

LIFELINES: TRACING ORGANIC VITALITIES IN SACRED AND  
SECULAR BIOGRAPHY

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LIFELINES: TRACING ORGANIC VITALITIES IN SACRED AND  
SECULAR BIOGRAPHY

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This dissertation aims to find the life in hagiography. That is, this project breaks with traditional readings of medieval saints' lives in order to examine what constitutes "life" in these narratives. While medieval hagiography has been mined by contemporary scholars for political, social, and ecclesiastic content, little attention has been paid to the genre's relationship to philosophical and organic categories of life. I argue that not only do these lives engage in philosophical wranglings about ontology but that their literary inclinations also attach hagiographic forms to a kind of presence that resists transcendence while still acknowledging a theological tradition. Although the vast corpus of medieval life-writing seems potentially universal in scope and content, this study organizes around the idea that medieval life narratives prove flexible enough to permit speculation about living energies and bounded enough by genre, convention, and doctrine to develop the idea of vitality carefully and intentionally.

The first part of this project addresses the living being through a literary-historical lens that endeavors to trace the evolution of this concept as it is connected to a trajectory of holiness in post-Conquest England. The injunctions and caesurae of monastic living highlight the medieval sense of the instability both of the living being and of a working understanding of it. The lives of saints native to the British Isles whose legends feature encounters with animals reveal how animal lives can map spaces in the vita for other living beings. Studying next the means by which Geoffrey Chaucer and the *Pearl*-poet attend to the difficulties in locating and representing the space and dynamism of life, I explore how vital objects, landscapes, and minerals affirm the place of nonhuman life in the human life. Finally, a look at *Piers Plowman* illustrates that the later fourteenth-century life grows through its connections to the problems of knowledge, imagination, and spiritual histories to create a type of ecological entanglement. The medieval life, I conclude, is not merely concerned with exemplary living, but rather imagines the living being as constituted in a network, as patched together with materials, nonhuman beings, other human beings, ideas, and histories.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patricia Har was born in Princeton, New Jersey, on February 28, 1977. She graduated from Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts in 1995 and Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut in 1999, earning a B.A. in the College of Letters. Tricia was awarded the Sage Fellowship at Cornell University in 2003. She currently lives in Byfield, Massachusetts with her husband, Aaron Mandel, two-year-old son, Willem, and an eternally young dog.

For Aaron and Willem  
with love

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## *Introduction*

Augustine of Hippo in the eleventh book of *De Trinitate* writes, “[W]e are not bodies but intelligible beings, since we are life”<sup>1</sup>. At first blush, this statement seems definitive and peremptory: humans, in particular “we” humans, find our essence not in bodies, just in spirit, in a vaporous cognitive impulse, in an implied soul. This tract that imagines Trinitarian doctrine as a universal and immanent principle sets up in this sentence, maybe out of habit, maybe on purpose, maybe as an accident of syntax, maybe with a nod to immanence, another trinity: body, sentient being, and life. Augustine’s causal qualification, “since we are life,” does not offer an elucidation of the properties of life, nor does it define life against intellect or spirit, identify it as an earthly or divine spark, but rather life in Augustine relies in this ontological parsing on a big and hazy category. But life is an important concept, for Augustine and for later medieval writers whose works this project examines, and not just a throw-away term, a catch-all notion, or a flexible genre. While it is hard to define, to locate, and to visualize, neither Augustine nor medieval hagiographers or secular poets like Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland could keep from doing so. My question is not “what was it like to live in

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, ed. Gareth Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 61.

medieval England?”, but rather “what does a genre that comments on methods for proper living reveal about medieval ideas of the fact of being alive?”. What this project delivers, then, is not a definition or exposition of a concept of life or being, but rather a map of the branches of a medieval conception of vital energy that charts the diverse means by which the problem of life is approached in the genre that purports to inscribe it. If life is the anchor, this project endeavors to reveal it by tracing its attachments, by unbinding life from the spiritual, corporeal, and psychic processes to which it can be found fastened. I attempt to pause at the textual interstices where something vital and dynamic comes into focus and especially where vitality becomes the focus in narratives that assume the mantle of sacred biography or that confront the question of lived experience. This study attempts to enter into the trinity that Augustine posits in order to explore the life side of the equation, to consider medieval vitalities as a concept separable from spirit and body, as separable even from human bodies.

One approach to thinking through vitality is to look at the accounts of the lives of those people who seem to have an extra helping of life. While other types of biographies certainly do appear occasionally in medieval literature, the lives of saints achieve a prominence and popularity that implies an exceptional felicity of

expression when it comes to the concept of life. An acute interest in the notion of life – the living energy that is held in common and is always strange, demanding, and strangely pleasurable – dominates the Latin life of Saint Catherine of Siena. As a Dominican Tertiary active during the second half of the fourteenth century, Catherine was not compelled to remain within the precinct of a convent, but rather was permitted to engage in public acts of charity and devotion, which even led to Catherine’s involvement in the political intrigues of the Great Schism. Yet, in his account of her life, Raymond of Capua, the holy woman’s confessor and first biographer, devotes only a handful of chapters to her ambassadorial endeavors, and omits entirely many of Catherine’s more distinguished public successes which came toward the end of her life<sup>2</sup>. According to Raymond, his subject’s social and civic accomplishments beyond a particular date bear little significance because Catherine’s living purpose had been fulfilled well before her physical death.

In a section which sets out to review the highlights of Catherine’s young adulthood and the development of “her sublime virtues,” Raymond notes that “before [Catherine] reached the end of her life she had all but achieved her aim within the world of time,

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<sup>2</sup> In an essay that considers the historical and authorial contexts of Raymond’s life of Catherine, see Karen Scott, "Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the Mystic's Encounter with God." *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*. 136-167. Philadelphia, PA: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999.

having run forward with the utmost speed to gain the heavenly reward.”<sup>3</sup> Quite the temporal and spiritual athlete, Catherine seems to owe her immoderate virtue in part to an outpacing and overcoming of her living being, a life that has been separated from living. In asserting this divide, the hagiographer implies multiple fissures in the narrative and the actual manifestation of Catherine’s life. This split effectively places Catherine beyond the life of being and outside of time; it is as if the time of her life has shed earth-bound, cosmological constraints. Something in Catherine is at once on hyper-drive, sprinting ahead of her own body, and already very still, like a rock or soul in Paradise, because she is outside of time as humans experience it. Even so, Raymond remains constrained by linear and logical conventions, and so must compose her life *as if* she were attached to worldly agendas, as if she were still here.

This interest in dividing temporalities and Catherine’s time-hopping brings up for Raymond what it is that animates Catherine following her transition out of earthly time. While the hagiographer never explicitly locates the moment when Catherine surpasses earthly measures, he does recount twice an especially vivid anecdote about

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. George Lamb (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 2003), 392. Hereafter all citations to Catherine’s *Life* will refer to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

Catherine's care of another devout laywoman sick with breast cancer<sup>4</sup>. Because the disease had so advanced that tumors eroded this ailing woman's flesh, no one but Catherine would approach her for the odor. While changing Andrea's dressings one day, Catherine herself falls prey according to her confessor to passing weakness, or possibly demonic instigations, and suffers a momentary bout of queasiness. This lapse provides the saint with an opportunity to defy her frail stomach and to mete out an especially stringent penance: to teach herself a lesson, despite her patient's protests, she "put her mouth and nose to the horrible sore and remained there until the Spirit had conquered the rebellious feeling of nausea" (141).

Later, Catherine's constitution fails again in response to her charge's degenerating condition, but this time she releases "holy anger against her own body...[a]nd she collected up into the bowl the fetid stuff that had been used to wash the sore, along with all the pus, and going away a little, gulped it all down. When she had done this, the temptation to feel repugnance passed away" (Raymond 147). While these encounters establish a decided rift between bodily impulse and spiritual will, Catherine's gruesome self-punishment seems to redirect the narrative to concentrate on Andrea's disease. It is unclear from this incident what the dying body gains by this emphasis, but its

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<sup>4</sup> For an insightful comparative reading of this type of activity, see Molly Morrison, "Ingesting Bodily Filth: Defilement in the Spirituality of Angela of Foligno." *Romance Quarterly* 50.3 (2003): 204-216.

importance is certified by a vision of Jesus in which the “abhorrent drink” taken as penance from Andrea is countered with a taste of the divine chest wound: “And she, finding herself thus near to the source of the fountain of life, put the lips of her body, but much more those of the soul, over the most holy wound, and long and eagerly and abundantly drank that indescribable and unfathomable liquid” (Raymond 148).

Even as Catherine’s ascetic performance intends to join her to Andrea and Jesus’s suffering bodies and to represent her victory, as Raymond repeatedly puts it, over corporeal need, it also denies the reducibility of human life, the living being and the most fundamental subject of the hagiographic form, to the body or the soul. Although Raymond makes sure to identify as repugnant the strange drink Catherine concocts from Andrea’s dressings, he includes as an aside that Catherine had confided in him that she had “never...tasted any food and drink sweeter or more exquisite.” Likewise, Raymond discovers among the papers of Catherine’s previous confessor that she had described her inhalation of Andrea’s wounds as the most pleasant scent she had ever smelled. For Catherine, then, these are not uncomplicated conquests. It is not Catherine’s own body that through suffering and alienation establishes a site of sanctity, but instead Andrea’s affliction, which Catherine internalizes in such a way that

she is affected at levels both physical and spiritual. But these effects cannot quite be called suffering, at least according to Catherine's report of the experience. Moreover, it is Catherine's consumption of Andrea's diseased flesh that opens up the possibility of an intimate encounter with both the divine and the energy of another human being. In the time following this incident Catherine's appetite disappears and she never again allows herself to digest food. The text emphasizes these double wounds as the origin of Catherine's new, more abstemious life, but instead of figuring Catherine's post-nutritional life as a practice of repeatedly denying a hunger or a need, the saint seems to have been energized in an ultimate way by drinking in all this biomatter. And the two wounds, while clearly hierarchized in their effects<sup>5</sup>, provide a point of contact that throws into relief questions surrounding the source and conceptualization of a living vitality. If Catherine's vision of Christ as capable of performing both male and female bodily activities, as both nursing mother and Heavenly Bridegroom, may be understood to disrupt the idea of rigid gender binaries, so too the two wounds that nourish Catherine seem to render more fluid the categories and spaces of biological and

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<sup>5</sup> In her article, Morrison claims that "Catherine consumes filth to prove herself worthy to drink Christ's blood" (211); while I do not disagree with this assertion, it does seem important that the narrative devotes at least as much attention to the filth-eating as to the incorporation of divine fluids.

spiritual life<sup>6</sup>. This double dose of stuff organic and spiritual seems to fill the saint up for good. Raymond uses the episode to signal the end of the saint's connection to her material existence, but Catherine's description, which slips into the *Life* only in fragments and asides, indicates that organic life does not launch only disgust and disavowal, but enriches Catherine to a point beyond need.

As fascinated as Raymond's story of Catherine's pus consumption is with extreme penance (which in contemporary culture might be likened to extreme sports - those dangerous but exuberant activities that push human bodies and psyches to their limits and are widely regarded as the pursuits of the healthiest people), these encounters bear witness to an interest in an animating force that is not spiritual. Excretions like blood and tears might be sublimated or transformed into signs, but something about pus resists such recuperation. It is also a fluid that unlike blood does not seem to make anything or keep any part of the body functioning, but rather is a nuisance, an indicator of trouble or excess, something to be gotten rid of. This corporeal flow and Catherine's treatment of it also conveniently draw together and problematize the vital energies whose development I trace in this project. Pus is uncontrollable and impure, a dark image for vitality, but still its ingestion so energizes Catherine

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<sup>6</sup> This passing reading follows Caroline Walker Bynum's influential discussion of similar episodes. See Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

that she never eats again. Animating energies sometimes do not look like life, and the life force is not simply the picture of health, the image of impenetrable bodies or seamless unions. Vitality in medieval life writing and poetry has an uncanny knack for looking a lot like death and decay, or at least for snuggling up close to the end of life.<sup>7</sup> While this adjacency appears to be an issue of negative definition – what is life if not death? in more ancient terms, what is life if not motion before stillness? in more humanist terms, what is human life if not animal life, if not vegetal life? – it is worth considering, and I do so in almost every chapter, that the question of what life is tends to emerge most urgently just at the point of its loss, just as it fizzles out. For Saint Catherine of Siena, vital energies and the decaying organic first repulse and then powerfully attract her, and these affective responses in conjunction with her intimacy with this ghastly biomatter allows Catherine to live more and to live more strangely, more inexplicably. The mystery of life does not grow more defined by getting close to death, but deepens. In her book, *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett notices the violent potential in the Deleuzian notion of life as immanence, suggesting that despite its generative properties, vitality should not be limited to a vision of a splendid overflowing: “A life thus names a restless activeness, a destructive-creative force-presence that does not

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<sup>7</sup> In fact this project started out as an attempt to trace subjectivity in rituals and narratives of mourning in medieval hagiography, but the prospect of long-term research into death seemed a little too gloomy so I backed up a little into life.

coincide fully with any specific body. A life tears the fabric of the actual without ever coming fully 'out' in a person, place, or thing"<sup>8</sup>. In this pair, Catherine and Andrea, it is not a given that Catherine is the more vital simply because her body is not diseased or because she has a reputation for spiritual austerity. And that Catherine relies on the fluids from Andrea's sores confers a certain vitality to the dying woman and assigns a certain destructive potentiality to this representation of an animating entity.

