II.iv.52-3). Having rejected the tantalizing riches of the material world, immolated himself through confessing the sins of his past life, braved the darkness that threatened to overwhelm his being, proceeded beyond the “super-human aid” (I.ii.4) of the Hunter and Witch of the Alps, and left all behind in denouncing the final vestige of divine mediation, the naked contemplative arrives at the journey’s climactic moment. Through Nemesis, who for Spence is a manifestation of Manfred’s consciousness (5), Manfred “[u]ncharnel[s]” (II.iv.82) Astarte, “[o]ne without a tomb” (II.iv.83):

Shadow! or Spirit!  
 Whatever thou art,  
 Which still doth inherit  
 The whole or a part  
 Of the form of thy birth,  
 Of the mould of thy clay,  
 Which returned to the earth,  
 Re-appear to the day! (II.iv.84-91)

At these words Astarte is “uncharnel[ed],” but she is “one without a tomb,”<sup>79</sup> a Christ-like living-dead upon whose resurrection Manfred’s inner self depends. Merton reminds us that it is the resurrection above all else that rouses the dormant self within and endows the striving soul with a glimpse of itself (38). Looking upon Astarte is to look upon “the same” (II.iv.102), that is, the same “God” (II.iv.102) he addresses in exclamation: “It is the same! Oh God, that I

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<sup>79</sup> Is Astarte dead, Dennis asks, or is she truly “one without a tomb”? His answer does not venture beyond what is explicitly said in the poem: the apparition subsists in a “life-in-death” (Ian Dennis 79) state, evidenced by the reassuring “bloom upon [her] cheek” (II.iv.98) and her unsatisfying “inaccessib[ility]” (Ian Dennis 80).



should dread / To look upon the same—Astarte!” (II.iv.102-3), a similar identification to that which he made at the beginning of his journey when faced with the female specter fashioned by the seven spirits. Now, as then, he instantiates the abstraction “Oh God” (II.iv.102) with literal meaning. In medieval Christianity, supplication on the part of the living could assist the souls in purgatory. But Radler argues that thirteenth-century mystic Christina the Astonishing connects the earthy and purgatorial realms due to her spectacular existence as “a living dead or undead person” (“Liminality and Ambiguity” 126). Thomas of Cantimpré’s *Life of Christina* tells of Christina’s miraculous resurrection: back on earth and equipped an impervious body, she chose to instruct the faithful through extreme forms of bodily torment (Radler, “Liminality and Ambiguity” 122-3). Her body is like Christ’s (Radler, “Liminality and Ambiguity” 123-4) in its both-and, “this-and-that-worldly status” (Radler, “Liminality and Ambiguity” 126). Also like Christ’s body, Christina’s unsettling liminality offered redemption to any who sought to draw on her salvific power. Her Christ-like body and capacity to act as “a mouthpiece of the divine” (Radler, “Liminality and Ambiguity” 127) (thus bypassing hegemonic claims to mediation by the clergy) leads Radler to call Christina “co-redemptrix” (“Liminality and Ambiguity” 127). Astarte as co-redemptrix appears, embodied in a “mould of . . . clay” (II.iv.89) whose dust shares in the very sinews of Manfred’s ligaments but whose divinity inspires his soul with “tenderness” (II.ii.114), “humility” (II.ii.115), and “virtue” (II.ii.116) that he admittedly “never had” (II.ii.115). In this deific moment the problem of mediation is, Manfred hopes, suspended indefinitely, for who would bother with a priest, the saints, or even the Blessed Virgin when united with the divine being from whom his “likeness” (II.ii.145) derives?

But alienation attends each stage of the mystic’s quest, and often estrangement piques at its climax, the moment at which darkness and light abide in starkest counterpoint. Manfred’s

request of the image to speak is met with silence—a resounding absence he must “endure” (II.iv.119) or else “shrink from immortality” (II.iv.130). Alienation plays a focal role in medieval mystical theology. What alienates the soul is its simultaneous identification with and distance from God, the first of which encourages a fantasy of completeness that is promptly undercut by the reality of the second (Beckwith, “Material Mysticism” 44). Tragically, the mystic can never satisfy his fantasy, but this insatiable feeling of alienation “perpetuates the mystical desire as it explores the profundity of its own lack of and distance from its creator” (Beckwith, “Material Mysticism” 45). Astarte’s initial utterance “Manfred!” (II.iv.150) galvanizes the mystic, and he fancies his own wholeness extending in the voice of his beloved. The equivalence he assumes between his being and her voice—“I live but in the sound—it is thy voice!” (II.iv.151, my emphasis)—is one that he makes advisedly, for nothing is more intimate than true unity between human and divine through detachment: according to Eckhart, “God must be very I, I very God, so consummately one that this he and this I are one ‘is’” (qtd. in Bancroft 8). Manfred’s conversation with Astarte is a communion with himself, “a *meditation* in dramatic form” (Spence 5, my emphasis) consisting of a series of one-word exclamations that are bereft of detail but that carry their own codified meanings in the cloud. The *Cloud*-author participates in the medieval suspicion of language (McDonald 45) and illustrates its fallen nature through subtle interplay of “world” (McDonald 51) and “word” (McDonald 51). In linking the former with the latter, the author demonstrates the “worldliness” (McDonald 51) of “wordiness” (McDonald 51). *The Cloud of Unknowing* elides this problem of wordiness not only in its liberal use of images but also in its moments of “single-word contemplation” (McDonald 57): a repeated cry of one-word utterances through the cloud is more redolent than a string of complex sentences can hope to be (McDonald 57) when one considers the inadequacy of language to signify ineffable

experience. Manfred searches for a word of forgiveness between the staccato-like utterances “Manfred!” (II.iv.150, 152, 156) and “Farewell!” (II.iv.152, 153, 154) and, finding none, “in that silence [he is] more than answered” (II.iv.111), and he “depart[s] a debtor” (II.iv.169). In the apophatic tradition there can be no perfect union with an unrealizable God, thus all attempts to achieve one are by definition ultimately unsatisfactory. The real union, however, occurs in the moment of self-recognition in the mirror.

Astarte’s “remain[ing] forever unavailable” is really to remain forever desirable “within the system of metaphysical desire,” Dennis observes, where “any denial, any reverse, is potentially to be recuperated for the purposes of that desire” (Ian Dennis 81). Ultimate succor wafts tantalizingly out of reach so to bless the process of *affectus*, which bids the mystic to continually revisit the journey of *imitatio Christi* throughout his life. The *imago Dei* might remain forever unavailable, but its very unavailability stokes metaphysical desire, builds up spiritual stamina, and compels the earnest contemplative ever upwards by incessantly pushing him down. No wonder the Abbot cannot grasp the paradox of Manfred’s “earthless flight” (III.iv.152) as he is once again rapt into the cloud at the play’s end: “[h]e’s gone” (III.iv.152), the monk stammers in disbelief, lost to a place he “dread[s] to think” (III.iv.153) because the journey upon which Manfred’s soul embarks appears to be a descent.<sup>80</sup> The process begins all over again, as a spirit, unbidden by the mystic to whom it comes due to his increasingly “absorb’d” (III.iv.135) state of mind, appears, “[h]is face *wrapt* in a mantle, and his form / Robed as with angry *clouds*” (III.iv.164-5, my emphases). A poised, confident defiance exudes from the experienced mystic, for he knows that the early spirits, those that “rise / Like infernal god[s] out

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<sup>80</sup> The Abbot fails to understand where Manfred’s soul has gone at the end of the poem because, as Spence suggests, it “has not gone anywhere. . . . No spatial metaphor is appropriate for a soul as independent as Manfred’s has become” (7).

of the earth” (III.iv.62-3), carry a worldly, all-too-mortal force that “hast no power upon [him]” (III.iv.125) because his “innate sense” (III.iv.132) of the Trinity has been awakened. He “derives / No colour from the fleeting things without” (III.iv.133-4). As the Abbot says, he is “gone,” but there is little doubt as to whither. The details of each individual journey may vary, but his end—union with Astarte—is ever fixed in his soul’s eye.

Chapter Four: *Bleak House*'s "[In]Consequential Ground"<sup>81</sup>: Eucharistic Theology and  
Bureaucratic Absence in Dickens's London<sup>82</sup>

In believing in Christ by faith—which is but an apprehension of the understanding—we do no more really eat the body of Christ than doth the hungrye man his dinner when he apprehendeth and desireth it but cannot have it. (Kellison 230)

Many Victorian writers turned to the Middle Ages for a model of presence against which they might begin to fill the absence created by modern life. The medieval Eucharist, that ultimate nexus of presence, Christ's substance immolated on the altar, the quintessence of unity that nourished the soul as well as the body—this most material of symbols provided a conceptual hinge about which modern man might reorganize society. As Pseudo-Dionysius said in the sixth century, the Eucharist works to reconcile the individual recipient to Christ and reorganize the collective faithful into His one church (Adams 36-7). Though debate over the precise figuration of the Eucharist called many medieval theologians to task—and some to tribunals—certain aspects of the sacrament were always beyond doubt: the Eucharist is constitutive of spiritual and material dimensions or properties; it is *the* symbol of unity that binds together communities on earth and the individual communicant with the divine; it is good, and a conveyor of grace; and most importantly it is Christ, *present*, in the present, on the altar. The Reformation unsettled these claims to presence and unity in crucial ways. Christ reigns in heaven, the Reformers

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<sup>81</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, 225. Subsequent citations to this work are cited in the text as *BH*, followed by the page number.

<sup>82</sup> Curran, T. "Dickens and Eucharist: Sacramental Medievalism in *Bleak House*." *Christianity & Literature*, 66(3), pp. 444-462. Copyright © 2017 by the Author. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications, Ltd.

reasoned, so He cannot “really” be present on earth, ensconced in earthy elements, confectioned within an earthly institution. The only institution that matters are the *words* of institution (*hoc est corpus meum*), and it is the faith that the individual communicant has in those words—clearly uttered and properly understood—that can elevate the recipient to heaven where Christ dwells. Unintentionally, perhaps, the Reformation’s challenge to Eucharistic presence invited an absence that had grown palpable by the nineteenth century. The Anglican Church with which Dickens was familiar had experienced divisions along Eucharistic lines: the nominalists brought Christ’s presence in the sacrament to its Zwinglian conclusion and reduced the host to an empty sign, while the moderate realists posited a vague doctrine of presence in the tradition of Luther.

Charles Dickens, too, tends to be rather vague when it comes to Christian doctrine. “[S]teeped . . . in the knowledge, the words, the stories, the rhetoric, [and] the practices” (Cunningham 255) of the Church of England, Dickens is not a secular writer *per se*, but Joshua Taft suggests that “he offers a variant of Christianity that preserves a minimal theological content while stressing its ethical component” (661). For Karl Ashley Smith, Dickens engages quite directly with religious symbols; his novels ask whether religious discourse retains a voice in an intellectual and cultural milieu that has effectively rejected its epistemological value (4). Smith is quite willing to endorse religious readings of Dickens’s novels, but he nevertheless assures, like Taft, that they do not talk about theology at all (Karl Ashley Smith 6).<sup>83</sup> Other scholars are more sanguine regarding Dickens’s overall engagement with religion in his novels. Carolyn Oulton, Natalie Bell Cole, and Jude Nixon agree that Dickens’s religion is always present,

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<sup>83</sup> Dennis Walder distinguishes between Dickens’s personal faith and his identity as a writer: while he may have been a Christian (13), he cannot be considered “a religious novelist” (15). Rodney Stenning Edgecombe’s rhetoric is rather less diplomatic: Dickens “attempt[ed] to gut Christianity of its irrational dogma” (135), and he conducted this business in a particularly subversive way—as a Christian insider (135).

embodied within the texture of his work.<sup>84</sup> Most confident of all is Robert Butterworth, for whom religion has primacy of place in Dickens's novels to the extent that it "is the solution to all society's problems" (2). Whatever Dickens's feelings may have been about the Church of England, and wherever his particular allegiance lay regarding Eucharistic controversies medieval or modern, Dickens's critique of England's courts of law in *Bleak House* raises many of the same questions that animated theological debate over the Eucharist since the sixteenth century. If presence is fundamentally linguistic, then what happens when the words are obscured, or unclear to the recipients, or not understood? If presence depends upon faith alone, is there really "a there there"? If Christ is not confectioned *ex opere operato*, is there a way His grace can be made available regardless of the sins of the priest or of those in the pews? I argue that Dickens presents the British system of law operating as a central signifier like the Eucharist, but a Eucharist that is absent when it should be present, linguistic when it should be embodied. Dickens constructs a Eucharistic drama to deconstruct the courts, as he demonstrates the consequences of stripping ritual of its essential qualities of nourishment for a Reformed Eucharistic system whose mysteries now reside in dust instead of sacrificial bread. He deploys theological language and concepts to instill what Kenneth Sroka calls a "sacramental consciousness" (186) in the Victorian legal system as a cautionary measure against using oppressive bureaucratic power at the expense of the citizens whom it exists to serve.

When Dickens comments on social relations, religious considerations are, generally speaking, never far off. I read his broader novelistic project as a symbiotic effort to bring spirituality out of the church and into the world and to enchant the world by means of the spirit.

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<sup>84</sup> See Oulton, *Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England: From Dickens to Eliot*; Cole, "'Amen in a Wrong Place': Charles Dickens Imagines the Victorian Church"; Nixon, "Framing Victorian Religious Discourse: An Introduction."

What good is purely physical nourishment, Dickens seems to ask, when the supernatural gifts that Christianity offers are short-circuited by pride, greed, ignorance, or lust for power? And perhaps more pressingly, what good is purely spiritual feeding, where Christ inhabits a place beyond this world toward which we can only aspire, when people in this world, in Regina Schwartz's words, are "hungry . . . condemned to apprehend and desire a dinner that they cannot have, at least, not yet" ("Real Hunger" 2) and yearn for a material, substantial, ingestible Eucharist? Dickens does in his novels—and particularly, I argue, in *Bleak House*—what David Grumett and Brannon Hancock wish might be done in twenty-first-century culture: he "extend[s]" (Grumett 6; Hancock 269) the Eucharist "outside the walls of the Church" (Hancock 269) in order to "contest . . . forms of secular materialism" (Grumett 4) at work in the broader society. Grumett shifts the focus from a linguistic and disembodied understanding of the Eucharist to the material species of bread and wine. Drawing creatively from the tradition of liturgical practice and theological reflection centered on Christ's corporeal presence in the sacrament, he posits an incarnational Eucharist whose transformed material reality might combat the fallacy of autonomous matter promoted by secular culture (Grumett 3-4). The endless stacks of papers that proliferate at the Court of Chancery, covered with thick layers of dust into which the very language contained therein is forever resolving, resist meaning at every turn precisely because they are disembodied and self-consuming. To correct this, the courts should exhibit qualities immaterial *and* material, spiritual *and* corporeal<sup>85</sup>—as does the medieval Eucharist. True participation by members of the *corpus mysticum* occurs, Grumett continues, in an encounter with Christ's physical presence; cut off from that source, the church as body is

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<sup>85</sup> Kenneth Sroka notes these kinds of juxtapositions elsewhere in Dickens. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens "reject[s] . . . spiritual and material monisms" (Sroka 187) that tether characters to a single representation; where there is no sacramental fusion, Sroka maintains, there is no life (187).



vulnerable to manipulation by secular forces (10-1). Dickens's novel mobilizes the medieval Eucharist's community-building power, as well as its power to negotiate between things worldly and supernatural, to tell a cautionary tale<sup>86</sup> of what happens when an institution falls prey to a dualistic way of thinking, forsakes this Eucharistic model, and so gets manipulated by secular forces.