Sorting out life is a mixed up business, and in this important moment of Catherine's life, ethics, eating, mastery, and things intermingle. On the most obvious and probably most relevant level, Catherine's intense care of Andrea stages the relationship of vitality to ethics. Catherine steps in when no one else can bear to change the suffering woman's dressings, rendering the saint unsurprisingly on the moral high ground. But Catherine's nausea complicates and challenges this predictable good deed: the saint is not allowed to be masterful or aloof. To avoid these ethical pitfalls, the episode suggests that intimacy, even an aggressive and unwelcome kind of intimacy, is necessary. Putting her face against Andrea's wounds forces Catherine, and Raymond's audience, to pay attention to a common vitality, to the sharedness of life. What makes these exchanges so intriguing,

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<sup>8</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010: 54.

however, is that they, and presumably Catherine if this biography is to be believed, go farther. This intimacy is not only about an intellectual or a superficial recognition; it imagines instead the power of digestion as a part of the ethical attachment. Catherine's eating of the rags used to dress Andrea's sores is a grand gesture, but there is something very small in the act, too, that seems to suggest that this event is not only about human bodies in touch with each other. Excretions, fragments, and bite-sized pieces of organic and inorganic matter are relevant to both the notion of vitality and of ethical action. As we are swept up into an ecstatic vision of Christ, we are also tacitly encouraged to process what it means to digest this strange combination of things, what is happening in the saint's gut, what this meal has to do with nutrition and the vitality absorbed from food, what is implied when things are substituted for food. In this very intimate exchange is also something impersonal – the rags, the digestion, the pus – which underscores the non-human element of vitality. Despite the focus on pus and blood, the narrative of Catherine's life does not hint at vitalism, the idea that a gelatinous entity invigorates bodies and circulates somewhere between organs, skin, and soul (nor is this concept something I am very interested in examining in this project). It is of course not the pus itself that animates in this scenario. Instead, Catherine's experiences with Andrea repeatedly figure the

breaking down of boundaries and so seem to imagine vitality as something more than attached to a subject or a body but something not really concomitant with the soul either.

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Writing not about hagiography but the history of ontological and epistemological formulations, particularly those that define humanity against a notion of animality, Giorgio Agamben theorizes:

In our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a logos, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element. We must learn instead to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation.<sup>9</sup>

Although it is certainly true that the Middle Ages contributes to the history of envisioning the human as a union of body and soul, it seems that medieval hagiographers and other poets had already learned to “think of man...as what results from the incongruity of these two elements.” Body and soul were never a perfect fit. Because saints’ lives were so popular, ranking second only to romances, and were so regularly reproduced in the Middle Ages, it is clear that these narratives must have achieved more than mere commentary on spiritual election and proper living. Hagiography with its constant turning over of the idea and the narration of life is particularly well

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<sup>9</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2004: 16.

poised to undermine the notion of the living being as a seamless whole or a product of mystical conjunction. It is my belief that medieval lives have quite a lot to tell about the vital energy that animates living beings, and so in this project I pursue the question of life in medieval hagiography and its inheritors, that is, in poems that embrace and revise hagiographic forms.

As exempla, as narratives of lives that not only illustrate superior earthly deeds but also point to a transcendent reward, these texts bear considerable normative authority. Unlike the modern biography and memoir market open to any extrovert with a confessional penchant, medieval lives describe not only a life of exceptional virtue, but also how to live; and so these lives intersect with and reify sets of social and doctrinal standards, becoming thereby part of secular and ecclesiastical power networks. One might presume, then, that the conventions of the devotional *vita* would impede manifestations of the living being in an effort to promote ideological orthodoxy. Undeniably, the life genre does indeed function to teach and promote such lived perfection and to reinforce the power of ecclesiastic institutions. Even so the ideological imperative that produces these texts repeatedly calls attention back to life as something that, in its earthly actualization, occupies an important, if troubled position in the hagiographic form. Moreover, because

exemplary lives seem to defend against a predetermined or singular definition of life, hagiography does not foreclose the possibility that these narratives have something to tell us about the fact of being alive. This energy can be recognized as distinct from the soul because it is not unique to the human. From the “dead stones,” whose modification presumes a once living condition, that the antagonists of martyrs worship to the lives of objects, like the holy cross, that appear in legendaries, medieval writers were also able to imagine and represent life as non-uniform and multiple<sup>10</sup>.

In examining what constitutes life in these narratives, my project separates from traditional readings of medieval saints’ lives. While medieval hagiographic materials have been mined by contemporary scholars for political, social, ecclesiastic, and literary content, little attention has been paid to the genre’s relationship to the philosophical and physical category of life. Even so, this study not only considers the idea of life in ontological terms, but also looks at what literary and theologically-inclined texts have to say about the ethical and relational commitments of ontology. In medieval life-

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<sup>10</sup> One example of such imaginings can be found in Augustine’s seminal reasons, or *rationes seminales*, which figured the vitality of matter as seeds planted in the materials both organic and inorganic. How seed-like this potency was – that is, if the notion of the seed was a philosophical placeholder, a way of thinking through the problem of material potential or was a breed of vitalism – has long been debated. Most important, however, is that Augustine’s interest in these *rationes seminales* was well-known in the Middle Ages and instructed medieval thinkers in a kind of materialism passed down from Stoic and Platonic philosophies. For an extensive consideration of Augustine’s use of this idea, see Michael J. McKeough’s dissertation, *The Meaning of the Rationes Seminales in St. Augustine* (Washington, D.C, 1926).

writing, vitalities are almost never alone, and so my reading of this literature evaluates the life in a world of lives. Looking at the disregarded vitality that pulses at the fundamentals of sacred literature in its various permutations exposes the complications and the incongruities that arise from the effort to imagine this enigmatic force and its implications. This investigation also points up the means by which the genre releases some of its ideological pressures, laying bare what happens when sanctity comes into contact with an array of living beings, from the animal to the vegetal. As it is redefined and repositioned, the medieval life, as genre and entity, increasingly opens up a rhetorical and narrative schema that allows, and even encourages, the organic to saturate it.

This pursuit is complex because life seems never to be one thing alone, especially in holy biographies which attach it to a multitude of related concepts. The vital energies of these stylized holy biographies depend on the representation of a life that is often seemingly disinclined to account directly for the life itself, the organic, living being. In passion narratives, the martyr's living being is typically eclipsed by the magnitude of a spectacular death. In lives of confessors, doctors, hermits, and other unmartyred saints, life is almost never to be found precisely where one looks for it. The narration of a life goes on often without explicit recognition of the

living being to which it attaches and from which it springs so that medieval lives often appear to trace serial encounters with the forces outside and beyond the life in question – spiritual marriages and blessed visions or cruel prefects and monstrous demons. The life as an object of inquiry in the medieval genre that purports to record it is arrived at obliquely. This is a problem of the philosophy, and presumably the literature, of life more generally. In the preface to his recent study of a particular philosophical genealogy of vitality, Eugene Thacker highlights this issue, formulating what he calls a *critique*, rather than an alternate ontology, of life around the claims that “[e]very ontology of ‘life’ thinks of life in terms of something-other-than-life”<sup>11</sup>. Life is either lost in transcending it with metaphysical vocabularies, or life is omnipresent and becomes a cipher for just about everything as a result of its polyvalence:

life means so many things that it does not mean any one thing. If the concept of life encompasses everything from the physical organism, to socioeconomic living conditions, to the life that is subject to ethical and legal decision-making to the entire plant itself, then there is a sense in which almost nothing is excluded from life.<sup>12</sup>

Writing about life – and writing about life-writing – risks the meaninglessness of overmeaning or the emptiness of abstraction. As Thacker observes, “‘Life’ is not only a problem of philosophy, but a

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<sup>11</sup> Thacker, *After Life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Thacker, 4.

problem in philosophy.”<sup>13</sup> The lives and secular re-interpretation of lives that I study in this project confront this challenge. Medieval life writing, in addition to participating in sacred history and in spiritual instruction, grapples with this problem; and it is my contention that not only do these lives engage in philosophical wranglings about ontology but that their literary inclinations help to work out and to attach the life to a kind of presence that resists transcendence while still acknowledging and participating in a theological tradition. Life in medieval lives does not naively mean everything thereby nothing. Although the vast corpus of medieval life-writing seems, looking at it from the outside, viewed as a collection, potentially universal in scope and content, medieval lives in general are not magnets for every possible cultural symptom. Instead, this project organizes around the idea that the medieval life proves flexible enough to permit speculation about living energies and bounded enough by genre, convention, and doctrine to develop the idea of vitality carefully and intentionally, in ways that are implicated rhetorically, historically, and ethically.

In considering writers as apparently different as Walter Daniel, Chaucer, Langland, and the poet of the *South English Legendary*, this project commences with a monastic life that is part private elegy and part institutionalized *vita* and concludes with narratives that, while indebted to hagiography, do not announce themselves as hagiographic

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<sup>13</sup> Thacker, x.

exemplars. What these writers share is an awareness of and commitment to the life as a flexible rhetorical space, a place to experiment with the life as literary form and with the life as philosophical category. And the chapters that follow are structured as case studies of lives drawn from these writers' oeuvres that take up this problem and foreground at once vitality itself as a topic worthy of inquiry and a vision of life that challenges the anthropocentrism of a genre dedicated to exceptional humanity. This study examines both specific figurations and a general interest in models of vitality to understand the rhetorical consequences of attention to this problem and the medieval ideas of life.

In Chapter 1, "Animated Attachments: Kaleidoscopic Living in Walter Daniel's *Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*," I address the living being through a literary-historical lens in order to trace the evolution of the notion of the life as it is connected to a trajectory of holiness in post-Conquest England. Beginning with the injunctions and caesurae of monastic living as represented in Walter Daniel's *Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*, I highlight the medieval sense of the instability both of the living being and of a working understanding of it. Though admitting the vulnerability of human lives and relationships seems at odds with a hagiographic project that endeavors to reify a version of living, we discover in the life of Aelred numerous appeals for such an admission.

A close reading of this life and its appended documents suggests that twelfth-century monastics sought ways to comprehend what kindles the bare fact of living. For Walter, as well as Aelred, the vital principle is bound up in a communal awareness, which implies that the living organism is not delimited by the body, but rather a force that reaches through and beyond it. Although this organic dynamism may not be produced by communal attachments, it is certainly, in Walter Daniel's estimation, most perceptible in the affections and interconnections of the monastery.

Moving outside the abbey walls, Chapter 2, "‘More Life’: Animal Encounters in the *South English Legendary*," I build on the communal and political implications of the life outlined in Aelred's *vita* by exploring these topics in Middle English lives. Setting the life of the saint alongside the life of the animal, I make a case for the significance of contact between hagiographic rhetoric and vital life forces that are not strictly human or not human at all. Examining in particular the lives of saints native to the British Isles whose legends feature encounters with animals, I argue that animal lives map spaces in the *vita* for other living beings, fixing our attention on a vitality that may be shocking in its sharedness. These animals are not just for food, for pedagogy, for work or power. Instead, writing animal lives into the saint's life moves the narrative away from a conventional

understanding of the life and moves the story out of spaces in which the human living being alone determined what counts as a life.

The second part of my project takes up fourteenth-century secular deployments of the hagiographic forms to investigate how relieving the life of its exemplary responsibilities ushers in different concerns and involvements and to discover what other lives are allowed to emerge in these decontextualized, repurposed lives. In my third and fourth chapters, I experiment with the notion of making “textual neighbors”<sup>14</sup>. This section parallels the structures of vitality that I claim develop in the narratives, and posits, without too positively insisting on, contact and exchange between these neighboring textual projects and geographically neighboring authors. In reading Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale* alongside *Pearl* in Chapter 3 and in putting Zenobia and Piers together as roommates in Chapter 4 a textual current is sparked, and narratives that envision life as a common force, an energy shared across the boundaries of body, species, and matter, enjoy a kind of emergent agency. And in Chapter

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<sup>14</sup> In positioning these texts and my readings of them in this configuration, I follow George Edmondson’s recent work on the relevance of neighbors in medieval literary scholarship. According to Edmondson, “[n]eighboring thus speaks to a different logic of textual relationality than that assumed by traditional genealogical models of literary history, a logic much closer in spirit to the miscellaneity – those seemingly random juxtapositions of spells with saints’ lives, recipes with fabliaux, animal fables with penitential guides – that characterized medieval manuscript culture” (*The Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson, Notre Dame*, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011: 20). While the idea of genealogy is a structure that might seem indispensable to a study of life and lives, it seems to me that the concept of the neighbor could help to dehumanize vitality, to remove the question of an animating force from an anthropomorphic rubric. After all, a neighbor could be a dog, a pig, a cave wall, a book, or a stairwell.