Hancock imagines the Eucharist as a "force" (265) from which "community" (265) springs. He wonders if extending the Eucharist beyond the church walls and into other institutions would facilitate a needed "*crossing*" (Hancock 267, emphasis in original) that would mend the "rift between the Church and the World" (Hancock 267). Reading *Bleak House* through the prism of the Eucharist and its histories might help us conceptualize Dickens's dissatisfaction with public institutions which swallow up generations of people, institutions with no localized or compassionate presence to be found (Chancery); with people who profess to be filled with life but whose lack of substance renders them ill-equipped to bear even the lightest of responsibilities (Harold Skimpole); with those who refuse to admit that the system they support is actually the problem (Chadband), and instead exacerbate the problem by offering spiritual words rather than spiritual sustenance to those (Jo) who cannot comprehend their own disadvantage. In other words, reading Dickens's novel in terms of Eucharistic history and theology throws into relief his disillusionment over a bureaucratic absence that seeps into the interstices of the novel at virtually every level. While I do suggest that *Bleak House* enlists Eucharistic taxonomies for the purposes outlined above, I wish to pose qualifications similar to those Jay Zysk makes in his book *Shadow and Substance: Eucharistic Controversy and English Drama across the Reformation Divide* before proceeding. Literature that takes up the Eucharist

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<sup>86</sup> C. J. Gordon observes that when the figure of the Eucharist has appeared in literary works it has most often been used to express caution or offer instruction (105).

does not, according to Zysk, evacuate its ritual or promote a specific tradition (*Shadow and Substance* 14). Appropriation of Eucharistic forms does not equate to “performing a sacrament” (Zysk, *Shadow and Substance* 16) any more than satirizing the Eucharist divests it of meaning (Zysk, *Shadow and Substance* 16-7). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, literary “engagements with Eucharistic discourses do not disclose the religious beliefs” (Zysk, *Shadow and Substance* 17) of the authors who use them (Zysk, *Shadow and Substance* 17). This chapter does not argue that Dickens was an Anglo-Catholic—let alone a traditional Catholic with sympathies reaching beyond the Reformation—nor does it suggest that he supported the Catholic tradition over the Church of England. In addition, it does not claim that Chancery is a sacrament in the formal sense. Upon repeating the popular line of modern secularization—rejection of a sacralized world led to disillusionment, secularization, modernization, and enlightenment, where the medieval past is “regularly resurrected in order to be pilloried” (Gordon 109)—C. J. Gordon joins with several scholars in pronouncing a “return of enchantment” (110) in our present age (110). I suggest that Dickens laid the groundwork for this “return of enchantment” model by recovering the medieval Eucharist and extracting its social function to address, and ultimately satisfy, the desire for a unifying body in Victorian culture.

### **The Eucharist in the Middle Ages**

The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist was accepted in the earliest centuries of Christianity. In the early Middle Ages, ideas about Christ’s presence in the Eucharist were divided into two main camps. The Ambrosian tradition conceived of Christ’s presence in a physical, material manner, while Augustinian figurations imagined a spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament (Macy, *Theologies* 5). William Crockett predicates controversies between the Augustinian and Ambrosian Eucharistic traditions, in large part, on the gradual dissolution of the

relationship between symbol and reality. As the classical unity of symbol and reality began to be undermined, hints of the former were increasingly thought to preclude the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. While in Augustine partaking of Christ's body does not admit separation between *corpus Christi* and *corpus mysticum*, throughout the medieval period this body was more generally understood to be the corporeal Christ in the elements broken and poured out on the altar (Crockett 106-7).

Augustine defines a sacrament as a sacred sign, a sign of something sacred. In his *Sententiae*, Peter Lombard does not so much extend the definition of the sacramental sign as clarify what it "causes" (Adams 33), that is, the "thing signified" (Adams 33). Aquinas proffers a similar clarification. Aquinas combines, as did Augustine, "the true *and* the mystical body of Christ" (qtd. in Crockett 114, my emphasis). Aquinas does not jettison the spiritual terminology of the Augustinian tradition but rather insists that Eucharistic presence is "spiritual [and] non-visible" (qtd. in Crockett 115). In the thirteenth century, which in many ways was the culmination of a centuries-old assault on Platonic signification, it was necessary for Aquinas to clarify that the Eucharistic sign causes grace: while signs meant "participation" (Crockett 116) for the early church, now the language of "sign" (Crockett 117) and "symbol" (Crockett 117) left a ghostly impression (Crockett 117). "Thomas employs the principle of causality," Crockett deduces, "not in order to negate the symbolic character of the sacraments, but in order to make clear in the medieval context what was obvious in the patristic context, namely, that the sacraments as signs participate in the reality that they signify and are not 'mere' signs" (Crockett 117).

In the ninth century, Ambrosian-Augustinian differences regarding Eucharistic presence bore fruit in the form of large-scale Eucharistic debates featuring the corporeal, incarnational

understanding of Paschasius Radbertus against Ratramnus's symbolic, figural interpretation. Paschasius's ninth-century treatise *De corpore et sanguine domini* was the first doctrinal articulation of the sacrament of the Eucharist and identified sacramental presence with the "terrestrial" (Macy, *Theologies* 21) body of Christ (Macy, *Theologies* 21). Though Paschasius stresses the corporeal realism of Christ's presence in the sacrament, Crockett nevertheless suggests that he appropriates a distinctly Augustinian framework: Paschasius recognizes "both 'figure' . . . and 'truth' in the sacrament" (Crockett 108). Similarly, Ratramnus does not go so far as to dismantle his opponent's language. Ratramnus affirms the real presence of Christ in the sacrament while understanding that presence in exclusively spiritual terms, though he was accused of denying the real presence on these very grounds (Crockett 108-9). Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnson second Crockett's motion to focus more on the theologians' concurrences than on their incongruities: both Paschasius and Ratramnus made use of spiritualist vocabularies—though of course to varying degrees—and believed that the presence they spoke of was "real" (223).

Those who adopted Paschasius's model were known as "metabolists" (Macy, *Theologies* 71) due to their use of "biological images" (Macy, *Theologies* 70) to describe sacramentality. In the spirit of Platonic Augustinianism, Berengar of Tours challenged this conception in the eleventh century and reaffirmed Christ's "figurative" (Rubin 17) presence in an attempt to side-step issues of substance and accidents (Rubin 17). Upon denouncing Paschasius's claim that the faithful consume the Galilean body, Berengar was made to read aloud a statement before the Roman Synod of 1059 renouncing his views on Eucharistic presence. The statement uttered by a reluctant Berengar bordered on the macabre in its physicality (Macy, *Theologies* 36-7).<sup>87</sup> Failing

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<sup>87</sup> Berengar was made to swear that "the bread and wine which are placed on the altar after the consecration are not only signs (*non solum sacramentum*), but also the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that sensually,

to keep his oath, Berengar was rearraigned and summoned to the Council of Rome in 1079. His speedy retirement did not prevent dualist movements like the Cathars from taking up his pseudo-Augustinian teachings on the Eucharist (Macy, *Treasures* 23). From the eleventh century onward, the body of Christ was fundamentally (and officially) corporeal (De Lubac 161), and this meant that conceptual space between the body born of the Virgin and the body consecrated on the altar dissolved, leaving one substance (De Lubac 164).

The seven sacraments and the body of canon law were systematized concomitantly in the early twelfth century. The *Decretum* became the first textbook of canon law in medieval universities, and its tract on sacramental law, the *Tractatus de consecratione ecclesiae*, defined theological concepts like the real presence for generations of students. Canonists Ivo of Chartres and Rufinus wrote the doctrine of transubstantiation and the authority of priests to conduct the ritual of the Eucharist into the law (Izbicki 4). Ivo in particular focused more attentively than did previous canonists on sacramental matters; with Ivo, the Eucharist and the law were intertwined (Izbicki 23-4). Significantly, canonists like Ivo and Rufinus gave space to both sides of the patristic controversy (Augustine *and* Ambrose), of the Carolingian controversy (Paschasius *and* Ratramnus), and of the eleventh-century controversy (Berengar *and* Lanfranc) (Izbicki 24-6). Perhaps the most extreme conflation in the *Tractatus* is Simon of Bisignano's commentary on the Berengar controversy: the host is indeed "ground by the teeth of the faithful," but this occurs "only sacramentally" (Izbicki 146), feeding the interior man in a spiritual way (Izbicki 146).

For Aquinas, the body of Christ in the Eucharist is discernible only to the intellect, to the "spiritual eye" (Bradshaw and Johnson 225). Aquinas's notion of transubstantiative physics

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not only in sign, but in truth (*non solum sacramento, sed in veritate*) they are handled and broken by the hands of the priest and crushed by the teeth of the faithful, swearing by the holy and one-in-substance Trinity and by the most holy Gospel of Christ" (qtd. in Macy, *Treasures* 21).

sought to correct theories of Eucharistic presence assumed to be too physical, on the one hand, or purely symbolic, on the other. In this regard, he found a middle way and united the two (Bradshaw and Johnson 225-6). Transubstantiation is “a whole-being conversion” (Adams 179) at the end of which Christ is present in the mode of substance under the accidents of bread. Once the doctrine of transubstantiation had been put in place, it became imperative for the priest to utter the correct words, while performing the correct gestures, with the proper intention (Izbicki 86). One patristic text collected in Ivo’s *Decretum* went so far as to say “the invisible priest, Christ, converted the elements ‘by His word with a hidden power,’ using the words of institution” (Izbicki 88). Concerning “the transformative power of words” (Izbicki 89), Aquinas instructs that what separates the Eucharist from the other sacraments is the real presence of Christ conferred *ex opere operato* regardless of the presence of a recipient. (The other sacraments rely fundamentally on the internal condition of the recipient’s soul.) After the consecration, Christ *is there*, and however the internal state of an individual communicant may affect his or her encounter with Christ, the objective presence of Christ remains, pouring out grace upon the community of believers (Adams 48-9).

### **The Reformation of the Eucharist: A Move toward Absence**

Martin Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* levied the first serious challenge against medieval religion in 1520. This work draws an analogy between the captivity of the Jews in the six century BC by the Babylonians and the captivity of Christianity and the sacraments by Rome. Taking an anti-ritualist approach, Luther trusted in the words of institution over “formulas” (Bradshaw and Johnson 237) in which they had been couched; this inveighed against scholastic formulations in particular, namely transubstantiation (Bradshaw and Johnson 237-8). By 1520, the seeds of what would become Luther’s mature thought on the Eucharist are

discernable, and they have to do with the faith of the communicant (Thomas Davis 19-20). As is evident in his early writings, Luther was impressed by the communal aspect of the body of the church in whose unity the individual might participate when receiving the Eucharist, but in the *Babylonian Captivity* his thought begins to privilege “the individual’s personal faith in the role of [E]ucharistic participation while [at the same time] downplaying the notion of *communio sanctorum*” (Thomas Davis 26). One must *trust* in the *promise* of Christ’s testamental *words*—this, for Luther, is communion (Thomas Davis 27). The species amount to “sign and signal” (Thomas Davis 28) that recall Christ’s death, but he does not jettison the idea of objectivity in the sacrament *per se*, for the sacrament’s objective quality consists “in the Word” (Thomas Davis 30). In Thomas Davis’s words, the Word alone is necessary to receive worthily because it is “Christ’s substance, possessed through the hearing and believing of it—through faith” (33), as opposed to “what had traditionally been regarded as the medicinal power of the Sacrament: the objective infusion of grace by the elements themselves” (31).

Ulrich Zwingli, opposite to Luther among the reformers, argued staunchly for the inefficacy of sacraments. He breaks definitively with both Luther and Rome in *On the Lord’s Supper* when he proclaims “that the word ‘is’ [in the words of institution] is not to be taken literally” (qtd. in Bradshaw and Johnson 258). Construing *is* to mean *represents* renders Christ’s presence purely spiritual. Zwingli’s theology of the Eucharist depends upon metaphysical and epistemological bifurcation, first between the natures of Christ (it is impossible for His body to be contained in the Eucharist because it cannot be on innumerable altars while still in heaven), and second between matter and spirit (Bradshaw and Johnson 257-8). Johannes Oecolampad, preacher in Augsburg during the contentious 1520s, delineates his theology of the Eucharist in a letter to Johann Haner in 1527. Christ’s body is located only in heaven, constitutive of the Word,

and made real only through faith (Wandel 60). Luther roundly denounced both Oecolampad and Zwingli for “divid[ing] absolutely bodily eating and spiritual eating” (Wandel 71).

John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* systematized Reformation theology. He had more faith in sacramental efficacy than did Zwingli while remaining skeptical of Luther’s uncomfortable proximity to Rome on many theological issues (Bradshaw and Johnson 263-5). Calvin affirmed what he called “Real Presence” (qtd. in Bradshaw and Johnson 268), yet he challenged Luther’s conception that Christ’s humanity and divinity could be in all places at once. Thus, Calvin denied objective presence. As Christ’s body is in heaven, those who wish to receive must be “lifted up to heaven where Christ dwells” (Bradshaw and Johnson 269) with the help of the Holy Spirit (Bradshaw and Johnson 266-9). Sixteenth-century debates about the words of institution took place within a cultural context in the Christian west that was making strides in the disciplines of philology,<sup>88</sup> science and anatomy,<sup>89</sup> and performative theory.<sup>90</sup> For Calvin, an efficacious Eucharist depends, first, on the “clear proclamation and exposition of the Words of Institution” (Thomas Davis 65), and second, on the congregants “hear[ing] the words . . . and understand[ing] them” (Thomas Davis 67). The consecration—what makes Christ’s body present—does not entail an alteration in substance but in the way in which the elements of bread and wine are “use[d]” (Thomas Davis 69). The purpose of the elements is to direct the communicant away from the material world and toward heaven where Christ really is (Thomas Davis 72-3).

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<sup>88</sup> Scholars like Lorenzo Valla and Desiderius Erasmus examined how the study of language—taking into account the societies it creates and the ways in which it is a product of a specific society at a particular time and place—might affect biblical exegesis (Wandel 4).

<sup>89</sup> Lee Palmer Wandel lists several questions regarding Christ’s body that were circulating in the sixteenth century: “What did it mean for Christ to have a body? What kind of body? How was Christ ‘present’ among the community of Christians? Could he be known physically to his followers, or did they simply have a disembodied memory of him?” (Wandel 6). Adding to the confusion was the replacement of Galenic humoral theories with groundbreaking discoveries made possible by dissections (Wandel 7).

<sup>90</sup> Is “this do” mimetic, representational, or performative (Wandel 10)?



The consequences of the Reformation with regard to the Eucharist are epitomized in a 1535 pamphlet published by an association of ministers in Augsburg, Germany. The document pronounces Christ's presence in the sacrament as shrouded in "secret or mystery" (Wandel 89), outside the scope of theologians, graspable only by the faith of the individual communicant—a faith, Wandel notes, the pamphlet leaves ambiguous (88-9). All in all, the "absences" (Wandel 92) of the Augsburg Eucharist "silenced meanings" (Wandel 92) that had been meticulously developed, debated, and systematized over centuries in the Middle Ages; medieval figurations were "gone" (Wandel 92), the "theater of the Eucharist" (Wandel 92) was hollowed out and done away with, and flesh and blood dematerialized into language.

### **Moderate and Immoderate Eucharists in the Church of England**

The Anglican Eucharistic tradition can be subdivided into two camps: those who subscribe to a "realist" (Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 49) understanding of the Eucharist, and those who reject sacramental realism for what has been called a "nominalist" (Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 49) approach. For Anglican Eucharistic realists, the signs of bread and wine are connected to that which they purport to signify so that Christ is "present in some way" (Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 49). The realists further split according to the mode of sacramental presence. "Moderate realism" (Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 49), as it has come to be called, attests to a "real yet mysterious and supernatural" (Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 49) understanding of presence, while "immoderate realism" (Brian Douglas, *Companion* 451), a pejorative label given to what has been seen as a continuation of medieval Eucharistic orthodoxy, reads Eucharistic presence in a "fleshy or carnal manner" (Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 49) loosely derived from the medieval metabolists. Many prominent members of the Oxford Movement considered themselves to be moderate realists.

Nominalists, on the other hand, stake their Eucharistic theology on a variety of dualisms rooted in the faith of the individual believer. Philosophically anti-incarnational, the nominalists “sever the participatory link between the earthly sacrament and the heavenly reality” (Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 50), a move that delimits absolutely the created from the supernatural order. This logic, of course, extends to the Eucharist: the signs of bread and wine are linked linguistically, not “really,” to what they signify, and sacramental efficacy depends upon the communicant’s faith (Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 50).

Moderate realism in the Anglican tradition can be traced to the early seventeenth century. High and low Anglicans who considered themselves moderate sought a halfway-house between transubstantiation, on the one hand, and memorialism, on the other. Low Anglicans focused on the faith of the individual at the expense of Christ’s objective presence in order to elide the problematic of presence and absence. High Anglicans, too, distanced themselves from material presence through what Eleanor McNees calls a “corporate recalling” (96) of Christ’s once-and-for-all sacrifice, reenacted by the priest. Neither group acknowledges substantial change in the species, but for both the Eucharist is more than a mere sign (McNees 96-7). Most Anglican realists in the nineteenth century preached moderate realism. According to Brian Douglas, moderate realists claimed the terms “real, spiritual, mysterious [and] supernatural” (Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 57) to denote Eucharistic presence, taking care to differentiate themselves from the “literal, carnal, or fleshly” (Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 57) conceptualizations of the immoderates. Newman made sure to do so: “The Body of Christ is in a mysterious way, if not locally, yet really present, so that we are able after some ineffable manner to receive it” (qtd. in Brian Douglas, *Eucharistic Theology* 60).