3, “Thing Power in Literary Lives: Vital Materials in *Pearl* and *The Second Nun’s Tale*,” by studying the means through which the anonymous author of *Pearl* and Geoffrey Chaucer in *Second Nun’s Tale* attend to the difficulties in locating and representing the space and dynamism of life, I explore how vital objects, landscapes, and minerals become agents and affirm the place of nonhuman life in the human life.

Finally, Chapter 4, “Entanglements: *The Monk’s Tale*, *Piers Plowman*, and the Mesh,” focuses on narratives that do not record the acts of saints or even exemplary figures and do not outwardly seem to adopt a hagiographic structure. Even so, Chaucer’s *The Monk’s Tale* and Langland’s *Piers Plowman* manage to include lives unsanctified and to stress, in productive ways, the divisions and varied attachments that constitute evolving concepts and representations of life. Turning to the problem of living as propounded in *Piers Plowman*, I contend that the poem’s inquest into life and the living being grows its connections to the problems of knowledge, imagination, and spiritual and individual history creating a type of ecological entanglement. The medieval life, I conclude, is not simply concerned with exemplary living, but rather the living being is understood in Langland’s poem and other works in the Middle English canon as constituted in a network, as patched together with materials,

nonhuman beings, other human beings, ideas, histories, and narratives.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Animated Attachments: Kaleidoscopic Living in Walter Daniel's Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*

Aelred of Rievaulx, a Cistercian abbot who was born and ministered in Northumbria, died in 1167. Shortly after his death, Walter Daniel, a fellow resident at Rievaulx Abbey, was commissioned to compose the abbot's *vita*. While Walter's life sticks to hagiographic convention, following Aelred from childhood but concentrating on his conversion and monastic career, appended to this text is an unusual lament in which Walter allows himself to observe the inclinations of his grief over his lost mentor and friend. Largely ignored by contemporary scholars (and perhaps also by those who preceded them) this condensed expression of Walter's struggle to comprehend the death, or more precisely the extinction of the life, of Aelred illuminates some of the blind spots of the traditional rhetorics of sacred biography. In the *Lamentacio*, Walter not only rehearses his grief, but wonders too where the life of his companion could have gone. And so the *Lamentacio*, as a reflection on the *vita* and the life of Aelred, develops a very pointed concern for the living being and an embryonic consciousness of the force that animates a person while he lives.

Although the feeling behind Walter's lament reads as genuine, his introduction to this epilogue strains to rationalize the place of his project and loads up his odd elegy with overly formal explanations of the project. Presumably to prevent any misreading of this rare form of conclusion for a text meant to fall within the parameters of the hagiographic genre<sup>1</sup>, Walter begins his *lamentacio* with an attempt to summarize and rhetorically situate his project:

In the prologue, in the development, and at the conclusion of my lament – lest I appear ridiculous by supplying to authorities first a rationale and a descriptive picture of those things that I am offering in the report – I will attempt to expedite things, setting down a clear likeness by accurate assertion of the matter at hand, and I will then press home to you the truth.<sup>2</sup>

With such a preface, it seems Walter intends for his readers to take seriously the content of his lament. No afterthought or transposed marginalia, this colophon should be understood as both relevant to the text which precedes it and as a worthy exemplar of the lamentation

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<sup>1</sup> Although Aelred was never canonized, Walter Daniel's *vita* follows the hagiographic outline rather faithfully. In her introduction to F.M. Powicke's translation of this text, Marsha Dutton argues that the *vita* is both a saint's life, in form and generic content, and an apology or defense against accusations that Aelred participated too eagerly in the political world outside Rievaulx Abbey. (Walter Daniel, *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*, introduction and translation of *Lament* Marsha Dutton [Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1994], p. 75-79.) What does this imply about the organic or living content, then? On the one hand, it suggests that Walter does not offer an unbiased record of Aelred's life, nor does he aim to produce the fullest reflection of Aelred's various activities. But on the other hand, it does, in a way, avoid the traps of convention into which most hagiography falls. Walter is intent to separate Aelred from his public persona, to isolate the kernel of his sanctity and his personality, to show his teacher and advisor in a detailed and authentic light.

<sup>2</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 140. Because the Latin original of Walter's *Lamentacio*, first translated for publication by Dutton, exists in a single manuscript held at Jesus College, Cambridge (MS Q.B. 7 [f. 74<sup>r-v</sup>]), I will only be able to reproduce and rely upon in the translated version for this study.

genre, which certain informed authorities would surely recognize. One such authority would have been Aelred himself, who composed *Lament for David, King of Scots* toward the end of his career. Writing a lament for Aelred, then, allows Walter to eulogize *and* emulate his teacher; and it further accentuates the importance and complexity of this undertaking, since Aelred's lament complicates the genre by acting at once as history, tribute, admonition (or perhaps a mirror for princes as the narrative's first audience is the newly crowned Henry II), and even *vita*<sup>3</sup> on a miniature scale. Likewise, the objectives and genres of Walter's ostensible expression of grief ramify: while the stated subject of the text is "the death and passing of my friend, the grief of my mind, the witness of his end"<sup>4</sup> to which Walter has already devoted the

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<sup>3</sup> At the end of the English Civil War around 1153 Aelred begins work on a text now published under the title, *Lament for David, King of Scots*. This lament, which is significantly more comprehensive in biographical scope than Walter's narrative for Aelred, was composed to register Aelred's grief at the death of his patron, King David, and to serve as a political and ethical guide for the soon-to-be crowned Henry II. Given these purposes, Aelred refers to this project as "*lamentatio*" and "*planctum*," yet two manuscripts in which this text survives – BL MS Cotton Vitellius F.iii and BL MS Cotton Vespasian A.xviii – name it "*vita*." (For more, see Marsha Dutton's introduction to Aelred of Rievaulx, *Aelred of Rievaulx: The Historical Works*, trans. Jane Patricia Freeland, ed. with intro. and annotations by Marsha Dutton [Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2005], p. 13.). Even Walter Daniel follows this naming convention, writing in a section of the *Vita Aelredi* that examines Aelred's literary pursuits that his mentor "published a life of David, king of Scotland in the form of a lamentation, and added to it a genealogy of the king of England, the younger Henry" [Walter Daniel, *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*, ed. and trans. F.M. Powicke (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1994), p. 120-1. "...uitam Dauid Regis Scocie sub specie lamentandi edidit cui genealogiam Regis Anglie Henrici iunioris uno libro comprehendens adiunxit." Walter Daniel, *The Life of Ailred of Rievaulx*, ed. and trans. F.M. Powicke (London: Nelson, 1950), p. 41.]. So we begin to see how Walter comprehends both the propriety of connecting a lament to a life and the various levels – social, hagiographic, historical, and personal – at which such a plaint might resonate.

<sup>4</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 140-1.

thirteen concluding chapters of the *Vita*, the *lamentacio* quickly bleeds into allegory, which seems a suitable vehicle for the “truth” that Walter promises to bring home.

As the allegory develops, Walter appeals to his Tears to assist him in his mourning, for despite a low opinion of demonstrative mourning among his peers, Walter confesses that he must discover some remedy for the pain he is experiencing, the “inexplicable madness of [his] attachment,” as he describes it. Rather awkward to visualize, Walter’s address to his tears, which flow in response to a vision of Aelred ascending into the clouds while exhorting the lamenter to grieve more explicitly<sup>5</sup>, is slow to arrive at the crux of the matter. Again, Walter seems anxious to position his endeavor in the annals of laments<sup>6</sup> despite the passage’s pathos.

Slowing the progress of the narrative, this difficulty in avoiding the editorial approach, though delaying the actual lament, in fact draws attention to Walter’s technical interest in the operations of the body. Instead of allegorizing a mental capacity or abstract concept, Walter animates his tears, which separates the author from his body, or at least that which seeps out of it, as well as renders him

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<sup>5</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> “O tears, I shall content you with the plaint of my voice, seek to furnish a testimony that you may see how such a man, so kind, so sweet, is adequately lamented. I am speaking of general, common, spiritual lamentations; I say, I am speaking of universal as well as particular lamentations. Like the Song of Songs, like middling and simple songs, so I know are the best, the mediocre, and the worst [songs].” Dutton, 1994, p. 141.

inordinately aware of the body's impulses. Keeping with this physicality, Walter soon specifies that the heartache which inspires the *lamentacio* stems not from an attachment to the soul of Aelred, which he must acknowledge has joyfully returned to its creator, but rather "because life has deserted me, that spirit of my life by which my spirit was living well"<sup>7</sup>. Upon Aelred's death, life has abandoned Walter, too, and this loss compels the man left behind to rethink the source and stuff of living. As we shall see, in ways both subtle and explicit, Walter shows himself to be profoundly aware of his belatedness, that is, that he remains behind and follows after Aelred. Following Aelred, and in the *Lament*, following after the life of Aelred, comes to inform Walter's ideas about the living being as it emerges in networks and communities.

The author clarifies, "I grieve, in fact, because as a physician [I cannot provide] medicine for myself. My physician was my abbot. Who? Aelred – someone than whom there is nothing sweeter, nothing more effective, nothing more curative for my illness. How? He was equal in soul as well as in body to many a great saint"<sup>8</sup>. The absence of Aelred causes Walter even to question his own profession, which is fittingly concerned with human health. While it remains unclear how

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<sup>7</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 142.

extensive Walter's training as a physician was<sup>9</sup>, his statement here corroborates the distinctive attention to illness and corporeal oddities shown in the *vita*. But Walter's expressed helplessness also mistrusts his expert knowledge; not only has his vitality waned, but his relationship to what he knows best has grown weaker with the death of his friend.

On the one hand, this plaint permits Walter to right the imbalance that he seems to perceive, and that contemporary scholars too are quick to note<sup>10</sup>, in the *Vita Aelredi*; because Walter primarily draws upon his memories of Aelred's habits and encounters which he accumulated in the seventeen years he passed under the guidance of the abbot of Rievaulx and those recollections of Aelred's pre-monastic life recounted presumably by the abbot himself, the *vita* approaches the category of autobiography due to its dependence on Walter's own experiences and knowledge. Although Walter does not seem

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<sup>9</sup> "Walter had spent seventeen years at Rievaulx during Aelred's abbacy and was familiar with the intimate details of the abbot's life during his last decade. He identifies himself in the *Vita* as Aelred's scribe...and refers in the Lament to his service to Aelred *in officio medicus*. While these words need not mean that he was the monastic infirmarian, his detailed discussion of Aelred's various illnesses and of the symptoms of some of the people Aelred miraculously healed shows his knowledge about and interest in human illness and its treatment." Dutton, 1994, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Dutton argues that it is impossible not become acquainted with Walter's prickly personality through the *Life*, that he continuously exposes his intention to remain at the center of the text not only as dutiful observer, but also as a subject worthy of recognition. But I think this doubling of the *Life*'s interests has more to do with the idea of inseparability – and possibly even a broader Cistercian concern for the interconnectivity of all humanity. Foregrounding the intimacy between Walter and Aelred provides more evidence that for Walter, and possibly Aelred, too, given his work on spiritual friendship, life is not reducible to a single organism, impulse, or force. It operates and emerges in the presence of others, even as a textual entity.

particularly anxious about his omnipresence in the *vita*<sup>11</sup>, he is alive to his arrogation of the conventional role of saint or holy person as healer. Whereas it is the subject of a *vita* who is counted on to restore to health the body and soul of both the hagiographer and the *vita*'s audience, as Aelred's physician, Walter knows he has usurped this position to a certain extent. Yet, aside from this brief reversal, Walter does not appear too terribly concerned that his relationship with Aelred has not conformed to the hagiographic pattern, and this realignment seems also to stress rather than chastise Walter's enduring interest in the healing arts. Having already departed without consequences too dire from the hagiographic norm, Walter begins through his allegorizing to open up the *Lamentacio* to purposes outside those stated, that is, to theorize – or at least to begin to examine – the root of human vitality. For, although it is clear here that Walter hopes by both the *vita* and the lament to register his subject among the ranks of the sanctified, it is also at this point that Walter begins to distinguish and to disconnect the different elements of Aelred's being, separating history and body from the source of the living being.

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, despite the modern irritation at Walter's perceived commandeering of Aelred's story, readers coeval with the *Vita*'s subjects did not find his presence authoritative enough. In the *Letter to Maurice*, another textual appendage, Walter responds to critics who have called him to task for his lack of legitimate sources, particularly for the passages that involve miracles and ascetic practice. Begrudgingly, Walter adds to the *Vita*'s cast of characters by providing the names and testimonies of the requested witnesses. For the roots of this controversy and Walter's barbed response to his detractors, see Powicke, 1994, p. 147-9.

Walter extends his reassignment of Aelred to healer status to depict the abbot as father and mother to his fellow monks, noting that the abbot's charity, humility, prudence and so on made him "father to many," not just his closest associates. What is more, Aelred's special concern for teaching his brothers charity "was so close to us that it approached the richness of a mother's milk for her sons and undeviatingly displayed the grace of a responsible father"<sup>12</sup>. At first, it appears that Walter wants to erase difference through his lament: Aelred's body, serving as mother and father, collapses gender distinctions and his exemplary virtue earns him a place alongside even martyrs. Yet soon enough, Walter turns his attention to the question which is the particular source of his pain: Where is Aelred?

Careful that this question not be deemed meaningless or absurd, Walter explains that his intent is not to exhume Aelred's personal history, since "the years and months and days and hours of his past life...have all passed away like a shadow"<sup>13</sup>. Nor is Walter inquiring about the body of Aelred, which, Walter writes, "lies in a coffin in consecrated ground." Instead what Walter misses is the life of the abbot; it is, he writes, the absence of "the life by which that body lived, and lived as well as Aelred lived" that disquiets the hagiographer.

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<sup>12</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 142.

<sup>13</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 143

In a striking, if perplexing, move, Walter pauses here to distinguish the type of life he wishes to locate and understand from animal life:

A beast of burden lives what I would call a commercial life, because when it quits the body, [that body] ceases to belong to it. A dying cow leaves its body behind it, not so much its life as a life [not its own], what I called a commercial life, because once the cow is purchased, the buyer makes its life to be nothing.<sup>14</sup>

In light of this passage, it becomes clear that Walter's seeking after the life of Aelred, the vital element that caused him to be alive, is no mere effect of grief or product of generic conventions, but rather the writer seems genuinely invested in discovering the reason for a life's disappearance. As Walter points out, the only mark left by an animal after its death is its carcass, since no discernible life – at least not one recognized by its human counterparts – remains or is remembered. But this lack of life owes less to the nature of the animal, the absence of language or reason, than to its having been acquired as an asset. That is, the cow has no life to speak of after it has died on account of its status as object from its human owner's point of view. Certainly a bum exchange from the purchased object's perspective, but further, one wonders about animals without commercial standing: is an animal's life blotted out upon its introduction into the system of exchange? Or is the "commercial life" the only life, however ephemeral and contingent, afforded to an animal? Perhaps because these

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<sup>14</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 144.

questions are somewhat outside the purview of a lament, Walter leaves his concept of the commercial life rather impressionistic, returning to Aelred: “Yet there is reason to say where Aelred is, for I care much less about the life of cattle. I am asking about the man who sought me out, formed me, established me, cherished me, nourished me, taught me, and loved me”<sup>15</sup>.

And in fact, as opaque as the idea of animal life remains here, Walter’s theorizing does begin to shed some light on what he means by human life or more generally a vital energy unattached to any species. In identifying life, even for the poor cow, as distinct from the body, Walter also intimates life’s relationship with corporality as one characterized by ownership. Whereas once the cow dies, its carcass does not belong to any particular or identifiable cow, one assumes that the reverse is true in the case of a human. Even though the dead person’s life has expired, there remains a connection between the cadaver and the life that animated it. Yet, what marks this life as different from other lives, from the cow’s life? If it is tethered to a single body, how can vitality vanish so irrevocably? For a human life, a biographical record – a person’s actions, habits, and demeanor – might index its singularity, except Walter already has insisted that personal history is not what he is after. Nevertheless, this brief foray into natural philosophy suggests that for Walter, life emerges not as a

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<sup>15</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 144.

discrete entity, but rather in the presence of body, history, and other lives (“I am asking about the man who sought me out, formed me, established me...” etc.), since as Walter says, his interest is less in bovine dynamism than in the life that formed him.

To address the disappearance and lingering influence of Aelred’s life, Walter invites Reason to engage him in debate. This discussion leads to the conventional admonishment of the mourner and the expected justification that Aelred’s shedding his bodily prison is more to be celebrated than bemoaned. As the dialogue continues, Reason asserts that Walter is simply confused; he has conflated the life of Aelred with his soul, even though the lamenter already has conceded (using rational thinking, as Reason cleverly points out) that it has found eternal rest and glory. If not guilty of this error, then Walter has mistaken life for the body, which Reason stresses is buried, “lying withered and dead, covered with stone and constricted by a mass of earth”<sup>16</sup>. During this exchange, Reason not only dodges Walter’s original question, but offers an explanation – the imprisonment of the flesh and the debility of human life – that importantly *cannot* account for the vital presence that Aelred represented in the evolution of Walter’s own identity.

None of Reason’s explanations quite satisfies Walter, who continues to inquire after the place of Aelred, a place that seems

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<sup>16</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 144-5.

“wholly inaccessible”<sup>17</sup> to him. As Walter repeatedly underscores in this lament, upon Aelred’s death, he comes to recognize a reversal in their ostensible roles: Aelred is the true physician and without his restorative presence Walter, a physician by trade, grows infirm. The interconnection of the lives of these men renders the issue of Aelred’s ephemeral life intensely relevant to Walter. And Reason’s platitudes aren’t cutting it. When she finally dispenses with the evasion and does take up the life question directly, Reason implores Walter to live well rather than to lament the loss of Aelred. This living well, which again sidesteps the problem of “life,” will according to Reason permit Walter to reunite with Aelred after death. Exhausted by these detours, all the despondent Walter can muster at the conclusion of the lament is to admit that he does wish to “be brought back to moderation”<sup>18</sup>. Walter’s concession conspicuously does not endorse as adequate Reason’s substitutions for the Lament’s primary question which remains: where is Aelred, where is his life?

In articulating these unresolved issues, Walter Daniel draws attention to life as an authentic category for hagiographic inquiry. Walter does not want the living being, the living networks of Aelred to suffer erasure or repression in favor of orthodox topics like soul, proper living, and sanctity. Even so, the location and the definition of

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<sup>17</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 145.

<sup>18</sup> Dutton, 1994, p. 146.

organic life escape Walter. Relegating this subject to the Lament, which lies at the margins of the official text of the Life, spotlights this slippery problem and its unconventionality. And Reason's inability to answer Walter's questions directly further marks as irrational the subject of Aelred's life. Organic life, it seems, cannot be submitted or even acknowledged by Reason. The soul, the body, and the history of Aelred can all be accounted for, but the force that animated these – his vital energies, his biology – resists inclusion.

It is not difficult to see that this resistance compounds Walter's loss. Disavowing the importance of Aelred's life, however eternal his soul, has concrete implications for Walter, whose own life cannot be disentangled from that of his spiritual advisor. Although admitting the fragility of human lives and relationships seems at odds with a hagiographic project that endeavors to inscribe and reify a particular version of living, an awareness of the interdependence of human lives provides the rationale for the lion's share of written legends. Very often hagiographers, especially of martyrs and other "big name" saints, weave prayers for a saint's intercession, either for the author or the audience, or both, into their narratives; and countless other incidents of intercession are written into the lives in the form of miracles performed at various stages in the saint's career. While miracles associated with a saint's relics rely upon the presence of a saint's

energy that persists even after the holy person has died, the power that works these wonders is typically understood as an effect of the soul, and of the force of a divine entity that reanimates the remains of an especially worthy candidate, rather than as a property of an energy attached to the earthly organism. This distinction has acute emotional and philosophical consequences for Walter. Walter's despair at Reason's refusal to accommodate the living being – that part of his friend that was neither body, nor soul, neither intellect, nor spirit – as an aspect of his loss insists on the need for a better definition, a better understanding of the animating energy that operates in connection with, but remains distinct from both body and soul. Revising the boundaries of what is worthy of mourning and worthy of being called life, Walter's *lamentacio* affords an opportunity to reconsider the relationship between the bare fact of living and the genre that purports to record it.

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Given the resistance that Reason shows to this category of inquiry in the *Lament*, it is not surprising that Walter only expressly raises the issue of Aelred's other energies in the *vita's* afterthought, leaving his remarks on the energy that animated his teacher and friend cloudy and finally silenced by a double dose of Reason's misapprehension and insistence. But a sustained interest in the organic living being also develops in the official portion of Walter's

narrative, which responds both to Walter's uncommon question and to the problem of isolating, either spatially or rhetorically, life.

In his depiction of Aelred's worldly youth, Walter dedicates a sizeable chunk of his narrative to an explanation of his subject's fosterage with King David of Scotland. While it remains somewhat unclear the role that Aelred performed at court, Walter indicates that he was "steward of the royal household"<sup>19</sup> and other sources attest that Aelred held a position of some esteem as he established alliances with the king's sons as well as a closeness with King David himself sufficient to warrant Aelred's composition of a lament following the Scottish ruler's death. Valuable not only for its social historical insight, these opening chapters depart from the often rather cursory account of a saint's childhood in favor of moments of conversion, confession, or trial. Though he does not emphasize the abbot's administrative or management proficiency later in the text, Walter, finds reason to explain the first twenty-four years of Aelred's life, noting his habits in secular dress, his effect on the king, and his potentially illustrious career, suggesting that King David would have promoted him to "the first bishopric in the land"<sup>20</sup> should Aelred not

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<sup>19</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 91. "Erat tamen cum eo economus domus regalis..." Powicke, 1950, p. 3-4. As Powicke notes in connection with this line, *economus* had come to mean "steward" or seneschal by the time Walter writes the *Vita*.

<sup>20</sup> Powicke, 1994, p 91.

succumbed to the charms of Rievaulx<sup>21</sup>. Walter even goes so far as to feature an encounter in which a particularly aggressive knight, who, out of indignation at Aelred's advancement at court, publicly attacks and accuses the young courtier of deeds "too foul for [Walter] to speak or for others to hear"<sup>22</sup>. In the midst of lavish dinners and scurrilous nobles, however, Aelred was already "looked upon rather as a monk than as given to the service of the world and the display of office"<sup>23</sup>, so one wonders what dubious actions, then, prompted the knight's vituperation. After the quarrel, which Aelred gracefully defuses by seconding his rank as an average sinner, the young man's emerging holiness becomes clear to all involved. The vicious knight later that same day seeks forgiveness from the humble steward and the king begins to turn to Aelred for guidance:

The king saw very clearly that such wholesome outpourings of rare humility and other graces could have no other source than in streams of exceptional prudence and wisdom. The great counselor had a fitting name, for the English *Alred* is in Latin *totum consilium* or *omne consilium*. Well is he placed in the counsels of an earthly king, whose very name gives forth the sound, 'all counsel', he who was afterwards to be father,

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<sup>21</sup> Although the details of Aelred's early life remain a bit cloudy, Aelred Squire's biography attempts to fill in the gaps. (Aelred Squire, *Aelred of Rievaulx: A Study* [Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1969].) For a more recent discussion of Aelred's early education at court and beyond, see Chrysogonus Waddell, "The Hidden Years of Aelred of Rievaulx : The Formation of a Spiritual Master," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 41:1 (2006), 51-63. Aelred, too, offers some insight into his childhood at Hexham in *The Saints of the Church of Hexham and Other Miracles* collected in Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Lives of the Northern Saints* trans. Jane Patricia Freeland, ed. Marsha Dutton (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Powicke, 1994, p 93.

<sup>23</sup> Powicke, 1994, p 91. "...monachus putaretur quam secularis potencie et pompatici ministerii officialis discipulus...". Powicke, 1950, p. 4.

counselor, judge and protector of manservants of God, first showing an example of justice to his companions in the world, then in loftier regions of a more exacting life the pattern even to spiritual men of perfection and inward humility.<sup>24</sup>

These chapters allow Walter not only to compare the temptations and vicissitudes of life outside the cloister with monastic tranquility, but also set up a duality that worried even the youthful Aelred. Although the etymological implications of Aelred's name make use of a widespread hagiographic device, Walter moves beyond the convention in this analysis. Claiming that Aelred is "all counsel" associates the fortuitously named man with wisdom, to be sure, but also with language, as if he were a mass of letters or at best a library. While this foresight impresses the monarch and seems also to excite Walter, there is a hint of possible contrivance in this accolade which requires multiple translations to convey its significance, translations which cause the living Aelred to shrink from view. Sensitive to the consequences of such a substitution, Walter closes the passage by separating Aelred from his earlier consular self by pointing out that after his conversion he becomes a father before all else. This more

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<sup>24</sup> Powicke, 1994, p 94. "...uidens pro certo non nisi ex preclare prudentie spienceque riuulis eximie tam salubres humilitatis ceterarumque graciaram haustus profluere potuisse. Congruit eciam eius omni interpretacio magni consiliarii, quod uersum in Latinum *totum consilium* uel *omne consilium* facit. Etenim *Alred* Angicum est, illudque quod diximus exprimit in Latino. Et bene ad consilia Regis terreni assumitur cuius nomen *omne consilium* sonat, qui uidelicet postmodum futures erat pater et consiliarius iudex et patronus multorum seruorum Dei, quatinus primo inter seculars conuersans illis ostenderet exempla iusticie, demumque ad alciora conscendens uite arcioris eciam spiritualibus uiris foret exemplar perfeccionis et humilitatis interne." Powicke, 1950, p. 8.

organic relationship with his brethren seems to postulate that it is not until Aelred enters the Rievaulx that his living being truly surfaces. If he is the image of an abstract principle like justice while in the secular sphere, Aelred evolves into a more expansive model of perfect living once professed.