The Tractarians grounded their theology of the Eucharist in their belief in what they called the “sacramental principle” (Brian Douglas, *Companion* 455) an incarnational idea received most immediately from Romanticism that places nature at the center of a divine epistemology. Since divinity is known in and through nature, things of the natural world like the Eucharistic elements can make the sacred present. Tractarians like Henry Wilberforce sought a middle way between what he saw as Zwingli’s underestimation of signs’ capacity to signify and the immoderate realists’ irrational belief in signs’ ability to become Christ’s literal body (Brian Douglas, *Companion* 455-6). This middle way amounted to moderate realism and adherence to the sacramental principle. Pusey led the Tractarian charge against physical presence on the assumption that spiritual presence is “more real” (Brian Douglas, *Companion* 461). While the Tractarians generally avoided systemizing for fear of reducing the mystery to sets of rationalistic data, they did tend to acknowledge the *Catholic* systematizing tradition as legitimate. (This varied, of course, throughout the Tractarian ranks.) Douglas suggests that this accounts for their preference for realism over nominalist linguistics (Brian Douglas, *Companion* 593). They shared this affinity for the traditional Eucharist with several Reformation and post-Reformation poets. John Milton, for example, was prominent among poets whose ambivalence over revisions to the story of the Eucharist caused intense nostalgia. Eucharistic controversy at the Reformation consisted of two distinct sets of fears, Schwartz adduces: the reformers’ fear of a material Eucharist, and “the Catholic fear of losing communion with God altogether, of divinity and humanity locked in a tragic separation that left man wallowing in his sin” (Schwartz, “Real Hunger” 1-2). Schwartz blends elements of the Eucharistic controversy with religious medievalism in thinking about how Reformation poets might have processed these fears. Many accepted a spiritual rather than a material presence of Christ in the sacrament, but this

engendered in them “a persistent nostalgia for that material presence” (Schwartz, “Real Hunger” 2) that she perceives as “hungry” (Schwartz, “Real Hunger” 2). Dickens, too, detects in the quiet desperation of the victims of Chancery, Tom-all-Alone’s, and the Ghost’s Walk a desire for material presence. *Bleak House* amplifies these absences so that the real presence of its antidote would be made all the more vivid by contrast.

### ***Bleak House* Eucharists**

Child-like faith in the systems of *Bleak House* invariably leads to dead ends. Faith in absence constitutes the normative view of the novel, rendering it impossible for characters to extricate themselves from the “nets” (*BH* 523) they are “taken in” (*BH* 523) precisely because they ensnare themselves willingly in a system that does not work. Sir Leicester Dedlock’s faith in the Chancery suit, English voters’ faith in Doodle and Coodle, Chadband’s faith in the discourses of “high church” (*BH* 627) or “low church” (*BH* 627), and faith in abstract theories to salvage Tom-all-Alone’s are predicated on *somebody* that exists “according to somebody’s theory but nobody’s practice” (*BH* 627). The phantom “Somebody” (*BH* 523) aids Harold Skimpole, the clearest representative of child-like faith in the novel, as he gleefully illustrates the ways he is

bailed out—like a boat. Or paid off—like a ship’s company. *Somebody* always does it for me. *I* can’t do it, you know, for I never have any money. But *Somebody* does it. I get out by *Somebody*’s means. . . . If you were to ask me who *Somebody* is, upon my word I couldn’t tell you. Let us drink to *Somebody*. God bless him! (*BH* 523, first emphasis mine, second emphasis in original)

If Skimpole’s “Somebody” were not the charitable John Jarndyce but rather “Society, which has taken upon itself the general arrangement of the whole system of spoons” (*BH* 434), he would suffer the fate of Jo and be “moved on” (*BH* 221) when Society “does *not* produce that spoon” (*BH* 434, emphasis in original). Skimpole assumes the “social system . . . to be agreeable. It’s a

system of harmony, in short” (*BH* 252), because benevolent hands like Jarndyce allow him to keep a “natural dinner hour” (*BH* 434). But Society is not embodied in a person. In the world of *Bleak House*, Somebody organizes Society, denies aid when its constituents are too ill to help themselves, and “turn[s] [them] out” (*BH* 435) in the cold, as Skimpole advises they do to Jo: “‘In the meantime,’ [Esther] ventured to observe, ‘[Jo] is getting worse.’ ‘In the meantime,’ said Mr. Skimpole cheerfully, ‘as Miss Summerson, with her practical good sense, observes, he is getting worse. Therefore I recommend your turning him out before he gets still worse’” (*BH* 435). Believing in the magnanimity of Somebody by faith alone, Skimpole fails to see beyond his own perception of presence to the very real fact of Society’s objective absence for unfortunate souls like Jo.

Jo haunts “[t]he blackest nightmare in the infernal stables” (*BH* 627) of London, the slums of Tom-all-Alone’s—“and Tom is fast asleep” (*BH* 627). The origins of “Tom” are mysterious to all:

Whether “Tom” is the popular representative of the original plaintiff or defendant in Jarndyce and Jarndyce; or whether Tom lived here when the suit had laid the street waste, all alone, until other settlers came to join him; or whether the traditional title is a comprehensive name for a retreat cut off from honest company and put out of the pale of hope; perhaps nobody knows. (*BH* 220)

But of all the Somebodies that Tom might be, and amid the querulous “disputation [over] how [he] shall be got right” (*BH* 627), “there is but one thing perfectly clear, to wit, that Tom only may and can, or shall and will, be reclaimed according to somebody’s theory but nobody’s practice” (*BH* 627). Tom-all-Alone’s is the “[in]consequential ground” (*BH* 225) upon which unfortunate souls like Jo are deposited when they are turned out by Society, or by Skimpole—or, as we will see in a moment, by Chadband—whose obliviousness abets such behavior. Eminent minds in church and state puzzle over Tom’s plight and construct ambiguous, protracted theories

concerning Tom's mode of presence. Is he a concern of the church, or of the law, or of society? Interminable questions of "[w]hether he shall be put into the main road by constables, or by beadles, or by bell-ringing, or by force of figures, or by correct principles of taste, or by high church, or by low church, or by no church" (*BH* 627) distract from the truth that Tom's real value to Parliamentarians and Anglican divines is purely symbolic. But they should take heed of Tom, though he be only Somebody: "There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere" (*BH* 627). Tom-all-Alone's is but one manifestation of *Bleak House's* consumptive absences whose "blood" is "corrupted" rather than blessed and shed to "propagate infection and contagion" rather than grace.

Whoever Tom is or was, "[c]ertainly, Jo don't know" (*BH* 220). The social system that overlays the narrative, a system Skimpole commends as harmonious and Kenge reverently designates a "system of equity" (*BH* 843), is essentially a system of language, yet it is a linguistic system that depends upon the obfuscation of its language to maintain power. Jo stands in awe before "all that language" (*BH* 220); the "mysterious symbols" (*BH* 220) that stare intimidatingly back at him ensure that he remains "in utter darkness as to [their] meaning" (*BH* 220). The canonists of the twelfth century viewed the Eucharist as building unity. Simon of Bisignano hailed the Eucharist as a language one can depend on, the site where meaning is constant, reliable, unifying, and healing. The Eucharistic sign "is both signified and signifier, Christ's body [as] *both* the thing in itself *and* the sign of ecclesiastical unity" (Izbicki 35, my emphases), a transcendental signified that stands inside and outside language (Izbicki 34-5). That the signs surrounding Jo are incongruous to him is indicative of a larger issue than a particular character's level of education. Jo is the victim of a system whose illegibility wraps him up in "unfamiliar . . . shapes" (*BH* 220) and forces him to ask "what does it all mean, and if

it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me?” (BH 221). Signified and signifier exist in a state of separation that leaves Jo in isolation, as he “shuffle[s] through the streets” (BH 221); indeed, “[i]t must be a strange state to be like Jo!” (BH 220). But for the pontificating minister Chadband, the system is not responsible for Jo’s ignorance. In fact, the boy’s ignorance provides the necessary underbelly of the system: Jo is “to us a gem and jewel” (BH 269) precisely because he “know[s] nothink” (BH 269):

For what are you, my young friend? Are you a beast of the field? No. A bird of the air? No. A fish of the sea or river? No. You are a human boy, my young friend. A human boy. O glorious to be a human boy! And why glorious, my young friend? Because you are capable of receiving the lessons of wisdom, because you are capable of profiting by this discourse which I now deliver for your good, because you are not a stick, or a staff, or a stock, or a stone, or a post, or a pillar. And do you cool yourself in that stream now, my young friend? No. Why do you not cool yourself in that stream now? Because you are in a state of darkness, because you are in a state of obscurity, because you are in a state of sinfulness, because you are in a state of bondage. (BH 269-70)

Chadband “deliver[s]” “discourse” for Jo’s “good,” something which does him no good at all. He simply adds words to the befuddled listener’s problem of words. Chadband fails to offer goods that might objectively sustain his “young friend” because the “state of darkness” that shrouds Jo in “obscurity” precludes Eucharistic nourishment in the Protestant imagination. Jo’s lack of comprehension renders him “[in]capable of profiting by [Chadband’s] discourse” in the same way that misunderstanding the words of institution (*hoc est corpus meum*) prevents the communicant from partaking of the body of Christ. This circularity matters little to Chadband, as is made clear in the repetition of this one-sided “discourse” later in the novel. A move from unified community to the comprehension and disposition of the individual has left ministers like Chadband powerless to *really* help the needy in their congregations; all he offers are words (in other words) rather than the real presence Jo seeks.

Eamon Duffy emphasizes the inseparability of the individual and communal aspects which coexist in the medieval Eucharist. He insists that one cannot understand Christ's body as "the emblem and the instrument of all truly human embodiment" (Duffy 91) without considering the complex ways in which its particular and universal aspects constitute each other (Duffy 91-2). This dual function is perhaps best expressed in the definitional shift of the *corpus mysticum* in the twelfth century: the *corpus mysticum*, originally the name for the consecrated host (the host became the *corpus Christi*), came to be known as the organized body of Christian society united in the sacrament at the altar. The Fourth Lateran Council decreed in 1215 that the Church could function officially as a body politic, in other words, as a legal, political organism incorporated under one head. Viewed in this way, ecclesiastical authorities invested sacramental discourse with sociopolitical implications that were fundamentally ideological (Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics* 19).<sup>91</sup> *Bleak House* infuses the political with a sacred character that organizes Parliamentary proceedings—and those Parliamentarians who carry out the proceedings—into a set of "religious exercises" (BH 563). "Doodle" (BH 562), embodied as a man but representative of an arm of the political establishment, has found that he "must throw himself upon the country—chiefly in the form of sovereigns and beer. In this metamorphosed state he is available in a good many places simultaneously, and can throw himself upon a considerable portion of the country at one time" (BH 562). In many places at once yet really embodied in one place, Doodle's presence on the many altars of "the London [political] season" (BH 563) recalls Christ's simultaneous presence on many altars in the form of substance in the

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<sup>91</sup> As the political sphere encroached upon and commandeered sacred space during this terminological transition, what had been mystery was "instrumentalized" (Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics* 20) and embodied (Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics* 18-20). This new religio-political discourse was state regulated, thereby granting the king a "superbody" (Kantorowicz 4) consisting of "[t]wo [b]odies" (Kantorowicz 4) in which the mystical and the political are bound in a relationship that was explained, to a large extent, according to the logic of Eucharistic theology (Kantorowicz 196-9).



medieval Eucharist. But the Reformer's dualist understanding of the nature of Christ's body—He is in heaven, so He cannot be on earth—evacuated Christ's substantial presence from the Eucharistic host, rendering it a symbol that merely gestures toward Christ. Dickens parodies this delegitimization of the sign, as members of the desacralized body politic “pocket Doodle in the form of sovereigns, and swallow Doodle in the form of beer” (*BH* 562-3). “Coodle” (*BH* 562), his political opponent, disseminates in the same way until the “season comes to a sudden end, through all the Doodleites and Coodleites dispersing to assist Britannia in those religious exercises” (*BH* 263). Such movement from the church to the socio-political sphere exists often in Dickens's novels. For John Schad, evacuation of the sacred in Dickens manifests in a dramatic, “head over heels” (17) style reminiscent of Bakhtinian carnival (17). Written “the wrong way up” (Schad 6), Dickens's secularized and bowdlerized church “shades into the courtroom, theater, and, indeed, ‘elsewhere’” (Schad 6) as a result.<sup>92</sup> The church “shades into the courtroom” in *Bleak House*, but such a movement need not be evacuative if we take Grumett's and Hancock's claims seriously. I suggest that Dickens parallels the evacuation of the courtroom with the evacuation of the modern Eucharist, and the presence offered by the medieval Eucharist might serve to penetrate the absences of both.

Sir Leicester, a figure who in many ways represents the patriarchal system of law, order, and ancestral values that hovers phantom-like over the text, does not seem to pay much attention to Doodle and Coodle, nor does he have much time to follow the suit at Chancery. While he is not particularly interested in the sundry details of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, he nevertheless takes

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<sup>92</sup> The cathedral in *Bleak House* seems at first to hold physical and moral authority, but Cole ironizes the cathedral, lumping it in with ineffective secular institutions. The grotesque spires tower over London, but their ability to signify and command respect is in the past (Cole 218-9).

for granted its role as the organizing principle of the world of the novel and confesses his obligation to its power:

Sir Leicester has no objection to an interminable Chancery suit. It is a slow, expensive, British, constitutional kind of thing. . . . [H]e regards the Court of Chancery, even if it should involve an occasional delay of justice and a trifling amount of confusion, as a something, devised in conjunction with a variety of other somethings, by the perfection of human wisdom, for the eternal settlement (humanly speaking) of everything. (*BH* 13)

Antony Harrison observes that a distinctive feature of Victorian medievalism up and against other medievalisms is “the social and political force of [the] ideological operations . . . [of its] coded discourse” (*Cultural Production* 20-1). Much has been made in recent years of the “ideological operations” of the Magna Carta, the embodiment of English law signed by King John in 1215.<sup>93</sup> Magna Carta is the central document of the theory of Saxonism, which holds true English law to be an outgrowth of Saxon traditions.<sup>94</sup> Leicester seems to consider a process that is complicated, drawn-out, and lacking in transparency to be a “constitutional kind of thing.” In so doing, he aligns the suit not only with the law but with the original, foundational, peculiarly British system of law established in the Middle Ages. Leicester’s mentality here is certainly indicative of old-world thinking, but it is not quite old enough for clear thinking on what the suit *really* is. In conceiving the suit as “a *something*, devised in conjunction with a variety of other *somethings*, by the perfection of human wisdom, for the *eternal settlement (humanly speaking) of everything*,” Leicester betrays a vague understanding of the mystery of Chancery and a contentedness to leave the mystery alone, a perspective reminiscent of those Protestant Reformers who denounced the systematizing tendencies of scholastic theology. The suit is for

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<sup>93</sup> The constitution was ratified in the same year that the Fourth Lateran Council instantiated the political capacities of the church as *corpus mysticum* and made official the doctrine of transubstantiation.

<sup>94</sup> Clare Simmons examines the ways in which the constitution haunts nineteenth-century literature as an uncanny absent presence (“Absent Presence” 69-70). Shelley’s “Mask of Anarchy,” for example, illustrates the ghoulish nature of nineteenth-century law by depicting the law as an absence. “Anarchy,” historicized as medieval, is a terror that cannot be seen—like the Magna Carta in modern England (Simmons, “Absent Presence” 80-1).

Leicester a process in which an indeterminacy—or “a something”—comingles within a matrix of indeterminacies—or “other somethings”—until they resolve inevitably into “everything,” a totalizing category that contains all indeterminacies. And faith in these “somethings” will alone suffice. The suit’s linguistic iterability offers no ostensible hope of final signification, but Leicester betrays a deep-seated faith<sup>95</sup> in its innate ability to organize meaning in an effective and correct manner.

What begins to give form to the indeterminacies listed above is the relationship established between the communicant (Leicester) and sacramental object (the suit): in this particular context of relations the participant and sacramental object constitute each other, forming a mutual structure that binds the subject to the signifying power of the sacramental sign. Eduard Schillebeeckx stresses that a sacrament exists suspended in a state of activity. The Eucharist’s ontological mechanism hinges on Christ’s activity, on the one hand, and the communicant’s reciprocal activity, on the other; thus, the Eucharist’s efficacy is born of mutual, interpenetrative sharing (Schillebeeckx 83-4). What binds Leicester’s relationship with the Chancery suit, so that, as in the traditional Augustinian formulation, he is inextricably bound to the sacrament in the act of contemplating it, is his absolute faith in the suit’s efficacy, or, for Henri de Lubac, its “power” (169). Unfortunately for Leicester (and anyone else with whom the suit comes in contact), Chancery’s sacramental presence is a farce whose sound and fury hides the fact that there is “no there there.” Luther stated that it is “heart-felt *faith* in the Sacrament, and not the sacrament itself, that justifies” (Thomas Davis 37, emphasis in original); in similar

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<sup>95</sup> This kind of faith in absence can be seen elsewhere in the novel: “[Mr. Turveydrop’s] wife (overpowered by his Deportment) had, to the last, believed in him. . . . The son, inheriting his mother’s belief, and having the Deportment always before him, had lived and grown in the same faith, and now, at thirty years of age, worked for his father twelve hours a-day, and looked up to him with veneration on the old imaginary pinnacle” (*BH* 192).

fashion, Leicester forms a relationship predicated on faith with an abstraction rather than communion with an object.

Amid the oppressive linguistic dissimulation that surrounds Jarndyce and Jarndyce, the notion of a center is offered as the novel opens:

[H]ard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery. Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth. (*BH* 2)

At first glance, this may seem misleading. If we take this passage at face value, Chancery appears Dantean, lurking at the center of the novel's "circles" (Hollington 199).<sup>96</sup> But while Mary Douglas describes ritualism as a system of symbols which places the symbolic object *par excellence* at the heart of all while it simultaneously encompasses all (47), Sarah Beckwith suggests that symbols are indefinite in themselves. Such imprecision endows symbols with interpretive flexibility (*Christ's Body* 3-4). Miri Rubin approaches medieval symbology as she would a language, "not as something fixed but as a variety of coexisting idioms" (7). The obfuscating substance that surrounds the Court—lingering absence that manifests severally throughout the novel as fog, dust, cloud, and shadow—is "the universal article into which [the suit's] papers . . . and all things of earth, animate and inanimate, are resolving" (*BH* 305), but this does not bespeak the benevolent presence and saving grace of the medieval Eucharist. Rather, the body of Chancery "catches in its network of associations a range of oppositions constructed in many ways but in such a way as to defer any possible final signification" (Beckwith, *Signifying God* 29-30).<sup>97</sup> In making the courts linguistic and fundamentally formless,

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<sup>96</sup> Chancery, lying at the thematic center of the novel, is condemned in apocalyptic terms. For Miss Flite, Chancery's manifold "[i]mages of decay" (Sanders 140) take on "an eschatological magnification" (Sanders 140).

<sup>97</sup> Graham Benton identifies disease as the primary force that structures the novel: disease is present yet absent, Foucaultian in the way it secretly arrogates power and carries a diffused existence within the social (70-2).

systematized as they are through a comprehensive network of activities or embodied in certain individuals or groups of individuals, Dickens exposes the danger of constructing an institution purportedly in the business of serving the social body on the slippery ground of language.

Chancery may be located “at the very heart of the fog,” but at the moment this presence is activated—when, in the case of the court, it is in session—it dissolves into nothingness, and its doors are locked by invisible hands:

“He is a cousin, several times removed. I am not at the moment prepared to inform the Court in what exact remove he is a cousin; but he *is* a cousin.” Leaving this address (delivered like a sepulchral message) ringing in the rafters of the roof, the very little council drops, and the fog knows him no more. Everybody looks for him. Nobody can see him. . . . The man from Shropshire ventures another demonstrative “My lord!” but the Chancellor, being aware of him, has dexterously vanished. Everybody else quickly vanishes too. (*BH* 6-7)

The Court dissipates into the fog when faint presences attempt to make themselves known. The slightest awareness of presence, embodied in the desperate exclamation from the Shropshire man, is subsumed by obscurity itself. Laura Giovannelli invokes transubstantiative physics with respect to the dematerialization of bodies in Macperson’s Ossian poems. The characters evanesce into specters through a process of “self-induced ‘transubstantiation’” (Giovannelli 82-3). Christopher Herbert dips into theological parlance in a similar way as he tries to grasp Chancery’s elusive yet pervasive power, calling the suit ‘a supernatural mystery’ (129) which makes it a spectral monstrosity that engulfs the narrative (129). Herbert’s reading of Nemo—a character placed at the center of *Bleak House*—aligns with Giovannelli’s notion of reverse-transubstantiation: the name Nemo, which means “no one,” literally erases itself (Herbert 135). Giovannelli’s use of the term “transubstantiation” to describe a process where substance is turned into specter resonates with a Eucharistic reading of *Bleak House*. Just as the Reformers marginalized the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation in ways that crowded out the substantial

presence of Christ from the altar, so does Dickens demonstrate, using characteristic exaggeration, how a system might generate absence—perform a reverse-transubstantiation—if it loses sight of the needs of the body it serves. This is of course not how transubstantiation works in medieval sacramental theology. While presence may waft elusively out of reach, it never finally dissolves.

Illegibility underwrites the suit's very existence, as the characters—and the reader—can only hope to know it as unknowable. Michael Ragussis suggests that the novel exacts a “divergence . . . between signifier and signified” (253) when it names people, places, and objects using language that negates their existences in the very act of naming (255-6). Chancery severs the link between signifier and signified—a break anathema to theologians in the Middle Ages and which represented the key novelty of the reformed Eucharist. Christ's body as the central organizing metaphor of medieval devotion created order in a disparate and complex world, and while Beckwith attests to linguistic aspects of this body (its remarkable elasticity, for example), the associations it proliferates nevertheless subsist in a structure that redraws hierarchical boundaries as it explodes them (*Signifying God* 40). Conflating Mary Douglas's theories of symbolism with Michel Foucault's discourses of power relations, Beckwith concludes that symbols are “signifying devices which provide the communicative context through which social worlds are imagined, invented and changed” (*Christ's Body* 2), and perhaps no symbol has performed this function more effectively than the medieval Eucharist.

De Lubac understands the medieval Eucharist as an action during which the sign and the “hidden reality” (51) concealed within the sign interpenetrate (51). The Eucharist is a present performance rather than a commemoration of an act that can be located in history (Beckwith, *Signifying God* 88). There is a direct relationship, then, between symbols and ritual, and any

consideration of medieval ritual must begin with liturgy, for all was tested and sanctioned in the sacramental celebration of the Mass. Liturgy gathered and ordered all things in a harmonious network of relations. Crucially, it is through liturgy alone that the body of Christ can be made manifest in the world (Holsinger 297). Chancery is bound by a performance structure that allows for endless repetition within a set of activities, but it is known precisely as unknown, enveloped in circuitous communication that fails in the very act of communicating. Dickens calls this ritual process “Wiglomeration” (*BH* 98):

It’s the only name [Jarndyce] know[s] for the thing. . . . Kenge and Carboy will have something to say about it . . . Counsel will have something to say about it; the Chancellor will have something to say about it; the Satellites will have something to say about it; they will all have to be handsomely fee’d, all round, about it; the whole thing will be vastly ceremonious, wordy, unsatisfactory, and expensive, and [Jarndyce] call[s] it, in general, Wiglomeration. (*BH* 98)

Lacking a definite object which could bring the process to a conclusion, the suit itself has been translated into an interminable chain of repeated actions that takes place in the forever-present moment. “[V]astly ceremonious,” the bureaucracy disseminates in ways that are unclear—these departments will have “something” to say, but what is actually said and that about which this something is said are, like Bucket, left “languishing for want of an object” (*BH* 712).<sup>98</sup> Feverish searching for Chancery’s substantial presence takes a particularly insidious turn in the story of Richard Carstone. Richard naïvely acts successor to Tom Jarndyce, John’s great-uncle, who spent “day and night poring over the wicked heaps of papers in the suit . . . hoping against hope to disentangle it from its mystification” (*BH* 96). Like Tom, Richard constructs his own Tom-all-Alone’s, as he “por[s] over a table covered with dusty bundles of papers” (*BH* 695) in “want of an object” that will give his quest direction. Finding nothing, he desperately tells Woodcourt,

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<sup>98</sup> According to Marina Bondi and Silvia Cavalieri, Chancery’s obfuscating language forms a barrier between men of the law and the people whom the law purports to protect (561-2).

“[t]o make short of a long story, I am afraid I have wanted an object; but I have an object now—or it has me—and it is too late to discuss it” (*BH* 692). In the late medieval Mass, the rood screen was “both a barrier and no barrier” (Duffy 112) placed between the sanctuary and the congregation “to function as a *temporary* ritual deprivation of the sight of the sacring. Its symbolic effectiveness derived from the fact that it obscured *for a time* something which was normally accessible; in the process it heightened the value of the spectacle it temporarily concealed” (Duffy 111, my emphases). The screen that obscures the ritual processes of Chancery permanently conceals its operations, and when the exhausted Richard peers behind the screen he is met “with dusty bundles of papers which seemed to [Esther] like dusty mirrors reflecting his own mind” (*BH* 695). Instead of offering real presence that exists *ex opere operato*, the Reformed Eucharist merely reflects the desires and fears of the individual communicant.

Richard regards it the particular onus of the law to bring the case to a satisfactory end. He is hopeful, in other words, of the positive referentiality of the *hoc* at the transubstantiative moment, but since this *hoc* has no reference, it can mean both anything and nothing. The perennially controversial *hoc* (or, “this”) in the words of institution is referentially ambiguous. Does “this” refer to the elements of bread and wine or to the event of consecration? For an answer, Richard appeals to Mr. Vholes:

“This desk is your rock, sir!” Mr. Vholes gives it a rap, and it sounds as hollow as a coffin. Not to Richard, though. There is encouragement in the sound to him. Perhaps Mr. Vholes knows there is. . . . “You said just now—a rock.” “Yes, sir,” says Mr. Vholes, gently shaking his head and rapping the hollow desk, with a sound as if ashes were falling on ashes, and dust on dust, “a rock. That’s something. . . . The suit does not sleep; we wake it up, we air it, we walk it about. *That’s something.*” (*BH* 551-2)

Pledging his loyal assistance to Richard during every step of the process, Vholes assures his young client that he can rest his hopes on the desk in front of him. Physicalizing the *hoc est*



*corpus meum* establishes a space where Christ's body can "become visible" (Kobialka 149). In this way, the Eucharist created a bond between mysticism and ecclesiastical administration: making the transubstantiative moment visible and tangible fulfilled a hegemonic desire on the part of the ecclesial establishment to control indiscriminate private devotion in the early church (Kobialka 157). However, "this" desk, which embodies the suit insofar as it is a place where its actions can be facilitated and regulated, is itself a hollow reference consisting of the same "universal article" into which the suit resolves: ashes and dust, piled upon more ashes and dust. "That" to which Vholes refers is certainly not rendered visible, though he indeed wraps on a solid object.

Vholes's ominous appeal to substance only to be answered by a resonant immateriality recalls rather vividly the echoing footsteps on the Ghost's Walk, but more immediately it sets the stage for Tulkinghorn's tense discussion with Lady Dedlock shortly thereafter. Tracking Lady Dedlock with a quick eye and indefatigable spirit, Tulkinghorn assures her that he seeks "[r]eal flesh and blood" (*BH* 572), yet this desired corporeality is juxtaposed against "the light of the fire, which is low, [where] he can be seen looking towards the moonlight. By the light of the moon Lady Dedlock can be seen, perfectly still. . . . By the light of the fire he can be seen looking towards the moonlight. By the moonlight, Lady Dedlock can be seen in profile, perfectly still" (*BH* 572). In both cases, material realities dissolve into immaterial traces, creating reverse-transubstantiations similar to the scene with the man from Shropshire. To return to the scene with Richard, Vholes seeks to substantiate this "something" by offering the equally indeterminate qualifier "that," yet he drums his knuckles on a surface sturdy enough to withstand the weight of "immense masses of papers of all shapes and no shapes" (*BH* 865) under which the desk groans; in short, it props up "Jarndyce and Jarndyce everywhere" (*BH* 865). Followers of

Luther and Zwingli brought their differences to a colloquy in 1529 at Marburg, Germany, with the intention of finding middle ground in the Eucharistic debates. Unable to arrive at a settlement, Luther etched the words *hoc est corpus meum* on the library table to express his frustration at the futility of the task (Bradshaw and Johnson 259). The table, like Vholes's desk, lent the words a semblance of certainty and definitiveness, but really it represented an empty signifier over which the Reformers could draw no decisive conclusions. Richard starves for the physical and spiritual benefits of communion—waning of temptation, robustness of soul, overcoming blindness, protection from imminent death (Bradshaw and Johnson 229)—but it is Vholes who is satiated, “always looking at his client” (*BH* 550) with “hungry eyes” (*BH* 553) “as if he were “making a lingering meal of him with his eyes as well as with his professional appetite” (*BH* 550). Chancery's empty Eucharist consumes Richard as opposed to becoming incorporated into him, and he becomes, for a time, like Vholes: just as Vholes's “dead glove . . . scarcely seemed to have any hand in it” (*BH* 617), the youthful, once vigorous Richard wastes away, “his laugh” (*BH* 822) hollowed out “like the echo of a joyful sound” (*BH* 822).

Grumett bemoans what he calls “a theology of consumption” (234-5), which, I argue, Chancery endorses: it consumes because its practitioners, and some of its participants, consume. Dickens's system of law in *Bleak House* eats its victims and ultimately itself, engulfing its prey in its internal, self-sustaining fires. “[T]here's combustion going on there!” (*BH* 556) gawks Weevle—“[i]t's not a case of Spontaneous, but it's smoldering combustion it is” (*BH* 556). The same logic applies to Krook, “The Lord Chancellor of *that* Court” (*BH* 455, my emphasis), who possesses a bundle of letters that would expose Lady Dedlock's secret affair. Guppy and Tony creep through “air [that] is full of . . . phantoms” (*BH* 452), starting at “the rustling of garments that have no substance in them” (*BH* 452) until, to their “[h]orror” (*BH* 455), they catch sight of

a “crumpled black thing . . . upon the floor” (BH 455). “[H]e IS here!” (BH 455, capitalization in original) exclaims Tony, “and this from which we run away, striking out the light and overturning one another into the street, is all that *represents* him” (BH 455, my emphasis). For medieval theologians from Augustine to Aquinas, *hoc est corpus meum* means that “He *is* here,” though the specific mode of presence in which “He *is*” has a complex history; but conceptualizing the consecrated host as a mere sign made it a “garment” with “no substance,” bread that simply “represents [H]im.” “[A]ll Lord Chancellors in all Courts” (BH 455) die “the same death eternally” (BH 456), but what dies is “inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself” (BH 456), the body bereft of the spirit, a “corrupt” body whose incarnation “eternally” reiterates a “death” rather than eternally celebrating a sacrifice.

Somewhere amid the suffocating absence, beyond the child-like faith of the system’s executors and devotees, underneath the dissimulation, combustion, and indifference, a strident presence endeavors to make itself known. And each time it stirs, this presence *in potentia* corrals, if only for a moment, around Esther Summerson: Esther is the catalyst of community for much of the narrative. But each time it stirs, it glimmers an instant and fades away like a stain upon a mirror. Characters like the benevolent Jarndyce or the “never absent” (BH 650) Lady Dedlock “connected [themselves] with . . . association[s] in [Esther’s] mind that [she] could not define” (BH 63), but “all at once, a something sudden” (BH 63) flashes through—a look in their eyes, a “something” in their glance, an indication of strength or goodness—that makes her “certain it was [Jarndyce]” (BH 63), or “absolutely certain . . . that the lady was Lady Dedlock” (BH 250). But momentary presence retreats as quickly as it appears, making her “frightened” (BH 63) that she “had lost [them]” (BH 63). Time and again transubstantiation is stymied—

lingering presence cannot finally break through and become *real*—until Allan Woodcourt returns a medical hero from a shipwreck abroad:

“When I returned,” [Woodcourt] told [Esther], “when I came back, no richer than when I went away, and found you newly risen from a sick bed . . . [know] that my praise is not a lover’s praise, but the truth. You do not know what all around you see in Esther Summerson, how many hearts she touches and awakens, what sacred admiration and what love she wins. . . . Dear Esther, let me only tell you that the fond idea of you which I took abroad, was exalted to the Heavens when I came home.” . . . Something seemed to pass into [Esther’s] place that was like the Angel he thought [her]. (*BH* 833-4)

Woodcourt’s reverence for Esther, first, takes the form of “sacred admiration” for her “risen” body, a devotion expressed in both corporeal and spiritual terms; second, his words refer to a thing “exalted to the Heavens” in “*truth*,” not something subjectively esteemed as would “lover’s praise.” The “fond idea of [Esther] which [he] took abroad” is a theory become real “when [he] came home,” and he wishes for all to partake in the communal goodness that is Esther Summerson, to have their “hearts” likewise “touche[d] and awaken[ed].” At long last, “something” gets through and inheres in the elements: a divine, “Angel[ic] . . . [s]omething seemed to pass into [Esther]” at the level of substance that now exists under the accidents brought on by her illness, making her compassion and sacrificial love Eucharistic.