As expected, Aelred becomes increasingly aware of the artifice of the aristocratic life, and decides that the “way of quiet and holiness”<sup>25</sup>, that is, monastic life might offer him the solace which he has discovered he seeks. Walter is vague about what prompts this newfound consciousness of the perils of serving “a prince of flesh and blood”<sup>26</sup>, mentioning only that it must have been God who planted the idea; yet that the chapter that outlines this resolution follows so closely on the conflict between Aelred and the knight hints at some connection between these events. Compounding this uncertainty is Aelred’s own hesitation before executing this transition, which obliges him to keep his plans secret to physically ruinous ends: “In the meantime the heat of his desire invades his heart, fills his mind, takes possession of his soul, stays all his senses in the effort not to seem the man that he is, and wishes to be and to become. His bones stiffen as his marrow melts away, his flesh withers, the pulse beats slow, his whole body trembles and his spirit grows faint in the wretchedness of

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<sup>25</sup> Powicke, 1994, p 95.

<sup>26</sup> Powicke, 1994, p 96.

suspense.”<sup>27</sup> Here Aelred’s method of social survival jeopardizes his physical and spiritual well-being. Remaining a member of the Scottish court zombifies Aelred, renders him a dead letter. What is striking about this account is that although it seems to follow the typical conversion narrative that charts a deadening to social exigencies and pleasures, Aelred’s desire to alter his way of life becomes the condition of his living at all. That is, Aelred does not simply die to the world, but would disintegrate were he to remain in it, which assumes an important relationship between the living being and devotional exercise. Although this unhealthy stillness besets Aelred only when he finds himself in the “wretchedness of suspense,” once he settles on contemplation as the path toward redemption he appears to have passed a point of no return mentally and physically. The biographer’s literalizing of this trope of conversion narrative highlights Aelred’s vital dynamism, or the waning of it in the face of inaction. Following the contraction of his bones and flesh as well as the slackening of his internal rhythms, the weakening of his “spirit” may allude to both Aelred’s soul and some kind of animating energy, particularly since we read that his heart, mind, and soul were ablaze with devout fervor. All of this encourages the reading that it is not just proper living that is

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<sup>27</sup> Powicke, 1994, p 96. “Interim ardor desiderii cor eius inuadit, mentem occupant, animum optinet, sensus omnes miro suspendit artificio ne uideatur homo esse quod est, quod uult uelle, quod uult efficere. Ossa illius euanescentibus medullis regescunt, marcescunt carnes, uene pulsus lentescit, omne contremescit corpus et anima ipsa miserabili expectatione languescit.” Powicke, 1950, p. 10.

gained upon entering the cloister, nor only guarantee of the soul's eternal life, but the restoration and possible salutary effects for the living being, too.

Walter Daniel's report of the incidents leading to Aelred's admission to Rievaulx Abbey in 1134, which is likely embellished to suit the demands of genre, provokes further questions about the relationship of life itself to a form of living. The story goes that sent on royal business to Archbishop Thurstan of York, Aelred learns from a "close friend" about the habits of "certain monks...come to England from across the sea"<sup>28</sup>. The anecdote provides Walter the opportunity to wax eloquent about the practices and ideological motivations of the Cistercian order in an extract that reads more like recruitment material than hagiography. In addition to outlining the white monks' positions on virtuous poverty, communal property, and social parity, Walter describes the deliberate fixedness of Cistercian meals ("A pound of bread, a pint of drink, two dishes of cabbage and beans.") as well as the tranquil homogeneity of the community which is maintained by excluding women, hawks, and dogs "except those barkers used to drive away thieves from houses"<sup>29</sup>. After explaining the Cistercian rule, Aelred's friend apparently turned to Rievaulx's natural setting. So moved by these accounts, the would-be monk immediately mounts

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<sup>28</sup> Powicke, 1994, p 96.

<sup>29</sup> Powicke, 1994, p 97.

his horse and rides to Helmsley Castle, home of his acquaintance and the founder of Rievaulx Abbey, Walter Espec. The next day Walter Espec brings Aelred to tour the abbey and meet some of the monastery's eminent brethren, which so stirs the visitor that the following morning as he and his party make their way back to the King of Scotland, Aelred casually wonders if any of his companions would enjoy a second call at the abbey. This time, suspecting Aelred's intentions, the prior and others convince him to stay at Rievaulx as a novice. Although there is convincing evidence drawn from Aelred's own writing that this episode was considerably less spontaneous than his *vita* indicates, Walter Daniel seems determined to portray this conversion as free of any machination or ambition<sup>30</sup>. And the flourishing valley of Rievaulx as recounted by the nameless friend points up Walter's intent, representing the abbey's surroundings as a pastoral utopia:

The spot was by a powerful stream called the Rie in a broad valley stretching on either side...High hills surround the valley, encircling it like a crown. These are clothed by trees of various sorts and maintain in pleasant retreats the privacy of the vale, providing for the monks a kind of second paradise of wooded delight. From the loftiest rocks the waters wind and tumble down to the valley below, and as they make their hasty way through the lesser passages and narrower beds and spread themselves in wider rills, they give out a gentle murmur of soft

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<sup>30</sup> Dutton claims that Aelred's conversion does not manifest any change in the man himself, but simply a change of career and energy (Dutton, 1994, 55). While such a view of the conversion may be defensible, it certainly does not reflect Walter's position, which produces something akin to the pathetic fallacy by projecting the naturalistic changes in Aelred's career and spiritual orientation onto the Rie Valley.

sound and join together in the sweet notes of a delicious melody. And when the branches of the lovely trees rustle and sing together and the leaves flutter gently to the earth, the happy listener is filled increasingly with a glad jubilee of harmonious sound, as so many various things conspire together in such a sweet consent in music whose every diverse note is equal to the rest.<sup>31</sup>

One begins to understand Aelred and Walter's love for Rievaulx from such a lush description. This extract, furthermore, develops the notion that monastic life releases, and perhaps enlarges the devout's sense of being alive, for the abbey's environs seem poised to counteract the corporeal desiccation Aelred suffered while suspended between secular and spiritual living – something akin to a Cistercian spa where “wooded delights” await the novice rather than the anticipated strictures and sacrifices imposed by adherence to the Benedictine rule.

More believable, however, is the way in which Rievaulx's backdrop mirrors the archetype of communal harmony: the sounds of the Rie's waters and the valley's trees produce a music in which one

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<sup>31</sup> Powicke, 1994, p 98. “...torrentem Rie nomine planicie uallis latissime hinc inde circumiacente casas fixere suas. Habitaculi autem sui nomen et loci eiusdem ex duobus composuerunt, uidelicet ex ipsius torrentis uocabulo et ualle, unde Rieuallis nuncupatur. Quam uallem excelsi montes circumambient et instar corone circumcingunt, qui arborea uarietate uestiuntur amenisque secessibus uicinia secreta ministrant et monachis nemorose deicie alterum quodammodo exhibent paradisum. Crispantes fonts ex eminentissimis rupibus labuntur ad inferiora uallis dumque per fibras minores et strictiores decurrunt uenas terre patulosque riuulos ac riuas prominentes leni murmure suauiter sibilant et sonis duclibus melos delectabile concinunt. Set et ramosae collision pulcherimarum arborum foliis in humum / conuolantibus molli collapse in carmineos conueniunt (sic) modos, fitque gratum audientibus nimis nimisque iocundum iubilium tam concordantis armonie, dum perdulci concentu tantarum diuersitatum concitatarum ad sonos uarios set equipollentes in musica...” Powicke, 1950, p. 12-3.

perceives simultaneously the individual rivulets and leaves and the collective tones of river and trees together. The account, taken in conjunction with the anonymous friend's summary of Cistercian principles that directly precedes it, set up the idyllic locale as the echo, but also the model, of the pious living recently introduced to North Yorkshire. Life here, natural and constructed, seems undivided even in its oscillation between singular to collective. Re-establishing a vital balance in such a venue should be effortless.

While Aelred acclimates quickly, as one might expect, to the routines of the cloister, as the *Vita* progresses beyond the vivid conversion, Walter tempers, or at least complicates his depiction of the relationship between the living being and monastic discipline. Not only does the novitiate Aelred perform his duties well enough to impress his instructors, but even in these rigorous early years, before he was promoted to various offices exempting him from the more labor-intensive of monkish activities, Aelred maintains a glow of health. On the day of his profession, "he was, like David, somewhat 'ruddy, and with all of a beautiful countenance and goodly to look to'"<sup>32</sup>. Heartiness in body and spirit help Aelred to advance at Rievaulx, and within the decade, Aelred had risen to the post, Master of Novices, which position's metaphorical content is not lost on Walter

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<sup>32</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 102. "Et quoniam aliquantulum rufus erat ut David, pulcher et decorus aspectu plurimum delectacionis intuencium oculis inferebat." Powicke, 1950. p. 18.

who writes that the students who were introduced to monastic life by Aelred “seem to bear blossoms more dazzling white than the white flowers about them”<sup>33</sup>. Presaging Walter’s synthesis in the *Lament* of Aelred into a mother and father figure, the abbot’s generativeness, his propensity for guidance but also formation, return the text repeatedly to a focus on life and the living energy in human and institution.

Explaining Aelred’s transfer to Revesby Abbey to serve as founding abbot, Walter imagines his subject in several roles: “The house of Rievaulx conceived a third daughter in her womb and showed signs that the time of her labor was drawing near. And when she gave birth, the midwives chose Aelred as bearer and nurse of the latest lusty addition to the family, declaring that, nourished by the milk of his solicitude, it would quickly grow into a stout child”<sup>34</sup>. Although Rievaulx itself functions as the surrogate, Aelred as “bearer and nurse” seems equally involved in the mothering and certainly the nurturing of the new abbey in Lincolnshire. This vitality, however, does not seem to be reducible to what one might call a biological impulse, since Walter clearly does not intend for his readers to envision Aelred

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<sup>33</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 107.

<sup>34</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 110. “Domus igitur Rieuall’concipiens in uteru terciam filiam genitui tumoris distensione partum propinquum minitauit. Que uero cum peperisset, obstetrics Alredum nostrum ad prolem recenter fusam gerulum et nutricium elegerunt, affirmantes cito grandiusculam futuram, si eius sollicitudinis lacte nutriretur.” Powicke, 1950, p. 27.

actually breastfeeding, nor even an ambiguously gendered abbot.<sup>35</sup>

Even so, the fertile dynamism which the monastic life and Aelred as a superior exemplar of it boasts equally cannot be attributed entirely to the biographer's hyperbole.

These repeated brushes with an emerging concept of the living organism suggest that life is not simply a fiction of the hagiographic genre; that is, the living being is not assumed by the hagiographer as a given condition or fixed entity. Instead the fact of being alive, and the author's and holy subject's awareness of it, becomes an important category for understanding the origins and effects of sanctity and devout living. For Walter Daniel, this living being – the part of Aelred that is not quite his soul or his body -- takes on, moreover, a significance of its own and is interrogated not only for what its apprehension might add to a manual for virtuous living, but also for its own sake. Revesby Abbey does not flourish autonomously, nor is it by Aelred's prayer or properly concentrated will that it prospers.

Representing Aelred as a nursing mother, Walter Daniel draws

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<sup>35</sup> As Caroline Walker Bynum explains, maternal imagery in 12<sup>th</sup>-century monastic writings most often seeks to suffuse with affect a paternal authority that primarily depended upon discipline and rule. Images of conception, birth, and nursing highlight the unifying and secure aspect to cloistered life instead of the commonly imagined alienation and separation from the world. For a broader discussion of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century attachment to maternal imagery, see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some themes in twelfth-century Cistercian writing" in *Medieval Religion: New Approaches* ed. Constance Hoffman Berman (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 20-48. For a look at the use of maternity in Aelred's own writings, see Susanna Greer Fein, "Maternity in Aelred of Rievaulx's Letter to His Sister" in *Medieval Mothering* ed. John Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland Pub, 1996), p. 139-156.

attention to something nutritive about the subject, reasserting the presence of a vital, metabolic energy into his pious history.