“Wiglomeration” is replaced by a liturgy in which Jarndyce-as-priest renews the old Bleak House and offers up the Eucharistic Esther to Woodcourt, the novel’s only worthy communicant, “before God” (*BH* 858). During the reenactment of the christening of Bleak House and the consecration and presentation of Esther “not a word [Jarndyce] uttered was lost” (*BH* 857): “This day” (*BH* 858), he articulates over the elements of the new Bleak House, “I give this house its little mistress” (*BH* 858), a warm presence to inhabit a house whose name had been implicated in the absence of Chancery for generations. Esther’s true substance embodies the unity the novel has so profoundly lacked; the house, which can be read as a microcosm of the

novel's "system," is now blessed with a steady, real, redemptive presence;<sup>99</sup> and the congregant, Allen Woodcourt, is ready and willing to receive both substance and accidents with open hands and an open heart. Jarndyce "rose, and raised [Esther] with him" (*BH* 858). Elevating the host at the consecration testifies to the importance of the words and adds more opportunity for reverence during the performance. If these words could bring about the transubstantiative change, then it stood to reason that this "most important form of material presence of Christ on Earth after the Incarnation itself" (Izbicki 102) should be lifted up in exaltation before the assembly of believers (Izbicki 101-2). "Allan" (*BH* 859), Jarndyce proclaims, "take from me a willing gift, the best wife that ever man had. What more can I say for you, than that I know you deserve her! Take with her the little home she brings you. You know what she will make it, Allan; you know what she has made its namesake" (*BH* 859). Jarndyce raises Esther and bids the communicant to "take" and eat, "take" and drink the savior of *Bleak House* whose sacrifice for the new house's "namesake" should be remembered and celebrated. But the offering Jarndyce confects is not itself a sacrifice in the conventional sense: "[W]hat do I sacrifice?" her Guardian asks—"[n]othing, nothing" (*BH* 859). Both Augustine and Aquinas agree that the act of consecration does not reenact Calvary, but neither is the act entirely new; rather, "it celebrates the *anamnesis* of Christ's death" (Crockett 120) by which we witness "an 'image' of Christ's passion" (Crockett 120) and through which "we participate in the redemptive effects of Christ's death" (Crockett 120). Chancery is replaced by a happier institution, an institution of presence that fosters community at the expense of none of its members, a congregation held together by the bonds of love and mutual self-giving.

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<sup>99</sup> Earlier, on the way to the old Bleak House: "That's Bleak House! . . . Presently we lost [it], presently saw it, presently lost it, presently saw it (*BH* 62).

At the same time Woodcourt receives Esther, the Chancery suit dissolves into nothing, crushed under the weight of its own unsustainability, consumed in its own combustible fires:

We asked a gentleman by us, if he knew what cause was on? He told us Jarndyce and Jarndyce. We asked him if he knew what was doing in it? He said, really no he did not, nobody ever did; but as well as he could make out, it was over. Over for the day? we asked him. No, he said; over *for good*. . . . [*P*]resently great bundles of paper began to be carried out—bundles in bags, bundles too large to be got into any bags, immense masses of papers of all shapes and no shapes, which the bearers staggered under. . . . “Do I understand that the whole estate is found to have been absorbed in costs?” [Woodcourt inquires.] “Hem! I *believe* so,” returned Mr. Kenge. . . . “I *believe* so,” said Mr. Vholes. “And that thus the suit lapses and melts away?” “*Probably*,” returned Mr. Kenge. . . . “*Probably*,” said Mr. Vholes. (*BH* 865-7, my emphases)

It is “over *for good*,” as the good that is Esther and Woodcourt’s union ends the tyranny of absence the novel has “staggered under.” Kenge and Vholes, stunned at the “present” kerfuffle and seeming rather deflated, are reluctant to betray their shaken “belie[f].” While they know very well the suit is spent, their long-developed uncertainty only allows them to venture that the case is “probably” closed. But as the novel draws to a close there are things that *Esther* knows for certain, “that [Ada] is very beautiful, and that [Woodcourt] is very handsome, and that [Jarndyce] has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they” (*BH* 880) *cannot* “very well do without” (*BH* 880) Esther, whose “beauty” (*BH* 880) shores up the narrative’s loose ends and subsists in substance beneath the accidents of her marked face—“even supposing—” (*BH* 880).

Chapter Five: Victorian Body-Image: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Medieval

Iconography in the *Fin de Siècle*

The harmony of soul and body—how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void.<sup>100</sup>

A famous thirteenth-century icon of Panteleimon, early-Christian martyr and patron saint of Nerezi, depicts the young saint as a hero with symmetrical features, rosy cheeks, and wavy, reddish-brown locks (Belting 215), attributes which combine to embody ideal male beauty in the late Middle Ages (Belting 241). Indeed, this could well have been the picture Basil Hallward makes of Dorian Gray, his remarkably beautiful sitter whose golden locks frame a face that is exquisite to Lord Henry, “Love himself” (*PDG* 54) for Sibyl Vane, a curious evocation of the artist’s soul for Basil, and something of the divine for all. The portrait is stylistically sound in the geometry of its lines and radiant in its masterful use of color, but it is beautiful because it is good, and thus it fulfills an aphorism in the Preface that has confused Wildean scholars since the novel’s debut: “The morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium” (*PDG* 3). The logic of this statement hinges on a relation that has seldom graced artistic preoccupations since the late Middle Ages, that somehow morality—or the exercise of goodness with and through God—and the uniquely human production of a material thing from “imperfect” matter are mutually constitutive. The Preface’s claim that “beautiful things mean only Beauty” (*PDG*

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<sup>100</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 13. Subsequent citations to this work are cited in the text as *PDG*, followed by the page number.

3) does not preclude morality from the novel's discussion of aesthetics if "Beauty," exalted as a proper noun, is read in the context of the Incarnation: in the Incarnation there is "only" Christ, who is "Beauty" itself for medieval theologians from Augustine to Duns Scotus, yet the beauty of Christ extends to material things and grants mere matter the potential to participate in the life that is Himself. The picture's *dynamis*—the "supernatural power" (Belting 6) afforded art to act as its prototype—is what makes Dorian's portrait beautiful, and what makes Dorian a modern Panteleimon.

In M. H. Abrams's view, the philosophy of art has been grounded since the eighteenth century in the theory of art "as-such" ("Art-as-Such" 8), a discourse in which the work of art is regarded "for its own sake" ("Art-as-Such" 8) and liberated from the bonds of morality and truth ("Art-as-Such" 8). For Abrams, this theory was revolutionary insofar as it undermined traditional aesthetics, by which he means that of the ancient Greeks through to their neoclassical successors ("Art-as-Such" 10). Reification of theories of art-as-such calcifies the artwork's sense of becoming. Theories of autonomous art reached their full development in 1790 in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, which systematized Joseph Addison's *Spectator* essays and Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury's miscellaneous writings on the subject in the early eighteenth century. After Kant, says Abrams, "each work is to be experienced disinterestedly, for its own sake, unalloyed by reference to the world, or to human life or concerns, or to any relations, ends, or values outside its all-sufficing self" ("Art-as-Such" 14). By the late nineteenth century, aestheticism's "crusade against didacticism" (Singer 345) had come to fruition, as divisions between beauty and truth, art and functionality, and the aesthetic and the ethical rendered the work of art totally autonomous (Forsey 589).



Though Oscar Wilde stresses intermittently in his theoretical essays that “[t]he sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate” (*Letters* 257), not to mention his defense of art-as-such as a “formula of creation” (Ojala 104), Wilde’s *novel* communicates a rather different view of art and its relations with ethics, morality, and spirituality. John Peters claims that Wilde intentionally pits the moral against the aesthetic in the Preface so that they may each highlight the other by contrast (1), but Felicia Bonaparte opts for a more direct approach, suggesting that Wilde wrestled with his inner aesthete on the grounds of morality (228-9). She argues that Wilde reimagines aestheticism “as a principle that can function only within carefully circumscribed moral boundaries” (231).<sup>101</sup> Dominic Manganiello corroborates this position: neither in his novel nor in *The Critic as Artist* does Wilde distinguish between ethics and aesthetics; if anything, aesthetics supersedes ethics, but his conceptualization of aesthetics as a “higher ethics” (26) relates the terms all the same (25-6). What Lord Henry derisively calls “all the maladies of mediaevalism” (*PDG* 19) persists untrammelled in spite of his materialistic influence, for how can Dorian sell his soul without a moral order to lend his wager ontological significance (Manganiello 29-30)?

I argue that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* posits a counter-aesthetic to Kantian discourses of autonomous art, discourses with which Wilde as artistic theorist and Wilde as artist have been conventionally associated. If art-as-such can be considered a “formula of creation,” I read Wilde’s only novel as a modern recovery of the medieval “doctrine of re-creation” (Ritchey 2) that reconfigures the “logic . . . of a world remade into holy matter, re-created through the incarnation of God in matter” (Ritchey 3). This remaking was accomplished by the enfleshing

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<sup>101</sup> Bonaparte argues that Wilde writes his novel in the tradition of the medieval morality play (235). Viewed in these terms, Basil is God, Lord Henry is the anti-Christ or devil (Bonaparte 247), and Dorian is Basil’s attempt to express “the harmony of the real and ideal” (Bonaparte 249). For Jerusha McCormack, “Wilde is one of the few modernists who uses the word ‘soul’ seriously” (McCormack 211).

and sacrifice of the *Logos*; matter in the world could now signify divinity, and this could be as a result of its very nature as material (Ritchey 9). Reading the novel within a framework of the theology of re-creation, in which the matter of the canvas lives, bleeds, and acts as its prototype, articulates Wilde's discontent with artistic autonomy. He mends the bifurcation between art and life, as he says in *De Profundis*, by finding a "mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals" (Wilde, *Poems and Essays* 193). Furthermore, I suggest that Wilde's novel shores up strands of medieval thought on beauty, morality, and art through a narrative that reimagines and rearticulates theologies of the devotional icon that span from the third century to the sixteenth.<sup>102</sup>

Dorian Gray, the unchanging idea born in the mind of the artist that nevertheless pre-exists its own conception, is the form that actuates the mere matter of the canvas and gives color to the formless outlines that come alive as if by "revelation" (*PDG* 24). Conflating the portrait and narrative icon into a single panel allows for a sequence of events to be shown as one moment, where the past, present, and future coexist in a fixed-yet-fluid sempiternal reality. Situating my reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* within the conceptual framework of theological aesthetics, which Alejandro Garcia-Rivera defines as the "recogni[tion] in the experience of the truly beautiful a religious dimension" (9) centered on the Incarnation (11), I argue that reading the novel in terms of religious medievalism helps us better understand Wilde's aesthetic project of exposing the dangers of modern *avant-garde* notions of the autonomy of art. To do this, he

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<sup>102</sup> McCormack suggests that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is in part a response to Protestant iconophobia: Wilde constructs both the picture and the human Dorian as icons, a "double transfer" (223) that allows sacred power to spread "[s]omehow" (224) through contact with Dorian (223-4). McCormack's treatment of icons amounts to scholarly observation in passing rather than focused analysis. My study is the first sustained attempt to present the novel exclusively as a theory of icons.

salvages the premodern understanding of the relation between art and life: that a work of art is coextensive with the divine prototype of which it is a representation.

Alexander Baumgarten coined the term “aesthetics” in the eighteenth century to give a name to what he called the “new science of sensory cognition” (qtd. in Garcia-Rivera 9), a discourse predicated on discriminating differences. Critical application of particular aesthetic paradigms has long been viewed as the key to unlocking the novel’s interpretative possibilities. Various constructions have included Michael Davis’s “psychological” (549) aesthetics and Elisha Cohn’s “neurological” (185) aesthetics, which read the novel’s explorations of beauty and degeneration in terms of late-nineteenth-century scientific discourses;<sup>103</sup> Shelton Waldrep’s “realist” (103) aesthetics, which considers the novel within the context of Victorian realist fiction, and John Paul Riquelme’s “Gothic” (610) aesthetics, which understands the novel’s incoherence as a reflection of the contemporary social order;<sup>104</sup> and Gerald Monsman’s “Platonic” (26) aesthetics, which imagines the love between Basil and Dorian in terms of Platonic Eros.<sup>105</sup> I apply *theological* aesthetics to theorize Wilde’s incarnational model of

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<sup>103</sup> Davis suggests that Wilde engaged with the work of several prominent psychologists to determine matter’s relations to the self in the construction of identity amid fears of evolutionary decay (547). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes the case, in the relationship between Dorian’s body and the canvas, that human beings are essentially material (Michael Davis 548-9). Given the body’s status as mere matter, Wilde emphasizes the role of mind in shaping inert matter into a recognizable identity (Michael Davis 550). Along similar lines, Cohn argues that Wilde harnesses the aesthetic power of the dandy to construct a critique of commodity culture—an “aesthetic mode of political intervention” (184)—that takes everyone, even the novel’s hero, by surprise. Wilde draws from contemporary psychology to understand the brain as both physical and ornamental. Neuro-aestheticism moves aesthetics inward, into the confines of an organ recently understood as common to all, into the place where the recognition of beauty is mediated (Elisha Cohn 184-6).

<sup>104</sup> For all its uniqueness, the *Picture of Dorian Gray* is a realist text, but Waldrep suggests that realism makes the aesthetic possible in the novel: beauty exists in a world “as it really is” (104), and focusing on life enabled Wilde to appreciate the beauty he found there (103-4). On the contrary, Riquelme reads Wilde’s novel as a study in anti-realism. Combining light and dark, Wilde throws the late-nineteenth-century social order into confusion by “aestheticiz[ing] the Gothic” (Riquelme 610) even while the aesthetic is “gothicize[d]” (Riquelme 610). The novel’s many doublings stack up in a destabilized network of unsolvable puzzles (Riquelme 615-6).

<sup>105</sup> For Monsman, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is an “embellished Platonic dialogue on beauty and love” (29) that draws on Plato’s *Phaedrus* to illustrate Basil’s love for Dorian and the love Dorian reflects back toward his lover. In Platonic theory, the erotic is replaced by Eros (Monsman 31) when the lover idealizes his beloved, and the beloved returns the love that the lover pours out for him as a “counterlove” (Monsman 29), which is the lover’s own desire (Monsman 33).

aesthetic rejoining, a model which challenges autonomous art at its source and reinforces the notion that with great art comes great responsibility. If life does indeed mirror art, as Wilde's "Decay of Lying" suggests, then art cannot be cavalierly left to itself, hidden in an attic away from view. Rather, it should teach us how to live well.

### **Wilde and Catholicism**

Catholic aesthetics is grounded in a rich tradition of ritual, music, and iconography. Among the devotional objects and practices important to Victorian ritualists were holy images of the Sacred Heart, the Holy Family, and the Virgin and Child (Heimann 40). It was precisely this "carnal nature of Catholic worship" (Janes 9), however, that rendered Catholicism morally dangerous in the minds of many Anglicans (Janes 9). For Victorian iconoclasts, Catholic theology was wrong to sacralize the things of the world; object-worship is idolatry, which Dominic Janes defines as "a confusing of the sign for the referent" (15) so to "attribut[e] power to that which should not have it" (16). An intense concern about idolatry surrounded the ritualistic movements of nineteenth-century England. Particularly insidious for Victorian Protestants was the belief in human agency in making material things holy and deserving of adoration; that a priest, for example, was able to imbue matter with vitality was to confound the boundary between spirit and matter (Janes 115-6). But perhaps worst of all, Anglo-Catholic material culture was uncomfortably medieval (Janes 18). Neither entirely premodern nor entirely modern, the Anglo-Catholic body was a deviant, ambivalent body (Janes 22).