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Although imagining hagiographic heroes as icons of reproduction or, more broadly, fertility, is not uncommon to the genre, Walter's insistence on this property's relevance to the biography of Aelred is noteworthy, to say the least. This emphasis underscores Aelred's special and exceptionally Cistercian animatedness, and perhaps his particular suitability for canonization, but it also testifies to Walter's sensitivity to his audience.

As much as he identifies the restorative and alimentary possibilities of monastic life, Walter also addresses various points of resistance, which anticipate the likely response to this representation by his primary reading audience, fellow monks. While life in the monastery offered certain protections, luxuries, and charms, it was by no means a guarantee of perfect physical health. What's more, Walter's account of one secular clerk's divided loyalties attests that Rievaulx was not necessarily a spiritual panacea either. This pivotal episode broadens an understanding of life as a more incongruous concept for Walter's audience than the hagiographic Aelred is permitted to exemplify.

One of the more prominent anecdotes in the *Vita* for its miraculous content and its detail, the story of the unstable monk spans three,

non-consecutive chapters and sketches the most animate character, after Aelred, in the narrative<sup>36</sup>. Aelred first meets this monastic aspirant while he is serving as master of novices. Immediately dismayed by the recruit's changeability, Aelred prays that he be given care of the capricious man's soul. Shortly thereafter, the novice entreats his teacher for release from the abbey; although Aelred advises against his return to the secular realm, the wayward student heads off nonetheless. But we realize that Aelred's prayers have been heard because the impulsive monk can only travel in circles: "All day long, after he had passed through the outer enclosures of the monastery, he wandered aimlessly about the woods until, shortly before sunset, he came to the road by which he had left and suddenly found himself again within the monastic wall"<sup>37</sup>. Perhaps this botched flight is to be expected from so fickle a clerk, but, even so, Aelred rejoices when he discovers his prodigal pupil has returned. Though we are not privy to the thwarted novice's feelings about his reinstatement, this incident achieves more than bearing witness to

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<sup>36</sup> As Dutton argues, the rhetorical accretion of these anecdotes points up not only the education of Walter's prose, but also that the episodes involving the unstable monk hold meaning for Aelred's life beyond that of the marvelous. "When he tells of three prayers at three different stages of Aelred's monastic career, all for the same man's salvation and stability in monastic life, he shows them as all equally effective but each in succession more physically powerful." Dutton, 1994, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 108. "Ut autem exteriora monasterii claustra pertransiit per deuia saltus tota die uacabundus oberrat et parum ante solis occasum ad uiam ueniens/per quam exitum fecit subito infra muralem monasterii ambitum se sensit transpositum." Powicke, 1950, p. 25.

Aelred's first official miracle<sup>38</sup> insofar as it validates the struggle of cenobitic commitment. This concession seems to acknowledge his readership's expectations not only about what a saint's life looks like but also what life less exemplary entails.

Discussion of the non-exemplary life extends into two later chapters wherein Aelred has been elected abbot of Rievaulx. Once again, the itchy-footed monk, who appears to have progressed beyond the probationary stage, begs Aelred to allow him to give up the monastery:

'Lord, my inconstancy is not equal to the burden of the Order. Everything here and in my nature are opposed to each other. I cannot endure the daily tasks. The sight of it all revolts me. I am tormented and crushed down by the length of the vigils. I often succumb to the manual labor. The food cleaves to my mouth, more bitter than wormwood. The rough clothing cuts through my skin and flesh down to my very bones.'<sup>39</sup> (112-3)

While this complaint owes much to convention -- recalling the anticipated protest of a disgruntled monastic, a hagiographer's vocalization of the antithesis of saintly virtue, or the allegorist's portrait of Body's objection to Soul's devotions, its report of the bad monk's physical failings is particularly fine-tuned. No mention is made of a crisis of faith, though it is possible that spiritual discontent

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<sup>38</sup> We learn later in the *Letter to Maurice* which Walter composes in response to the *Vita's* earliest commentators that this event is not, in fact, Aelred's first attested miracle. According to the *Letter*, Aelred's very first miracle occurred in his infancy when a visitor noticed a special radiance in the child's face (Powicke, 1994, p.151).

<sup>39</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 112-3. "Domine, grauitatem ordinis leuitas mea non sustinet. Res omnes contrarie sunt mee nature, diurnos labores non fero, nam rebellia michi uniuersa conspicio. Angor et crucio in mora longa uigiliarum, laboribus frequenter succumbo manuum, esce abscinthio in ore herent amariores, uestimentorum asperitas cutem et carnes penetrans ad ossa usque nuda pertingit." Powicke, 1950, p. 30.

is assumed in a brother so fixated on the twinges of the body. Even so, the unstable monk's reaction to life enclosed in the monastery centers on the sensible discomforts of the Cistercian rule: exhaustion from the early morning masses, wounds from the coarse dress, digestive distress from the meals. The inconstant monk's resistance, his revulsion emerges from a non-spiritual place. Indeed, the needs of the soul are nowhere mentioned in this passage, perhaps because Aelred had earlier taken possession of it, though the afflicted monk's refusal of Aelred's offer to mollify his aversions by loosing the restrictions placed on diet and habit suggests that something more than physiological misery solely is afoot. Moreover, the narrative reasserts the import of the living being in these negotiations with Aelred's response: the abbot vows not to eat, despite the disapproval of his brethren, until the renegade is restored to Rievaulx. Fortunately, the hunger strike is forestalled by supernal intervention. When the fugitive monk makes to leave the abbey, it seems as if a "wall of iron" impedes his desperate and repeated attempts at escape<sup>40</sup>. Not deterred by either the gathering crowd, or the thickening atmosphere, "in intense rage he takes hold of the hinges of the gate with both hands and, stretching out his leg, tries to put one foot forward, but in

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<sup>40</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 113.

no way did he contrive to reach even the boundary”<sup>41</sup>. And after this last ditch effort, the monk concedes his defeat and goes back, contrite, to seek forgiveness from his abbot.

Elsewhere we have seen that Aelred’s early conversion experiences were conjured from a fertility that energized his spirit, body, and a vital, animate element distinguishable from these attributes, yet with this extended anecdote, the *Vita* revises to a certain extent our understanding of the effect of piety on the living being by acknowledging the possibility of genuine resistance to the deprivations of devout practices. In contrast with the propagandistic tenor of the accounts of Rievaulx Abbey and its environs, the lengthy story of the unstable monk very likely strikes a chord with the *Vita*’s clerical audience<sup>42</sup>. These passages open up a complex identification for readers aware that the proper example and focus for their textual devotions is Aelred, yet empathetic toward the ill-disciplined brother. While Walter Daniel certainly does not endorse this connection, the space and detail he dedicates in the narrative to the wayward brother invites his audience, at the very least, to recognize the probably prevalent anxieties about the toll of ascetic practice, not to mention

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<sup>41</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 113. “Tandem iratus acriter sibi ipsi cardines ianue utraque apprehendit manu et pedem unum producta tibia extendens in longum nullo modo illum uel ad medium limitis dirigere preualebat.” Powicke, 1950, p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> Here I agree with Dutton who remarks that the unstable monk becomes a rounded character in the *vita* and also claims that the unstable monk in this dimensionality comes to represent all the monks in the abbey. This dilation establishes the general nature of this episode, but also underscores its role as a plausible vehicle for Aelred’s and Walter’s philosophies. (Dutton, 1994, p. 59.)

monastic enclosure. Even the comic image of the monk straining to reach his leg out of the abbey's gates does double duty to endear the hapless deserter to his audience as much as it sets him up for derision.

A worthy reader, however, would censure himself for such an impious affiliation, and perhaps even be moved to contrition for the cause of the identification, his own indulgence of constitutional frailty. Serving in theory as grounds not only for introspection, contrition, and reverence, the chief purposes of this encounter seem to be, on the one hand, to register a decided rift between exemplary and average, or slightly less than average, lives and on the other, to insist on the importance of establishing connections to other monks, other men, other living beings in the first place<sup>43</sup>. Though Aelred's holiness ought to be the principal interest in the *Vita* as a whole – and this anecdote is, after all, the extension of his first certified miracle – empathy for the insubordinate cleric redistributes the audience's focus to the

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<sup>43</sup> According to John Sommerfeldt, what Aelred's own work adds to an understanding of the soul was a property the abbot called, "affectus," which implies emotion or attachment. "And thus Aelred's soul is gifted with a faculty that goes beyond the traditional triad of intellect, will, and memory. To the rational, volitional, perceptive, and imaginative powers of these faculties Aelred adds the powers of emotion and feeling." (John Sommerfeldt, "The Roots of Aelred's Spirituality: Cosmology and Anthropology," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 38:1 (2003), p. 23.) Elsewhere in the article, Sommerfeldt argues that, for Aelred, love serves as the connective tissue not only in the mind or soul, but also in the natural and animal world. It seems as though Walter Daniel's representations of the living being in moments of extremity owes its subtle reliance on the value of community networks in part to his mentor's sermons and treatises.

relationship between these modes of living and perhaps also to consider what lies between these counterpoised lives<sup>44</sup>.

The polarized structuring of this account, the problem of identification and the implicit critique of the enclosed life, carves up more than contrary styles of religious conduct. Already Aelred has gained guardianship of the soul of the unruly monk, who is left to contend with his appetites and his psychological turbulence. Their second exchange complicates the outlaw's relationship to his will, as the abbot and the monastery act in concert to prevent the monk's escape. Though the monk remains intent on indulging the pressures of his sundry disinclinations, his failure to get past the monastery's walls, to execute his desires, signals the limits of his agency. With the troublemaker's soul and agency now attached to Aelred, a rather stripped down version of the monk's being remains.

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<sup>44</sup> Although what develops between the unstable monk and Aelred can hardly be called a friendship at least in any simple sense, these returns to a discourse of lively affiliations bring to mind Aelred's own writings on monastic friendships. In what is probably his most influential work, *De Amicitia Spirituali*, Aelred revises (to understate the case) for a medieval monastic audience Cicero's *De amicitia*. Walter does not elaborate upon his master's theories in the *Vita*, but I would argue that his foregrounding of the importance of relationships, both concrete and abstract, is indebted to Aelred's valorization of monastic affect.

For readings of the influence of Aelred's *De Amicitia Spirituali*, see Jan Ziolkowski, "Twelfth-century Understandings and Adaptations of Ancient Friendship" in *Mediaeval Antiquity*, edited by Andries Welkenhuysen, Herman Braet, Werner Verbeke (Leuven, Belgium : Leuven University Press, 1995), Constant Mews, "Cicero and the Boundaries of Friendship in the Twelfth Century," *Viator*, 38:2 (2007), 369-384, and Patricia Johnson, "Phenomenology of Spiritual Friendship and Discourse about God," *New Black Friars*, 88:1017 (2007), p. 549-563. For an evaluation of the Augustinian influence on Aelred's tendency to forge friendships, see Brian Noell, "Aelred of Rievaulx's Appropriation of Augustine: A Window on Two Views of Friendship and the Monastic Life," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 37:2 (2002), p. 132-34.

The concluding chapter of Aelred and the unstable monk's relationship comes at the juncture between life and death. By now promoted to abbot, Aelred sends the changeable monk with a group of ostensibly more reliable brothers, including Walter's own father, Daniel, on an errand to a nearby abbey of Swineshead "to illuminate it with the Cistercian way of life"<sup>45</sup>. During the night before the contingent is expected to return, Aelred experiences a vision in which a "man of venerable appearance" foretells the unstable monk's imminent death. Extending the displacement of the monk's life, the prophecy declares that the turbulent life will end in Aelred's very own hands. When the party arrives as predicted at the day's first light, Aelred seeks out the fickle monk and welcomes him warmly, but in a remarkable moment of consistency, the wayward monk responds to Aelred's reception by asking further leave: "What, shall I enter again on that death without end which the cloistered always endure? No, by your leave, I go at once for a month to visit my kindred to enjoy with them for just a little while the good things of this present world, and so return to you again"<sup>46</sup>. Unmoved by this plea to enjoy a few good things, even knowing what the coming days hold for this man, Aelred denies the request, cryptically explaining to his charge: "I live no

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<sup>45</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 116.

<sup>46</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 117. "Ut quid, inquit, intrabo ad mortem illam interminatam quam semper paciuntur claustrales? Immo uel saltem per unum mensem licencia tua uisito parents meos et cum eis uel tantillo tempore fruor bonis presentibus et sic iterum ad te redeo." Powicke, 1950, p. 36.

longer without you, and you shall not die without me”<sup>47</sup>. Within a week, the vision’s prediction is fulfilled: the unstable monk falls ill, bleeding continuously from the nose. Once Aelred recognized the “pangs of death” in man, he begins the litany for the dying, but without touching the monk as prophesied. After repeating the prayer twice, Aelred suddenly remembers the vision and, taking the man’s head into his own hands, calls out, “Saint Benedict, pray for him”<sup>48</sup>, which releases the unstable monk from his life.