A significant feature of Wilde's deviance was his fascination with Catholicism.<sup>106</sup> His childhood and adolescent ideas about Catholicism came from his mother Speranza, who argued

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<sup>106</sup> McCormack suggests that the dual longing for medieval Catholicism and deviance in the *fin de siècle* was often expressed in homoerotic ways. Artists like Pater saw in the mystical writings of John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila an invigorating synthesis of eroticism and sanctity. This influenced Wilde and other decadent writers

in an 1850 issue of *Dublin University Magazine* that the “sole patron of the Arts is the Catholic Church” and that “Catholicism alone has comprehended the truth that Art is one of the noblest languages of religion” (qtd. in Killeen 13). Speranza’s sons were baptized in the Catholic Church and educated in Catholic theology (Killeen 13). At Trinity College and Oxford, Wilde’s attraction to Catholicism increased due to the Declaration of Papal Infallibility (1870), the appeal of the Oxford Movement (specifically Newman and his *Grammar of Assent*), Pater’s fondness for Catholic ritual, and the theological poetics of Hopkins. So transfixed was he by figures related with Catholicism and the Anglo-Catholic movement in Britain that his dormroom walls showcased images of Cardinal Manning,<sup>107</sup> the pope, and the Madonna (Howard 112). Wendell Howard suggests that Wilde’s youthful enchantment in Roman Catholicism never left him (114); similarly, Jarlath Killeen cites Catholicism’s life-long appeal for Wilde (17). She notes that while he was an Irish Catholic at heart, the allure of the Oxford Movement, ritualism, and other Catholicisms broadened his vision of religion beyond the provincial (21). For Ellis Hanson, his interest in these traditions was doctrinal as well as aesthetic (233-4). Wilde would later express resentment that his father did not allow him to convert to Catholicism: “The artistic side of the Church and the fragrance of its teaching would have cured my degeneracies” (qtd. in Ellmann 583). In a letter to More Adley just before his passing, Wilde made what was perhaps the last of his great paradoxical statements: “My position is curious: I am not a Catholic: I am simply a violent Papist” (Wilde, *Letters* 825).

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(McCormack 214). Frederick Roden also comments on the part religion had to play in shaping homosexual identities in the 1880s and 90s, especially with respect to monastic communities (116).

<sup>107</sup> In the words of Desmond Morse-Boycott, Manning “might have been St. Augustine come down from a stained-glass window” (109). Wilde closely followed the conversion of his friend David Hunter Blair to Catholicism. Wilde attended Mass with Blair at the new Jesuit church at Oxford St. Aloysius (McCormack 215-6), where he “fe[lt] the awful fascination of the Church, its extreme beauty and sentiment” (Wilde, *Letters* 31).

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Killeen suggests, is a thoroughly Catholic text. She argues that Wilde pairs Lord Henry with John Henry Newman on the basis of their commitment to “youth” (90), “beauty” (90), and the need for bodily “regeneration” (91). Lord Henry’s answer is always science, but Newman relies on a “miracle” (Killeen 91) to deliver the necessary succor and realize his vision of a “Second Spring” for the Church of England (Killeen 89-91). Rejecting Newman’s theology by way of demeaning Basil’s “mediaeval” ideas, Lord Henry offers instead “a language of science” (Killeen 93), but, perhaps ironically, the theological language deemed outdated is effective in the novel (Killeen 93-4). The consequence of accepting Lord Henry’s materialist, anti-medieval scheme is the forced separation of Dorian’s body and soul in the portrait (Killeen 95).<sup>108</sup> Guy Willoughby’s reading is more broadly Christian than Catholic, but it too addresses the deficiency of Lord Henry’s antireligious, materialist aesthetic. Dorian’s fatal flaw lies in his wholesale acceptance of Lord Henry’s system that does not recognize its own narrowness; if he would only follow Christ, he would then be “in harmony with himself *and his environment*” (Willoughby 69, emphasis in original), an expanding state that is forever in process (Willoughby 68-9). Dorian’s restricted individualism, encouraged by Lord Henry at the expense of Basil’s “mediaevalism,” stymies any hope of “self-realization” (Willoughby 73).

Willoughby makes use of the novel’s references to “mediaevalism” but does not attempt to incorporate them into his central theses. But Hanson asserts that the Oxford Movement and Anglo-Catholic ritualism—whose aesthetic and liturgical appropriations, Janes reminds us, came

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<sup>108</sup> Killeen describes the changes in the portrait in terms of Eucharistic theology: “the picture is the Host of Dorian’s soul” (98) whose substance and accident is Basil’s artistic love and Dorian’s person, respectively (in keeping with Aquinas’s figuration of the Eucharist as the union of substance and accidents). Consuming the picture-Host, which should be communal, quickly becomes a selfish act, as Dorian devours it alone and in secret (Killeen 98). The picture-Host is “all soul without an appropriate body theology” (Killeen 99), and stabbing it exacts the body-soul unification necessary to rescue Dorian from damnation (Killeen 99).

first from the heritage of the Middle Ages and second from nineteenth-century Catholicism (Janes 4)—provided for Wilde a medium for “self-transformation” (Hanson 230). Ritual accommodated his dandyism and the drama surrounding confession lent his penchant for scandal metaphysical weight (Hanson 231). Hanson resists the trend in Wildean scholarship that calls his decadent Catholicism a “meaningless pose” (231); on the contrary, he suggests that Wilde was genuinely “tempted” (233), even “seduc[ed]” (233), by Christ the romantic man and Catholicism the poetic church (233). Late-nineteenth-century decadence is intimately related with Catholicism: the former is indicative of a “self-torturing *medieval* spirituality” (Lockerd 143, my emphasis) that encouraged hedonism, on the one hand, and piety, on the other (Lockerd 143). I hope to show that medieval theological aesthetics can provide a useful lens through which we might see more clearly Wilde’s efforts to spiritualize inert matter and mend bifurcations created by the modern aesthetic tradition.

Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in terms of medieval theology and iconography also sheds light on the religious dimension that I believe is essential to Wilde’s artistic radicalism. “In order to be morally good,” Irving Singer says of art-as-such, one “need only create that which is beautiful” (352). Ethics regulated by aesthetics seems to complete the toppling of traditional hierarchies between morality and art (Singer 352), but Umberto Eco demonstrates the ways in which medieval theologians preoccupied with the beautiful grounded morality in aesthetics (*Beauty* 36). Fusing the beautiful and the good allowed for an artistic sensibility in which the moral depends upon the aesthetic (Eco, *Aquinas* 15). Wilde’s novel provides an aesthetic base for morality in the very way Eco describes. In a pivotal exchange between Dorian and Lord Henry, Dorian confesses, “I want to be good. I can’t bear the idea of my soul being hideous” (*PDG* 83). Fond to think of himself as a perspicacious observer, Lord Henry generally

ends up missing the mark, though his misguided witticisms often emanate from a love of paradox. His response to Dorian's intention to be good, however, is a moment of clarity: "A very charming artistic basis for ethics, Dorian!" (*PDG* 83).

### **Iconography in the Middle Ages**

The famous eleventh-century icon *Nicopeia*, known as "St. Luke's Madonna," was considered an "'authentic' portrait" (Belting 4) because its sitter was the Virgin herself. Such authenticity granted the portrait *dynamis*. A favorite of the Virgin, St. Luke's Madonna was treated not as a representation but as the Mother of God Herself, present in all her glory (Belting 4-6). The icon is not equivalent to the prototype, however; as John Dillenberger observes, "the sacred reality of Christ or the saint is present *through* the icon" (32, my emphasis), which renders the relationship of image and exemplar sacramental. Thus, the image is deserving of veneration, not worship, since veneration recognizes holiness but does not confuse the object with the reality itself (Dillenberger 32). Medieval iconographic records teem with examples of sentient images that have done such things as weep, bleed, and turn pale (Belting 1).

Mediating icons worked within a temporal scheme organized and articulated first in the *Chronographia* of Sextus Julius Africanus in the early third century and then expanded in Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and Augustine's *De ciuitate Dei contra paganos* (Kemp 3-4). The icon operated within a schema that not only allowed for but necessitated the presence of the past—absence was made present in the icon (Kemp 46). Legalization of Christianity and its subsequent dominion in the fourth century spelled the demise of pagan idols in adherence to the second commandment, which prohibits the making of graven images (De Gruchy 11-2). Recent scholarship has redressed common mischaracterizations of the early church as antagonistic to images as such. There was certainly ambivalence, but cautionary measures regarding material as



powerful as icons did not preclude their use, or even their veneration (Dillenberger 3). Some of the early church Fathers approved of and even favored images, while others remained strongly aniconic. The iconoclast council of 754 condemned artists for presuming to embody the sacred, but through vociferous argumentation on the part of iconodules claiming images' participation in the reality of their exemplar, the Second Council of Nicaea officially established the acceptance of images and their veneration in 787.<sup>109</sup>

Art's pedagogical facility was important to Gregory the Great. The religious image may inspire in the devoted viewer a yearning for repentance (Besançon 149). Charlemagne followed Gregory in revering religious art for its didactic possibilities, but he opposed its veneration. For the Carolingians, holy images are not worthy of *transitus*—"a passage between a material form and a divine prototype" (Besançon 152)—because matter is fundamentally of this world (Besançon 152). But from the twelfth century through to the Reformation, western religion experienced a "turn to . . . the object" (Bynum 19), to which the inner piety characteristic of late-medieval thought was a response (Bynum 19-20). A material revolution had started in the high Middle Ages and culminated in an explosion of accounts of animated statues, bleeding hosts, and icons whose figures could change before the beholder's eyes. These objects manifested their holiness through live performance (Bynum 20-1). Icon enthusiast Michael Psellus articulated a lucid and impassioned theory of icons in the eleventh century at a time when the icon was under conceptual reconstruction. An "icon painted in the new style" (qtd. in Belting 261) conflated the portrait and narrative picture in one complex image that could express emotion. For Psellus, that

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<sup>109</sup> Christianity's legalization had facilitated a meteoric rise in artistic output, and while vocal disagreements regarding the fitness of art to represent sacred figures persisted, some theologians, like Basil and John Chrysostom, spoke out in defense of images. Basil suggested that praise of the image is really directed toward the figure depicted, since, as Chrysostom states, what one does to the image one does to the prototype's body (Noble 14-6). But Eusebius and Epiphanius of Salamis insisted that matter is insentient, artists tend toward impertinence, and the exemplar's essence is not connected to its image (Noble 17).

an icon is “full of life and nowhere lacks movement” (qtd. in Belting 261) is to achieve art’s mimetic aim to the greatest extent possible (Belting 261).

And yet, sacred matter also posed a problem. Temporally and spatially limited, matter appears to clash with God’s complete and eternal nature, a paradox which kept iconoclasts ever vigilant. But redemption promises to reconcile this dualism (Bynum 175). Matter’s “[s]entience” (Fradenburg 25) placed objects within the bounds of ethics; the work of art, for example, was morally culpable for how it would act in the world (Fradenburg 25-6). Equally important was the action and comportment of the devotee. Miracles consisted in the encounter of the image and its admirer, but danger of idolatry, which Richard Viladesau defines as “a projection of human self-worship” (58), was ever present. Limits must be placed, Constantine V admonished, on the faithful’s indiscriminate application of the Incarnation to unworthy matter (Viladesau 66). Yet, despite himself, the iconoclast validates the image out of fear of the very efficacy he considers preposterous. Mere material would not have drawn so much attention and incurred such wrath (Janes 13-4). In a paradox that unites iconophobe and iconophile, “[t]he very act of iconoclasm reaffirms and reactivates, even as it imprisons, the imaginative power of the image and of the saint it represents” (Simpson 23).

Once the Second Council of Nicaea deemed images worthy of veneration, many subsequent rulers worked to strengthen the Council’s conclusions,<sup>110</sup> and later, the Fourth Lateran Council was powerless to contain the surge of sacred art that was to come in the thirteenth century (De Gruchy 32). In time, however, the bible would become the only image of the Reformation because it is “the single, original icon given directly by God” (Kemp 82) and because it is a “disembodied text” (Kemp 81). Martin Luther hastened to remove the body from

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<sup>110</sup> In 843, for example, the regent Theodora of Byzantium outlawed iconoclasm.

the church, material aspects of devotion were extracted from their central place in the liturgy, and images and relics were discredited and destroyed (Kemp 81). In fact, William Tyndale's advocacy of iconoclasm had as much to do with history as with images: since images were linked metonymically to the Middle Ages, iconoclasm seemed a viable way to physically and imaginatively un-tell history (Simpson 12-4).

### **Medieval Theological Aesthetics**

Platonic representation has its end in the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic *good*, of which beauty is the most perfect emanation (Martin 14). Augustine brings Platonic notions of the good to bear on Christian aesthetics: beauty, truth, and goodness inhere and are perceptible through the intellect. In theory, Augustine considers arts like painting and sculpting lower-level pursuits compared to the abstract, intellectual contemplation of the Real that is of God, but the Incarnation eventually persuaded him of the value of materiality. He always reserved an ambivalence, however, for idol-worship was a serious issue of which he remained wary (Martin 20-1). The turning point came when he made a definitive move away from Plato and arrived at what Hans Urs von Balthasar views as his theologico-aesthetic apex, that "the image character of substances is justified by reference to the original image in God himself, the Son who is identical with the Father in nature and who yet stands in relation to him as his image" (Balthasar 122). Christian aesthetics would have had a brief history, perhaps, if Augustine's metaphysics was incompatible with aesthetics, but his theological writings remained firmly within the aesthetic domain through his conversion (Balthasar 95). In fact, the aesthetic is central: "seeing" (Balthasar 99) is to glimpse beauty, unmediated and unfiltered, and "anyone who cannot *see* the specific nature of this catholicity . . . cannot be moved by it" (Balthasar 102, emphasis in original).

Edward Farley's sketch of the aesthetic tradition of the west—what Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz has called “[t]he great theory of beauty” (165)—begins in Pythagoras and cosmic beauty; thereafter, it is taken up and elaborated by Plato and Plotinus, situated within a Christian framework by Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, and passed on to Aquinas and Bonaventure via Boethius (Farley 17). Two requisites of beauty remain constant at every point in the great theory: beauty presupposes being and produces pleasure (Farley 17). But beauty is also good. Many medieval theologians agreed on the constitutive relationship of beauty and goodness. Because it is coextensive with the good, beauty is by its very nature desirable, as Aquinas makes clear in his *Summa Theologiae* and *De Veritate* (Eco, *Aquinas* 34). Aquinas predicates the correlation between beauty and the good on the form in which they are grounded. Similarly, William of Auvergne links the two in his *Tractatus de Bono at Malo* and suggests that the pleasure we feel comes as a direct result of this fusion: “The beautiful is that which is desirable for its own sake, and pleasant, or that which, being good, is pleasurable because it is good” (qtd. in Eco, *Aquinas* 42).<sup>111</sup>

Medieval connections between spiritual beauty and practical knowledge of artistic techniques and styles begin internally in the mind of the artist. Hugh of St. Victor found in the external artistic product the fruit of the artist's contemplation, the pleasure of which derives from the soul realizing itself in the object peering back in the mirror (Eco, *Beauty* 10). For Albertus Magnus, form directs the relationship between the beauty of a thing and its end. Unlike his student Aquinas after him, Albert incorporated an objectivist element in his aesthetics in which beauty depends solely on the thing itself. Aquinas adds a humanistic element to Albert's

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<sup>111</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux organizes his aesthetics around the virtue of humility and the imitation of Christ (Astell, *Eating Beauty* 71). True beauty emanates from a perfect alignment of external experience and inner humility, where the former is molded into shape by the latter and becomes its reflection in the world (Astell, *Eating Beauty* 74).

aesthetics that takes the perceiver into account, but the object that is contemplated nevertheless has an objective structure whose beauty we apprehend intellectually (Eco, *Beauty* 26). Form actualizes matter, says Aquinas, to create “a being” (qtd. in Eco, *Aquinas* 71), the highest of all things. A form exists in the strictest sense when it combines with matter in a person, or more correctly, in a material thing that has being (Eco, *Aquinas* 70-1). Matter by itself is mere potential. For optimal actualization to take place, matter must bend to the particular needs of the form if it is to assume a beautiful aspect (Eco, *Aquinas* 83). The artist does not create being in the proper sense because the matter-form composite generated by an artistic process exists always-already *in potentia*. But this does not lessen *aesthetic* value. When a work of art possesses beauty, its form in nature and its realization in matter are as one (Eco, *Aquinas* 179-80). The crux of Aquinas’s theological aesthetic—that a thing is beautiful only insofar as it is perfect (Eco, *Aquinas* 180)—throws into relief the Wildean maxim with which this chapter began: “The morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.”

### **Modern Aesthetics: Autonomous Art and Its Discontents**

Hans Belting sees the medieval-modern divide in terms of aesthetics: he labels the modern the “era of art” (9) and the medieval the “era of images” (9). Secularization in art has manifested in a divorce between aesthetics and religion.<sup>112</sup> The Enlightenment bifurcation of aesthetic and religious concerns rendered aesthetic judgment a matter of taste, a complex category of gentlemanly discernment that achieved cultural prominence in the eighteenth century when Baumgarten coined the term “aesthetic” in his *Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis Ad*

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<sup>112</sup> Idolatry, the “one great taboo” (Farley 9) of the early Christian world, brought about a similar rift. The dominance of language over image for some in the early church helped engender a negative theology in which God is ineffable and unknowable, beyond the possibility of figuration (Farley 9-10).