While this anecdote both parallels and raises the stakes of the previous encounters with the erratic monk, it also departs from those narratives in several striking ways. Unlike the preceding episodes, this one can be dated historically<sup>49</sup> and Walter here even takes pains to inform that his own father had contact with the unstable monk, indicating that these events and the brother in question do not serve simply as theoretical or narrative devices. Situating the unstable monk in time social and historical underscores the living, vibrant authenticity of the incidents associated with his presence at Rievaulx, but also sends out a web of connections with the fickle monk at the center<sup>50</sup>. His life is thereby linked, and of course in this case also

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<sup>47</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 117. “...sine te diucius non uiuo nec tu sine me morieris.” Powicke, 1950, p. 36.

<sup>48</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 117.

<sup>49</sup> For Swinehead’s relationship to its founding house, Rievaulx, see Dutton, 1994, p.162, n.74.

<sup>50</sup> For an evaluation of the Augustinian influence on Aelred’s tendency to forge friendships, see Brian Noell, “Aelred of Rievaulx’s Appropriation of Augustine: A

unlinked, to Aelred as well as to Walter's own family, the other Rievaulx brethren, and even as far afield as the inhabitants of Swineshead. And the *vita's* audience is reconnected with the unstable monk by the extension of his complaint, even if this passage is meant in jest as has been claimed<sup>51</sup>. The monk's resistance, it seems, originates and defines these associations; although we expect such a disruption to be banished from the idyllic, peaceful Rievaulx earlier introduced, it nevertheless seems very important that the aggressive opinions as well as the living body of the unruly brother are contained in the monastic community.

Luckily, Aelred is shown to have the power to soften any disorder the inclusion of such protest might arouse. The spiritual prowess that twice detains the volatile postulate coupled with the foreknowledge of the man's fate offered by Aelred's vision implies a rather heady approach to monastic management. And forcing the monk to live out his final days in the austerity that he found objectionable – “death without end” – seems to invalidate entirely life outside the monastery, as if dying at Rievaulx were preferable to living uncloistered among family. Yet Aelred's touch redirects the narrative toward the perceptible. Now the abbot has gained more substantial power with

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Window on Two Views of Friendship and the Monastic Life,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 37:2 (2002), pp. 132-34.

<sup>51</sup> Dutton cites Powicke's claim that this repartee might in fact be a signal that the unstable monk has now recovered enough from his lapses to be counted on to make such a journey. (Dutton, 1994, p.162, n.76.)

regard to life, since it is only his touch that liberates the dying monk. As the resistant monk seemed to become a hub of connections for Rievaulx Abbey, Aelred here transitions these associations into a vertical alignment calling upon the saints and Benedict, the emblem and designer of communal monasticism, in particular. By holding the dying monk's head, Aelred brings about balance both spatially and spiritually, suggesting through this gesture that life and its extinction must be understood as complex forces, not independent entities that may be isolated in material or theory, but rather impulses that emerge, operate, and withdraw in the presence of and in connection with other living beings.

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An insistence on a balance and dependence as crucial to understanding the organic, animating energies of life comes to bear upon Walter's treatment of illness in *Vita Aelredi*. As is often noticed about Walter's biography, the narrative owes much of its content to detailed reports of Aelred's infirmities. Of the 59 chapters that comprise the *Vita*, thirty discuss the last ten years of Aelred's life, a period during which the abbot's health begins to deteriorate; twenty of the thirty chapters cover Aelred's last four years; and thirteen of the twenty concentrate on Aelred's final year and death.<sup>52</sup> But in addition to cataloguing his subject's health, Walter also reports on Aelred's

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<sup>52</sup> Dutton, 1994, p51.

encounters with unwell members of surrounding communities.

Indeed, many of the abbot's miracles recounted by Walter involve the healing of uncommon afflictions and diseases.

Walter's interest, which perhaps borders on fixation, in illness has been read as a mark of his medical learning as well as a manifestation of his incompetence as a biographer<sup>53</sup>. Marsha Dutton argues that the bottom-heavy narrative structure of the *Vita* favors the time in Aelred's life that would have found Walter near at hand<sup>54</sup>. Emerging as a subtle theme in the narrative, the balance between health and illness, and this balance's relationship to spiritual and intellectual practice, reasserts the interdependence of living beings, particularly in a monastic setting.

The miracles that Walter attributes to the later part of Aelred's life, immediately preceding the last four years of the abbot's life which so preoccupy his biographer, revolve around bodily healing. After curing two monks, one with stomach troubles that suggest an ulcer of some kind and the other with heart failure, and a shepherd with an unexplained bout of muteness, Aelred's therapeutic energy takes an

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<sup>53</sup> And perhaps his professional status as a physician, see above.

<sup>54</sup> Dutton, not unjustly, labels Walter's *vita* something other than biography in the modern sense. She claims it is the incompleteness and the subjective approach of the text that distance it from the modern genre. While this may be a reductive claim, focusing on what Walter omits from his account supposes that a thorough or even comprehensive biography could be achieved. But Dutton hits on something when she identifies the cross purposes of a narrative about the historical persona as opposed to narrative about the "spiritual reality," or in this case an organic reality. (Dutton, 1994, p. 84)

unlikely turn: the saintly man curses a fellow abbot who, on a visit to Rievaulx, insulted Aelred. Although Aelred does not explicitly wish the man dead, he does pray that the offending abbot “speedily suffer an end to his malice”<sup>55</sup>, a plea that appears to cause the man’s death only a week later.

These acts of healing showcase both Aelred’s sanctity and his love for his brethren<sup>56</sup>. That Walter later questions the efficacy of his abbot’s curse, remarking in the *Letter to Maurice*, which follows the *Vita* and acts as a rebuttal to some of the *Vita*’s earliest critics, that “it is possible that the abbot about whom the story is told did not die for the reason for which it seems he died”<sup>57</sup>, further underscores the importance of affect to both Aelred and Walter’s agendas.

Even more striking is the development of the relationship between a spiritual power and the living organism. A short chapter prefaces those that recount Aelred’s healing miracles, noting that what follows will demonstrate the abbot’s shining virtue of spirit, rather than his administrative or scholarly acumen; yet the undeniable physicality of these accounts, coupled with Walter Daniel’s affinity for medical detail, engross the reader, leaving him to meditate less about the sacred display and more on the ailments of the human body. This interest in

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<sup>55</sup> Powicke, 1994, p.124.

<sup>56</sup> Discussing another incident in which Aelred meets a man who has become gravely ill after swallowing a frog, Dutton suggest that “Aelred’s ability to cure in this instance comes precisely because of his compassion, which Walter sharply though tacitly contrasts with his own horror at the sight” (Dutton, 1994, p. 61).

<sup>57</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 149.

the exchange between spiritual power and bodily pathology extends, however, beyond the biographer's professional curiosity. Unlike Aelred's early interventions, as in the case of the unstable monk, which made use of prayer alone to achieve his will, these encounters find Aelred cheek by jowl with the afflicted. Each miracle, excepting the confrontation with the visiting abbot, concludes with Aelred touching the sick man to work his curative wonders: the monk with stomach pains and the speechless shepherd are touched on the mouth and for the young monk with heart failure, Aelred holds relics and the Gospel of John to the debilitated man's chest. While none of these gestures is especially out of the ordinary in the canon of miracle healings, their repetition and the keen attention paid to each disorder allows the living body, at the moment of its probable extinction and its exhibition of great strength, to become at least as important as Aelred's sanctity.

This trend repeats, and is epitomized, in the final and most memorable of Aelred's therapeutic miracles. Distinct, in many ways as we shall see, from the previous miracles that involve monks or local Rievaulx valley inhabitants, this anecdote transpires by chance, as Aelred returns from Galloway on a diplomatic errand. In his travels, the abbot crosses paths with a man who appears to be suffering terrible internal distress:

He was so distended that he seemed to be carrying a cask. His natural form was disgracefully misshapen. You could see the poor wretch wilting under the burden, now falling to the ground, now trying to rise and sinking back again, unable to stand or sit or lie. His face was drawn, his eyes bloodshot, his pupils dimmed. The hairs of his head were like those of a goat rather than of a man, and his head itself was sunk into his monstrous body without any sign of a neck. In his swollen condition the man appeared like a very fat ox or sheep, except that in its natural state this gives general pleasure, whereas he was a terrifying object to everybody.<sup>58</sup>

Here Walter permits his fascination with illness free rein, but even so, this report differs notably from the others, which seek to diagnose and draw on Walter's familiarity with medical authorities to fill out his observations. In this miracle story, Walter makes no attempt to diagnose the blighted body, since these symptoms invite marvel rather than analysis. As the description unfolds, the reader, and presumably the witnesses to this event, loses track of exactly what it is he is meant to examine. While the body in pain served as a centerpiece for each of the preceding healing miracles, the human figure disappears in this last scenario, transformed into objects and animals. Not even its motion seems recognizable.

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<sup>58</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 125. "...et tergo uidelicet et uentre horribiliter tumidum, qui tanquam dolium quoddam gesetabat uiscera interius tumencia humore superfluo, que cutis naturalis inuolucio non capiens modum extensione nimia omnis competentis forme turpieter excedebat. Videris nunc misellum sub onere deficientem cadere, nunc surgere conari et iterum relabi post modicum in terram, nec stare posse sedere nec iacer; faciem informem et sanguineos oculorum orbes et pupillam obscuram non fulgere; totum capud instar hircine pellis pilos non capillos producere atque hoc sine collo monstruoso insidere corpori; pectus in tantum intumescere media et posteriora uentris ut pecus appareat pinguissimum homo, nisi quod pecus in natura placeat miserum gnus moralium!" Powicke, 1950, p. 46-7.

The horror of the scene is alleviated when the biographer intervenes to explain the cause of the man's condition: it seems he had by mistake swallowed a tadpole while drinking water "which had grown in his belly and eaten away his entrails day by day, gathering there the wherewithal to live"<sup>59</sup>. Somehow Aelred senses this; and after he is petitioned for help by the afflicted man, the abbot places his fingers into the man's mouth and utters a brief prayer. Instantly, "the frog within climbed up on to the fingers which the father had inserted into the man's mouth. When he withdrew his finger joints, the quadruped issues through the door of the mouth and falls to the ground. Its departure is followed all that day by glutinous humors and pus horrible beyond measure..."<sup>60</sup>. Despite the various expulsions, the man reverts immediately to his former, healthy self and Aelred finishes his journey to Rievaulx.

More explicitly than in the earlier miracles, the swallowed frog account employs bodily fragility as a means to explore Aelred's saintly powers. Instead of the average heart and stomach problems that appear in the other tales, Aelred's final healing scene removes both the holy man and the victim from the realm of the ordinary illness, which

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<sup>59</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 126. "...que creuerat in uentre illius et uiscera corrodens diebus singulis indie carpebat quo uiueret." Powicke, 1950, p. 47.

<sup>60</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 126. "...rana inclusa ad digitos ascendit patris quos iniecerat in os hominis. Articulis igitur extractis quadrupes per oris ianuam egrediens cadit in terram. Qua exeunte ab homine sequuntur tota die illa glutinosi humores et putredines horribiles supra modum." Powicke, 1950, p. 47-8.

concentrates the anecdote's focus on the strange, bloated body of the patient, a body that cannot be classified yet remains ostensibly alive.

In fact, although the chapter that contains this episode is attached rhetorically and materially by the biographer to the miracles that come before, its formal differences from these are striking. Not only does the anecdote conclude the section that concerns Aelred's medical miracles, but it also falls after an interjected chapter that describes a visit that the abbot makes to Galloway, which seems to isolate the frog phenomenon, and perhaps further to call attention to it, from its kindred accounts.

The content of the tale, too, sets it apart: in particular, the vivid narration of the healing act, Aelred's reaching into the throat of the afflicted young man, and the extensive commentary that Walter adds to this miracle alone. This commentary stems, it seems, first from the biographer's enchantment with the event as a medical oddity. In the excessive portrayal – so much so that translators more than once have truncated Walter's narrative – of the ailing man's appearance, followed by the grisly details of the frog's expulsion, Walter's captivation by the spectacle is palpable. Beyond this delight, however, lies a more orthodox agenda, which permits Walter to advance some ideas about the powers of sanctity over the living being.