*Poema Pertinentibus*.<sup>113</sup> Hume grounds his aesthetic theory in experience, sentiment, and taste, all essentially subjective categories that situate beauty within the realm of feeling. One can cultivate the eye and the manner required for a life of taste, but for Hume there can be no standard against which to measure taste (Martin 37-9). In Farley's view, the eighteenth-century creation of taste paved the way for a descent into complete subjectivity (35).

In 1785 German Enlightenment author Karl Philipp Moritz wrote an influential essay that shores up the fine arts and organizes them under a single category of autonomy. Moritz's piece set the stage for Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, which popularized the notion of autonomous art. Art's function as moral instructor with the potential to mediate the sacred was upended. Instead, each work of art was now celebrated as a discreet entity, occupying privileged space independent of related artistic forms. Serving no utility in itself, each painting is self-referential, a closed system of representation. For Moritz and Kant, the artwork is disembodied and gives rise to a non-bodily form of pleasure marked by disinterest, a turning away from the body toward an abstract, contemplative perfection (Hess 15-6). Kant set out to do what he believed Baumgarten had failed to accomplish fifty years earlier: to articulate a coherent theory of art (De Gruchy 56) in which the artwork does not possess a sacred *telos* but "is an end in itself" (De Gruchy 58).

However, nineteenth-century aestheticians like Blake, Coleridge, and Ruskin interweaved the terms art, beauty, and religion with ease and conviction (Frank Burch Brown 24). In fact, Frank Burch Brown asserts that Romantic aesthetics is fundamentally religious in nature (147).<sup>114</sup> Nineteenth-century British Congregationalist theologian P. T. Forsyth, sharing an

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<sup>113</sup> For Eco, Baumgarten merely coined the term; he gave birth neither to the spirit of aesthetic thought nor to the practice of creating and appreciating aesthetic objects (*Aquinas* xi).

<sup>114</sup> Some scholars over the past several decades have denounced equivalencies between aesthetic and religious concerns as an inattentiveness to detail. This gave rise to art critics offering correctives to their predecessors'

affinity with the Oxford Movement (especially with founding Tractarian F. D. Maurice) and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (they were “prophets as well as painters, and to no small extent apostles and martyrs” (qtd. in De Gruchy 71) who worked on behalf of the Incarnation), desired to reinfuse aesthetic philosophy and the practical arts with Christian principles (De Gruchy 67-8). The medieval *ethos* seemed to him most likely to spark such a recovery (De Gruchy 72).

Another proponent of nineteenth-century religio-aesthetics was John Ruskin. Galvanized by a profound admiration for medieval art, Ruskin attempts to “bring to light” in *Modern Painters* “that faultless, ceaseless, inconceivable, inexhaustible loveliness, which God has stamped on all things” (xlv), to convince lovers of beauty of the divine foundation of aesthetic experience.

Natural beauty consists in the presence of two coextensive sets of qualities: the first, which he calls Typical Beauty, mirrors the divine attributes on the outside, while the second, Vital Beauty, satisfies that which is proper to a thing on the inside. Beauty subsists in the *natural* order of Typical Beauty and the *moral* order of Vital Beauty (Fraser 114-5). Thus, aesthetic perception resembles religious ritual; it generates from man’s moral faculty (Fraser 116).

Julia Prewitt Brown suggests that “Wilde’s life-long preoccupation with the difference between art and life is evidence of his compulsion to overcome it” (2). His forebears—Brown lists Ruskin, Carlyle, and Newman, among others—spent their careers fighting dualisms that included the split between aesthetic principles and ethical values. Wilde followed the example of Ruskin and Newman in the application of Christian theology to achieve epistemological unification in his aesthetic theory (Julia Prewitt Brown 3). I, like Brown, take issue with what has become a critical commonplace of exaggerating Wilde’s discipleship to Walter Pater, for whom “*l’art pour l’art* means the triumph of art *over* reality” (Iser 35, my emphasis), a paradigm

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apparent oversights, a move that has further propelled the west along the path of secularization that began in the Renaissance and passed through Kant and Hume (Frank Burch Brown 25).

that underscores the “*contrast* between art and human experience” (Iser 61, my emphasis). The author of *Dorian Gray* proffers creative ways in which they coextend, and in the process he “retrieve[s] Pater’s ‘aesthetic moment’ from exclusive absorption in the world of sensation” and “reconnect[s] art and life on a new basis” (Julia Prewitt Brown 4). Conceptualizing Dorian’s picture as a medieval icon might help us reimagine Wilde’s challenge to modern aesthetic theories in terms of a recovery of more traditional ideas of body and soul, of matter and form.

### **Medieval Iconography in *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

Basil Hallward had captured the idea. He had found in Dorian Gray an inspiration for artistic creativity that he could not do without. This boy of exquisite beauty threatened to “absorb [Basil’s] whole nature, [his] whole soul, [his] very art itself” (*PDG* 9), and, overcome with the sight that would become beauty incarnate in the world of the novel, Basil internalized the image and imprinted Dorian’s form in his mind. The artist’s creative process begins with an idea, a coalescence of matter and form imagined in the depths of contemplation, a singular substance that springs from the intellect of the artist. Beauty emerges from the nexus of the idea and the form of its conception (Eco, *Aquinas* 167-9). The artist’s imagination shores up content from the repository of forms imprinted therein in ways unique to the particular artist (Eco, *Aquinas* 170). Basil’s intellect, a crucial faculty in the contemplation and realization of beauty, works to contain the form within the folds of memory so that matter is applied correctly, “[a]s the painter,” contemplating “the gracious and comely *form* he had so skillfully mirrored in his art . . . suddenly started up, and, closing his eyes, placed his fingers upon the lids, as though he sought to imprison within his brain some curious dream from which he feared he might wake” (*PDG* 5, my emphasis). True to Bonaventure’s notion that the beautiful artwork is one that simultaneously “equals its model” (Besançon 156) and “express[es] . . . the artist’s self”



(Besançon 156), Basil confesses that he has “put too much of [himself] into it” (*PDG* 6). Lord Henry, forever misconstruing his friend’s perorations on art, responds that he “can’t see any resemblance between [Basil and the portrait]” (*PDG* 6), though he does notice Basil’s “intellectual expression, and all that” (*PDG* 6). Lord Henry cannot see how the intellect has anything at all to do with beauty—“beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins” (*PDG* 6), sentiments of the art-as-such movement—but Basil, sympathetic to the “maladies of mediaevalism” that Lord Henry rejects, places so high a premium on their connection that his main fear of Dorian’s obsession with Sibyl Vane is the preservation of his intellect. Moreover, the union of the artist’s soul with the internalized idea does not denote physical “resemblance” but rather a spiritual likeness, one which Lord Henry, bereft of Augustine’s spiritual sight, cannot “see.” As Viladesau reminds us, iconic portraits strive to capture being, not resemblance (101).

Basil’s realization of form in matter has incarnational implications for the novel’s materiality: “The world is changed,” proclaims the artist, “because [Dorian is] made of ivory and gold” (*PDG* 185). He can now “see things differently” (*PDG* 12), “think of them differently” (*PDG* 12), and using a term with which Sara Ritchey describes the change that occurred at the Incarnation, he “can now *recreate* life in a way that was hidden from [him] before” (*PDG* 12, my emphasis). Ritchey argues that the re-created material world reveals as it simultaneously conceals God’s presence, collapsing the past into the present (Ritchey 14).<sup>115</sup> Dorian’s “merely visible presence” (*PDG* 34) is for Basil the “visible *incarnation* of that unseen ideal” (*PDG* 97, my emphasis) that

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<sup>115</sup> Irenaeus, whose work Balthasar credits as the “birth of Christian theology” (31), made what was perhaps *the* authoritative claim about the Incarnation: heresy is, at bottom, a rejection of the enfleshing of the *Logos*. Augustine later repeated this claim, solidifying it permanently in Christian consciousness (Balthasar 42).

dwelt in dim woodland, and walked unseen in open field, suddenly showing herself . . . the mere shapes and patterns of things becoming, as it were, refined, and gaining a kind of symbolical value, as though they were themselves patterns of some other and more perfect form whose shadow they made real. (*PDG* 34)

The “curves of [Dorian’s] lips rewrite history” (*PDG* 185) and make it possible for other matter to signify, to come to life and participate in the divine reality. Bynum suggests that the Incarnation reinscribed the medieval body within discussions of “matter itself” (32), where bodiliness and materiality are understood not as separate entities but as expressive of one another. No lacuna existed between Christ’s humanity on the one hand and the material in which His divinity might be embodied (Bynum 32-3). With Dorian’s remaking of the world, Wilde narrativizes a modern Incarnation that reinscribes the medieval body into the structure of the novel and exacts a correlation between his hero’s body and the materiality of Basil’s picture, bridging the “unseen ideal” with the “visible incarnation” of beauty itself.

Invited to gaze on the portrait, Dorian “drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. . . . The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation” (*PDG* 24). According to Hugh of St. Victor, aesthetic pleasure begins the moment the soul “recognize[s]” (Eco, *Aquinas* 11) its essential symmetry mirrored in a material object (Eco, *Aquinas* 11). So transfixed is Dorian by his sense of communion with the picture that he protects the canvas from Basil’s impetuous assault as desperately as he would his own life, “leap[ing] from the couch” (*PDG* 26) to stop the armed hand that “was going to rip up the canvas” (*PDG* 26). ““Don’t, Basil, don’t!” he cried. ‘It would be murder!’” (*PDG* 26). Even Lord Henry could see that Dorian’s identity is somehow caught between his person and the image hanging before them, and he gleefully bids the fascinating boy, whom he calls “a marvelous type” (*PDG* 33), to “come over and look at [himself]” (*PDG* 24). Indeed, so “marvelous” is Dorian’s “type” that he suggests to Basil “an

entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style” (*PDG* 12) the effects of which mean as much to him as did Psellus’s icons painted in the new style in the eleventh century.

“Unconsciously, [Dorian] defines for me the lines of a fresh school” (*PDG* 12). Dorian’s portrait is treated as the person himself in part because, as with the St. Luke’s Madonna, the prototype had posed for the artist: upon request of the delivery of the portrait to Dorian’s rooms, Basil responds, “[w]ell, as soon as you are dry, you shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home. Then you can do what you like with yourself” (*PDG* 27).<sup>116</sup> But Basil is also conscious of a possible danger. Calling the picture “the real Dorian” (*PDG* 28) is prescient, but the confusion these kinds of statements encourage—“‘[i]s this the *real* Dorian?’ cried the *original* of the portrait” (*PDG* 28, my emphases)—may lead to undue veneration, perhaps even worship. Basil confesses his own fixation later in the novel: “the world had become wonderful to my eyes—too wonderful, perhaps, for in such mad worships there is peril” (*PDG* 98). When Lord Henry flatters Dorian, Basil reprimands his friend, not wishing a similar “idolatry” (*PDG* 98) to beset others around him. Basil warns that he “must not say things like that before Dorian” (*PDG* 28), to which Lord Henry asks, “[b]efore which Dorian? The one who is pouring out tea for us, or the one in the picture?” (*PDG* 28). Basil, attesting to the portrait’s iconic status, responds, “[b]efore either” (*PDG* 28).

Dorian’s relationship with Sibyl Vane reveals the novel’s incarnational investment in the power of art to signify, on the one hand, and to endanger and ensnare, on the other. To the dismay of Basil and delight of Lord Henry, Dorian falls in love. Sibyl flits through Shakespeare’s plays with a grace that requires the aid of spiritual sight, and she seems all the

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<sup>116</sup> Images of fifth-century bishop Paulinus and St. Martin of Tours appeared side-by-side in the baptistery at Nola. Paulinus, uneasy about their proximity, differentiated the images as follows: Martin represents the “perfect pattern of a proper life” (qtd. in Belting 93), and he “a lesson for sinners who had to do penance” (Belting 93). His effort at differentiation bound the images together nonetheless—this time by narrative (Belting 93).

more real for her unreality. When asked who she is, the lover replies dreamily, “[o]ne evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen” (*PDG* 45); “I have seen her in every age and in every costume” (*PDG* 46). Dorian appears to rejoice in Sibyl’s power to embody another’s spirit in a simple change of clothes. But Basil’s alarm over his sitter’s infatuation derives from the pronouncement “Sibyl Vane is sacred!” (*PDG* 46), the gravity of which is unbeknownst to the besotted worshipper. From Basil’s point of view, not much good can come of a girl who “[t]o-night . . . is Imogen” (*PDG* 48) and “to-morrow night . . . will be Juliet” (*PDG* 48) for the same reason that he desires Dorian to remain unchanged and free from Lord Henry’s influence. A work of art cannot be sacred if it does not come into a direct relation with its prototype. When Dorian tells Lord Henry “how [he] worship[s] her” (*PDG* 49), the smiling listener does not anticipate the danger of idolatry in a narrative world endowed with sacred objects. He might advise that “[i]t is only the sacred things that are worth touching” (*PDG* 46), but it is unclear what he means by “sacred,” consumed as he is by a modern culture that does not account for such “mediaeval maladies” as an incarnational ethic that grants material sanctifying power. Lord Henry can conceive of no potential peril whatever, yet he does ask an appropriate question, despite himself. “When is she Sibyl Vane?” (*PDG* 48) he asks with some surprise, to which Dorian astutely replies, “Never” (*PDG* 48).

The idol “refers to something else” (Fradenburg 31). It fractionates indefinitely, Fradenburg maintains, and thus it remains “undead” (28), never to fuse with its signified (33). Sibyl Vane ceaselessly “refers to something else.” Dorian is shrewd in his observation that she is never actually Sibyl herself: her art is constantly on the verge of dissolution and will never represent the prototype in a meaningful way. Like an idol—or material that has become an idol for the devotee, which, in this case, is Dorian—she has no power in herself, but Dorian’s worship

of her ascribes such power to her. “From her little head to her little feet” (*PDG* 48) Dorian finds Sibyl “absolutely and entirely divine” (*PDG* 48); he “get[s] hungry” (*PDG* 48) for a “presence” (*PDG* 48) he inscribes in her; he “hid[es] away” (*PDG* 48) a “soul” (*PDG* 48) in her “little ivory body” (*PDG* 48); he “want[s] to place her on a pedestal of gold” (*PDG* 67) and “see the world worship the woman who is [his]” (*PDG* 67); and, importantly, he feels that he is changed, as Basil had been, now that his love is in the world. He talks of Sibyl in terms Basil uses about him—“[w]hen Sibyl comes on the stage you will have a new ideal of life” (*PDG* 69)—but Basil urgently attempts to reinscribe the notion of *goodness* into Dorian’s perception of Sibyl’s beauty. His “hope [that] the girl is good” (*PDG* 64) is met with a quip from Lord Henry that reinforces the divorce in modern aesthetics between goodness and beauty, a sentiment to which Dorian is, to Basil’s chagrin, susceptible. “Oh, she is better than good” (*PDG* 64), jibes Lord Henry, “she is beautiful” (*PDG* 64).

Indeed, Sibyl’s art “knows nothing of life” (*PDG* 48), and Dorian comes to realize its fraudulence:

The few words she had to speak—“Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much, / Which mannerly devotion shows in this; / For Saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch, / And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss”—with the brief dialogue that follows, were spoken in a thoroughly artificial manner. The voice was exquisite, but from the point of view of tone it was absolutely false. It was wrong in colour. It took away all life from the verse. It made the passion unreal. (*PDG* 71-2)

It is no surprise that of all the lines in *Romeo and Juliet* the ones chosen to reveal Sibyl’s artistic farce are words uttered by a pilgrim to a saint. The pilgrim’s words are inefficacious if not genuine. In the same way Claudius’s “words fly up” (Shakespeare III.iii.97) but his “thoughts remain below” (Shakespeare III.iii.97) in *Hamlet*, Sibyl’s art “produce[s] no effect” (*PDG* 75)

precisely because an idol is, metaphysically, “nothing” (*PDG* 75)<sup>117</sup>—its substance remains merely material. Michael Shea suggests that “Sibyl experiences the collapse of her art as a liberation” (133), but I argue that she has always-already “collapse[d]” because that is all she can do as an idol. The idol performs “on the verge of mutation and dissolution” (Zeeman 45), ever malleable and “in a state of collapse” (Zeeman 45). Sibyl’s final collapse is actually liberating for Dorian, who finally sees the idol for what it is. But this recognition traumatizes him. The impasse between referent and idol strikes us with a profound ambivalence (Fradenburg 33), and we “hasten to get rid of it” (35). Dorian “hasten[s] to get rid of” Sibyl-as-idol through a form of iconoclasm: “‘I have murdered Sibyl Vane,’ said Dorian Gray, half to himself—‘murdered her *as surely as if* I had cut her little throat with a knife’” (*PDG* 85, my emphasis). His “murder” amounts to ceasing to take seriously the idol’s art, and having been robbed of adoration, the idol dissolves, fading out of an existence it never actually occupied. In a moment of clarity, Lord Henry consoles the stunned Dorian, reassuring his protégé that in a novelistic world where things have sanctifying potential Sibyl “never really lived, and so she has never really died. . . . The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away” (*PDG* 89).

Dorian suffers a certain amount of trauma following Sibyl’s death, but after all that had happened he is, at bottom, relieved. But he notices something about his portrait that piques his curiosity and, following careful examination, makes him tremble with fear, for “the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different . . . the strange expression that he had noticed in the face of the portrait seemed to linger there, to be more intensified even” (*PDG* 78). Images declared themselves to be icons, says Gary Vikan, when

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<sup>117</sup> In such cases, mere matter is void. As Nicolette Zeeman points out, “although [the idol] is highly material, it is ‘nothing’” (44).

they perform miracles: “[a] painting became an icon at the moment when it began to function as an icon” (1-2). Thomas Noble corroborates this view, clarifying that while “any image could be an icon,” icons are “images that did, or that were expected to do, something” (5) deserving of reverence.<sup>118</sup> The subtle change in Dorian’s image declares its authenticity, a fact that Basil verifies later when the miraculous marks on the painting are made known to him for the first and only time, in the face of which he utters, with confused dread, “Yes, it was Dorian *himself*” (*PDG* 131, my emphasis). Peggy McCracken questions what happens at “moment[s] of miraculous mimesis” (47), that is, moments when the prototype whose image is depicted on the canvas responds to prayers, supplications, and other stimuli from without. Is it the image itself that performs, or does the person depicted intercede (McCracken 47)?<sup>119</sup> The painting known as the “Charter of Human Redemption”<sup>120</sup> illustrates what the result of such intercessory moments might look like: the canvas doubles as human skin scraped by a pen that represents the nails and flails that sullied Christ’s body, and the trails of ink left by the pen are actually blood-stains (Bynum 89). Similarly, the surface of the canvas doubles as Dorian’s actual face and body, and it begins to display marks that have been newly scraped by sin, lines that were not originally painted by Basil. Image and prototype are linked in what has become a soteriological narrative.

In this “moment of miraculous mimesis,” the novel enfolds the portrait in narrative to form the type of hybrid icon that was new to the eleventh century. Herbert Kessler delineates two classes of medieval icons: the portrait, or *icona*, transposed the figure illustrated into the

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<sup>118</sup> Examples abound that show the performative power of icons. The *Axion estin*, an icon of the Blessed Virgin, bled from a sword wound (Belting 48), as did icons of the crucified Christ in Hagia Sophia (Belting 195) and San Marco (Belting 197).

<sup>119</sup> A paradigmatic example of this ambivalence is the Holy Face of Edessa, generally known as the Mandylion, whose reputation as a direct imprint of the image of Christ’s face effectuated, according to Herbert Kessler, “the very possibility of icons” (63). Christ covered His face with a cloth, left His image upon it, and gave it to the messenger Ananias. Ananias’s failed painting of Christ wanted the grace of “the Archetype himself” (Kessler 73) the application of which rendered the image a “relic-icon” (Kessler 71).

<sup>120</sup> Fifteenth-century Carthusian miscellany, folio 23r, British Library Additional MS 37049 (Bynum 318, n80).

present and allowed interpersonal communication to occur between the holy person and the devotee, and the narrative picture, or *historia*, unfolded in visual form the actions of a revered person or group of persons for a particular purpose, usually to teach a moral lesson (1-2). While the portrait has traditionally held more weight than the narrative picture, Belting argues that their “claim[s] to historicity” (10) tend to equalize their ontological value (10). The Man of Sorrows, the most famous devotional image in England, conflates portrait and narrative in one image, which “allow[s] the devotee to transport the Christ-who-suffered into the present, to become the Christ-who-suffers” (Swanson 6), an act that simultaneously recalls and participates in the Passion *in imitatio* (Swanson 6). In similar fashion, Dorian’s portrait icon “h[olds] the secret of his life” (*PDG* 79), but it also “t[ells] his story” (*PDG* 79) as his Passion unfolds, with each curl of the lip, crease of the eyes and mouth, and laceration of the body appearing to remind the Dorian-who-suffers of the soul of the Dorian-who-suffered as the former gazes on each new panel. The portrait encapsulates the absolute truth about the person in his totality, but Dorian realizes that it is, at any given moment, only a “part of [himself]” (*PDG* 27) that reveals a single piece of the narrative arc of his life story. In placing them side-by-side—the unchanging prototype embodied in Dorian the person, on the one hand, and the painting as a narrative icon that renders his moral path visible for the purposes of repentance, on the other—the novel expresses one of the central (Augustinian) tenets of theological aesthetics, that “the path itself is beauty” (qtd. in Balthasar 122). Regarding the narrative-portrait “an ever-present sign” (*PDG* 82) that “call[s] him to judgment” (*PDG* 102), Dorian professes to see in this revelation an opportunity for moral instruction and pledges to read the narrative icon pedagogically, as it long had been read. “[T]he portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him would be a guide to him through life” (*PDG* 82).



Initially at least, Dorian's icon seems to have the effect that Gregory the Great wished for all icons to have on the faithful: "A sense of infinite pity, not for himself, but for the painted image of himself, came over him . . . he would not sin . . . [h]e would resist temptation" (*PDG* 79). A crucial distinction is made here between Dorian the prototype and Dorian the narrative icon. There would be no need to have "pity" on "himself" but rather on the painted image, which is his past, present, and future self with regard to morality. The lines on the canvas, drawn without aid of the artist, are self-generated, the self being the exemplar who is whole in himself. The image affords an opportunity for personal reflection on the repercussions of sin. Images of the virtuous *and the unvirtuous life* "belong to the realm of sacred art" (Viladesau 173) and offer models from which one might live. To begin to live the virtuous life as a result of the icon's influence would be to render "the path itself . . . beauty," but Dorian's exchange with frame-maker Mr. Hubbard regarding the acquisition of a frame for the portrait reveals both his lack of appreciation for what is at stake and his stridency to conceal what he knows he must face. "I have just got a beauty of a frame, sir" (*PDG* 103), reports Mr. Hubbard, "[p]icked it up at a sale. Old Florentine. Came from Fonthill, I believe. Admirably suited for a religious subject, Mr. Gray" (*PDG* 103). A frame thus "suited" is exactly what is called for, of course, but Dorian, though he promises to "drop in and look at the frame" (*PDG* 103), falsely confesses that he "do[esn't] go in much at present for religious art" (*PDG* 103). Dorian's precipitous descent into moral catastrophe begins with a denial of the painting's theological aesthetic. He would rather keep the painting out of sight.

The desire for repentance is short lived, and Dorian instead chooses to act in ways that only make the painting more frightful. Blights ravage the image as Dorian is "enamoured" (*PDG* 91) of what becomes a sadistic process of self-inflicted mutilation by night. But it is his

contemplation of the image's wounds by day that brings him the most pleasure. During these meditative sessions before the painting, intense both physically and mentally, he had "in a boyish mockery of Narcissus . . . kissed, or feigned to kiss, those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him. Morning after morning he had sat before the portrait wondering at its beauty" (*PDG* 90-1). Though the painting grows uglier by the day, Dorian wonders at its *beauty*. The "moments when [Dorian] looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful" (*PDG* 124) recall a particular kind of Passion devotion known as the *Christus deformis*, a concept first defined by Augustine and developed by Bernard and Bonaventure in the later Middle Ages. Augustine reconciles Jerome's conviction and Ambrose's repudiation of Christ's physical beauty in the *Christus deformis*, a paradoxical aesthetic dimension which understands beauty in and through ugliness. Focusing on Christ's wounds as loci of beauty, this Augustinian figuration inspired Bernard's *amor carnalis*, or "love for one's own body" (Astell, *Eating Beauty* 77), in which ugliness turns into beauty out of an "aesthetic empathy for the *Christus deformis*" (Astell, *Eating Beauty* 82). This was further developed by Bonaventure's reading of Francis of Assisi's stigmata as an aesthetic extension (Astell, *Eating Beauty* 99) of the Eucharist, a work of art carved by Christ that literally transfigures Francis's body into Christ's body (Astell, *Eating Beauty* 108). Dorian's devotion to his own beautiful disfigurement rouses similar feelings. The Passion image connects with the perfect, archetypal body through the wounds that disfigure it, and it is through these wounds that the image of Dorian, like the image of Francis, shares in the life of the archetype and literally becomes the "body of Dorian." But the painting's ugliness must inspire acts of virtue and self-sacrifice if it is to be as beautiful as Francis's ugliness. Wilde's novelistic incarnation and conflation of the portrait and narrative icon endow his eponymous hero with Christ-like properties, but his treating the icon as if it were

an autonomous artwork enables and justifies iniquitous acts now that he is closed off from Basil's influence. He has strayed far from Basil's intended purpose for creating the work of art in the first place. Lord Henry's flippant reassurance that "mediaeval art" (*PDG* 68), while "charming" (*PDG* 68), is "out of date" (*PDG* 68) abets Dorian's behavior, leading his impressionable disciple to misinterpret the painting's warnings and reduce its liveliness to a fascination, a mask for sinning rather than a model for good living.

"In the long cedar chests that lined the west gallery of his house [Dorian] had stored away many rare and beautiful specimens of what is really the raiment of the Bride of Christ" (*PDG* 118), some of which "were woven in a diaper of red and gold silk, and were starred with medallions of many saints and martyrs, among whom was St. Sebastian" (*PDG* 118). Wilde took the name Sebastian upon release from prison. Sebastian's body, riddled with arrows in traditional iconographic depictions, echoes the stigmatization of Francis. Wilde's explicit identification with Francis (Astell, "Work of Art" 200) and Sebastian parallels his intense attraction to the pierced and bleeding figure of Christ crucified (Astell, "Work of Art" 197), a fascination also recorded in Dorian's catalogue of religious objects: "He had chasubles, also, of amber-coloured silk, and blue silk and gold brocade, and yellow silk damask and cloth of gold, figured with representations of the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ" (*PDG* 118-9), though one need not look beyond the painting to see such a representation dynamically unfolding in real time. Dorian's contemplation of the wounds on the surface of the painting is really to contemplate his own wounds. Bernard's and Bonaventure's understandings of the *Christus deformis* suggest that ugliness can be beautiful—*is* beautiful, a beauty based on ugliness—so long as the sinner comes to know beauty by embracing the bloody and painful Passion. If internalized correctly, soul and body will emerge united and unscathed.

When Dorian the original, Dorian the image, and the artist of the original image finally come face to face (to face) near the novel's conclusion, the hero faces what I will read as the penultimate panel of Dorian's narrative icon. With sadistic glee Dorian unveils the altered portrait before Basil, who staggers back in disbelief. "There was nothing evil in it, nothing shameful" (*PDG* 132), he reasons, desperately trying to solve a problem unknown to modern aesthetics but about which he had a lingering fear from the outset, the terrible responsibility of capturing life in a work of art, of representing a "marvelous type" who is "made of ivory and gold." He first laments his idolatry—"Christ! what a thing I must have worshipped!" (*PDG* 132)—before locating the solution in his historical memory, to humbly acknowledge that there is a moral lesson to be learned and pray for the strength to avoid future temptations. "Good God, Dorian, what a lesson! what an awful lesson!" (*PDG* 133) is followed by the anxious entreaty to "[p]ray, Dorian, pray . . . '[l]ead us not into temptation. Forgive us our sins. Wash away our iniquities.' . . . The prayer of your repentance will be answered" (*PDG* 133). Dorian's refusal to submit to the "maladies of mediaevalism" at this crucial stage in the novel throws Wilde's aesthetic project into stark relief, as Dorian's stubborn adherence to Lord Henry's materialist paradigm crystallizes in the "wild hour of madness" (*PDG* 169) in which he murders Basil. This remorseless act reverses the betrayal of Christ, and "[o]ut of the black cave of Time" (*PDG* 169) the medieval imagination looms large in the face of modern flippancy that has brushed off its warnings. "[T]errible and swathed in scarlet, rose the image of his sin" (*PDG* 169), the image of Dorian in the garden on the eve of his final sacrifice. "[H]e saw the face of his portrait leering in the sunlight" (*PDG* 146), but "[w]hat was that loathsome red dew that gleamed, wet and glistening on one of the hands, as though the canvas had sweated blood?" (*PDG* 146). With his

last sin against Hetty, an innocent country girl whom Dorian thought he had saved, the Passion image reaches completion:

The thing was still loathsome—more loathsome, if possible, than before—and the scarlet dew that spotted the hand seemed brighter, and more like blood newly spilt. . . . And why was the red stain larger than it had been? It seemed to have crept like a horrible disease over the wrinkled fingers. There was blood on the painted feet, as though the thing had dripped—blood even on the hand that had not held the knife. (*PDG* 186)

The medieval icon “reenacts” (Belting 263) the prototype who is conceived as “the event itself” (Belting 263). In a Passion sequence, the event is the process of crucifixion that includes the prefatory events, the act itself, and the effects of the act. The icon serves its purpose (and becomes worthy of its prototype) if the sufferer “gains ‘insight’ into the deeper meaning of his or her suffering” (Belting 265). Staring out at the world with blood on his hands and feet, Dorian’s image entreats the world to take up its cross and sin no more.

“He would destroy” (*PDG* 187) the image—he “would kill this monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace” (*PDG* 187). According to Michael Buma, Dorian’s final act of violence returns the painting to a “pre-lapsarian state” (24). Yet Balthasar’s repeated observation of the artistic *telos* of theological aesthetics, that “the path itself is beauty,” has its origin in Bernard, for whom the end of art is the recovery of beauty that is not *a priori* and pre-lapsarian but *a posteriori* and the result of a redemptive process. “Nothing can be more pleasing to God,” says Bernard, “than His own image when restored to its original beauty” (qtd. in Astell, *Eating Beauty* 84), but such a restoration requires a mode of sacrifice that will change the world forever, leaving it all the wiser for the moral lesson imparted. In a moment of Christ-like self-sacrifice, Dorian, the divine prototype of the novel, participates in the crucifixion scene *aesthetically* by sacrificing himself as a work of art through an act of iconoclasm, “seiz[ing] the [knife], and stab[ing] the picture with it” (*PDG* 187).

The ideal end of art is illustrated in a twelfth-century crucifixion icon in the Mount Sinai collection at the Monastery of St. Catherine. Having concluded the process of intense suffering of the crucifixion, Christ appears without blemish, and the Virgin at the foot of the cross raises her hand as if to ask her Son to untangle the paradox of bodily suffering and divine immunity (Belting 271). A noise is heard, and a group of men tear up the stairs and forcibly enter the upper room to see what has happened. Wilde's narrative ends in the same way as this narrative icon *always is*, with a seemingly unanswerable question posed to a figure whose sacrifice is a perfect work of art.

## Conclusion

In her book *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Mary Carruthers resists medieval art criticism that she considers “over-theologized and over-moralized” (8) in the hopes of revealing how people in the Middle Ages could—and did—make non-theological aesthetic judgments (11). Carruthers’s objective is to extract a discourse of medieval aesthetics from the discourses of theology and morality within which they have been historically enfolded (13). The aesthetic lexicon she hopes to uncover, once liberated from “crude moralizing” (Carruthers 17), prefigures modern aesthetics because ancient rhetoric provided the model on which art was produced and observed (Carruthers 17-8). If Carruthers hopes to unearth a latent secularism from texts which seem inseparable from the theological imagination, I hope to have shown that, for some texts which seem inseparable from the secular imagination, theology may provide a key to unlock the rhetorical treasures embedded beneath. In juxtaposing the medieval and the modern artwork, Carruthers implies that the latter is already detheologized, since it is designed on an Enlightenment model which itself was designed in opposition to an even deeper—and presumably darker—medieval past. But I suggest that the authors I have treated in this study feared the unintended consequences of gothicized *modernity*. Reading their texts in light of medieval theology has hopefully shed light on some of the ways in which they enchant the present by looking to the past. The medievalizing process supplies their narratives with the supernatural bodies they did not explicitly name yet are nevertheless there, like the *Logos*, combating the ghosts of secularism, automatization, scientific materialism, and consumerism, awaiting incarnation.

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## Appendix

In an email in which the editor was queried on my behalf, the editor had this to say:

“[Timothy Curran] can go ahead, but he will need to say where the material first appeared, citing [Boydell & Brewer] as the publisher. If he decides to publish a book from the thesis, he’ll need to request permission more formally, again, but that should be fine.”