Walter begins with rather pointed remarks on the wretchedness of the living being, especially this one that defies categorization. Explaining that the man's distress and distention are owed to the inadvertent swallowing of a tadpole, Walter deplores humanity's impotence even over our own bodies: "Behold, O man, how a little worm, soon to die, cuts into your vitals and you have no power to pluck it out with your hand! Consider what a poor wretch you are. Such are your sons, O Adam. Here kings are powerless; even if they feel them there, they cannot eject frogs from their bellies"<sup>61</sup>. Here it becomes clear that this anecdote deviates dramatically from the typical account of miraculous healing, for Walter's interest tends toward weakness and mystery of the human animal. Rather than imagining the belly-frog as a punishment for some secret sin, it is a sign for Walter of the permeability and complexity of the living being. After all, the frog is consumed not during an illicit act, but when the man, minding his own business, simply intended to quench his thirst<sup>62</sup>. And indeed, Walter's point seems to be not that something has gone

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<sup>61</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 126. "Ecce secat, o homo, interiora tua uermiculus moriturus et manu eum non uales extrahere. Cogista miser quis sis. Tales sunt filii tui, o Adam. Nec re reges in hac parte potencie imperant, ut ranas eiciant a uentribus suis et si eas ibi senserint." Powicke, 1950, p. 47.

<sup>62</sup> It is possible that the story is a veiled reference to the sin of gluttony and a warning that one ought to be ever vigilant, especially with regard to the senses, not to allow impurities to slip in. As Dutton notes, there is an Irish analogue to this narrative that involves the consumption of a hunger demon, which validates to a certain extent such a reading. (Dutton, 1994, p. 167, n. 114.) Even so, Walter is (predictably) rather too preoccupied with the literal sense of the account to construe it as a preacherly conceit.

terribly awry in this situation, but rather that finding a foreign element in a body is only to be expected, even natural. It may be lamentable that our entrails are so susceptible to invasion, but our inability to know enough about the contents and operations of our viscera define us as human, and furthermore, connect us to our biblical ancestors and more contemporary political icons.

Although Walter's observations sketch out some abstract notions about human sovereignty, which he seems to suggest in practice does not often extend much beyond the idea itself, the literal nature of his analysis – the interest is fundamentally frogs in bellies for Walter – further informs his project. When Aelred agrees to end the young man's anguish, in contrast with his earlier miracles, the abbot does not simply offer a prayer, issue a command, or lay his hands on the victim, instead he thrusts his fingers into the man's throat and out pops the offending frog. The roughness of this gesture seems to have less to do with a saintly invocation than the gag reflex. Likewise, the ailment does not miraculously disappear, as if it were a kind of spiritual manifestation or demonic possession; the parasitic frog and all its unsightly by-products are belched up, insisting that the detritus of physical symptoms be taken as seriously as the marvel of a holy intervention. This is a messy miracle. Yet it is the mess and the touch, Aelred's getting his hands dirty to rescue a creature that only

he properly recognizes as still human, that provide the engine for the miracle and, it would seem, that restore life and health to the suffering man. While Walter does not delineate, nor even attempt to, a thorough philosophy of the living being in this episode, the frog in the belly affair does mark out and endeavor to connect a small selection of types of beings: the animal, the saint, and the unrecognizable or perhaps the non-being. For this assembly, Aelred becomes a curative force, but he does not achieve this healing, according to Walter's report, by means of a distanced or radiating sanctity, but rather through intimate contact with another man. As in other encounters discussed above, the living being is shown to be unstable and even uncategorizable, a complex of forces whose boundaries are difficult to distinguish, yet this miracle story adds very tangibly the dimension of community and affiliation, even at the level of the couple, to an understanding of the emergence and survival of the living being.

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Again, in the closing chapters of the *Vita* Walter emphasizes the communal dimension of the living being, or at least how it can be comprehended and represented. Immediately following the reports of Aelred's wondrous healings, Walter narrates his friend and mentor's

“second circumcision”<sup>63</sup>, alternating between the abbot’s bodily sufferings, both naturally occurring and ascetically inflamed, and his later sermons and teachings to reveal the effects of Aelred’s increasingly intense self-deprivation. As Walter points out, this “second circumcision” is not an effort to expunge excesses, or as he writes, “not...the removal of superfluties which did not even exist”<sup>64</sup>, but rather a further paring down of his physical appearance and his habits, throwing into relief the living organism at its barest and most vulnerable.

The network of associations appears at Aelred’s deathbed, where he is surrounded by fellow abbots and monks, his intimate friends and also engulfed in a textual complex of internalized citations. In a discussion of Walter’s depiction of the abbot’s death scene, especially the last words that the biographer attributes to Aelred, “*In manus tuas commendo spiritum meum*”<sup>65</sup>, Thomas Heffernan argues that this utterance edges the biography into the zone of sacred biography because it causes the *Vita*’s audience to acknowledge the typological significance both of the statement, which is a rearticulation of Luke 23:46, repeating Jesus’s dying plea, and of Aelred himself who earns sanctity by his imitation and quotation of Jesus thereby becoming a

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<sup>63</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 127.

<sup>64</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 127.

<sup>65</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 138; Powicke, 1950, p. 61.

little less Aelred and a little more saint<sup>66</sup>. This typological shift dispels, then, “verisimilitude” of Walter’s text in favor of a more universal figure of piety: “The quotation leads the reader to an apprehension of the general, to what is shared, to what is common, and not to what is private, unique, *sui generis*”<sup>67</sup>. For Heffernan, this textual movement exploits the reading tendencies of the *Vita*’s monastic audience, conditioned to look beyond and behind the simple details of the biography in order to access its historical precedents or cosmic significances. These inclinations introduce a whole host of characters into Walter’s *Vita*, adding traces of Luke, Jesus, Bede, Jerome, and countless other relevant commentators to Aelred’s end<sup>68</sup>.

While these departures quite possibly do crowd the scene for medieval, and some subsequent, readers, it is difficult to miss Walter’s need to return the focus to Aelred’s living body, even in its moment of extinction. Restraining to an extent his keen interest in bodies in crisis, Walter recounts Aelred’s death with affection: “I sat with him on that day and held his head in my hands, the rest sitting apart with us. I said to him in a low voice, “Lord, gaze on the cross; let your eye be

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<sup>66</sup> “The quotation places Aelred in a tradition, and the crucial point of such placement is to direct the audience’s attention to Aelred’s relationship to that tradition and not, for example to underscore his unique historical attributes in his role as abbot of Rievaulx.” (Thomas Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: saints and their biographers in the Middle Ages* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988], p. 78.) See p74-83 for Heffernan’s larger argument, which also takes up the role of the reader in the formulation of sacred biography.

<sup>67</sup> Heffernan, p. 79.

<sup>68</sup> See Heffernan, p. 80-2 for more on the textual reverberations of the Lucan quotation.

where your heart is”<sup>69</sup>. The point of connection, the touch, between Walter and Aelred grounds the duo in the corporeal. Their communication, which in turn elicits Aelred’s last words, depends upon this intimate contact. Moreover, it recalls the death of the unstable monk discussed above, who could only find release from life and illness when Aelred gathered the man’s head into his hands<sup>70</sup>. As Aelred in that moment bodies forth a convergence of spirit, life, and death, not as passing tangents but as overlapping and intermixing forces, so Walter repeats this meeting in his report of his role in the abbot’s last hours. If Heffernan is correct and Aelred’s invocation of Luke removes the reader from the distraction of verisimilitude to the leapfrogging of typology and allusion, then surely we are returned to Aelred’s chamber when Walter follows his teacher’s triumphant quotation with the abbot’s labored breathing:

Indeed, in the very next night his breathing was slower than before. So he lay until close on the fourth watch. Then, when we were aware that death was near, he was placed, as the monastic custom is, on a hair-cloth strewn with ashes, and, as the brethren with the four abbots who were gathered there with him, he surrendered his spotless spirit into the hands of his Father...<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Powicke, 1994, 138. “In illo die sedi ego et sustentaui capud eius maniubs meis, aliis longius consedentibus nobis. Dixi autem demissa uoce, nemine nobis intendent, ‘Domine, respice ad crucem et ibi sit oculus tuus ubi est etiam cor.’” Powicke, 1950, p. 61.

<sup>70</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 117.

<sup>71</sup> Powicke, 1994, p. 117. “Statim enim nocte sequenti spiritum solito lencius trahens usque ad quartam pene uigiliam sic iacebat. At tunc nobis eum iam iamque obiturum sencientibus, positus est super cilicium et cinerem more monachorum, filiorumque turba circa illum adunata cum abbatiubs quatuor qui affuerant, in manus Patris inpollutum spiritum emittens...” Powicke, 1950, pp. 61-2.

In the communal assembly as in the biographer's hands, the abbot's life is suspended in these connections. Walter insists that we stay with Aelred and seems intent to keep Aelred in the narrative foreground even in this time of anguish in an effort to remind his readers that the meaning of those ultimate words and these final moments is multiple.

Explaining the various ancient and medieval glosses on *spiritum* from the Lucan verse, Heffernan theorizes that Walter attributes Jesus's last words to Aelred as a way to demonstrate "human individuality in its complete fullness, to augment it, by placing the concept of the individual within the larger frame of a collective personality"<sup>72</sup>. Just as the citation of Luke evokes Psalm 30 and parts of Genesis, so *spiritum* serves to affix the essence of the individual with the notion of a divine creative force. Typically glossed as the "animating life principle," an entity that represents both something which distinguishes one person from another – a soul, personality, mind, consciousness etc. – and something which operates in the individual but is separate from him, *spiritum* also was believed by certain medieval commentators to refer to "the very creative breath of life that gave birth to the universe," otherwise known as the *spiraculum vitae*<sup>73</sup>. What this leads Heffernan to conclude is that, in

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<sup>72</sup> Heffernan, p. 87.

<sup>73</sup> Heffernan, pp. 83-4.

light of Aelred's invocation of Jesus's dying cry, Walter seeks to show that the *spiraculum vitae*, a divine spark, resides in Aelred, indeed even enables him to perform the holy deeds and miracles, manufactures his sanctity<sup>74</sup>. While Walter does seem invested in addressing the range of levels of meaning associated with Aelred's death and his inscription of it, his narration of this particular event seems mostly preoccupied with the local manifestation of the abbot's spirit, despite the referential distraction of the last words. Of a piece with Aelred's "second circumcision," Walter's report of Aelred's last living moments situate the *spiritum* close at hand, close enough to be perceived by the biographer and his fellow monks. An experience of the animating principle, however fleetingly, surpasses sanctity and citation as the question of the *Vita* in this pivotal episode in Aelred's personal history. So much so that even Aelred is given a voice in the matter.

Walter's intent, it seems, is not to defer the question of the spirit or the individual, nor its life principle, but to attempt to gather it into his narrative, whether to examine or to detain and to care for it (after all, it is the disappearance of this living quotient that sets Walter off in

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<sup>74</sup> "For if *spiritum meum* is related to *spiraculum vitae*/'breath of life,' then the force which guided Aelred on his saintly pilgrimage is the Lord actually resident in his body. Such a concept is not in the least foreign to the medieval mind, nor does its acknowledgment suggest a theology which was possessed of a pantheism of immanence...To put it baldly, the saints whose lives were chronicled exhibited behavior which [hagiographers] believed was contingent on the shifting interstices between the human and the divine presence." (Heffernan, p. 86.)

the *Lamentacio*). Isolating this energy is out of the question, instead Walter traces a zone where the spirit is shared and not divisible into individual portions, nor entirely retractable into a remote or universalized form. For Walter, as well as Aelred, the life principle is bound up in a communal awareness, which implies that the living organism is not delimited by the body, but rather a force that reaches through and beyond it; although this organic vitality may not be produced by communal attachments, it is certainly in Walter's estimation most perceptible in affections and interconnections of the monastery.

## CHAPTER 2

### ***“More Life”: Animal Encounters in the South English Legendary***

In Act Five of *Perestroika*, the second part of Tony Kushner’s play, *Angels in America*, Prior Walter, the play’s hero of sorts, visits a ruinous and very bureaucratic Heaven which looks “mostly like San Francisco after the Great 1906 Quake.”<sup>1</sup> The angels of the Continental Principalities tempt Prior, whose struggle with AIDS has left him physically weak, with the gift of prophecy if he will encourage his fellow humans to stop moving forward, but Prior refuses and instead asks for their blessing. “Bless me anyway,” Prior demands, and continues, “I want more life. I can’t help myself. I do....Death usually has to *take* life away. I don’t know if that’s just the animal. I don’t know if it’s not braver to die. But I recognize the habit....Bless me anyway. I want more life.” The life that Prior demands is not experience or adventure. He doesn’t ask for time, wisdom, knowledge, or love. The life that Prior wants is the extension of his bodily existence, vital energy. He also wants, of course, the acknowledgment that life matters, that lives like his count as lives worth living. “More life” suggests not only the desire for vitality, but the recognition of

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Kushner. *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003: 79.

different lives as lives and the ethical exigencies of this recognition. The phrase “more life,” which Kushner claims to have discovered in Harold Bloom’s *The Book of J* as a translation of the Hebrew word for “blessing,” returns to close the play when Prior uses it to speak his own blessing, a blessing of the audience, saying: “You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: *MoreLife*.” In Kushner’s play, “more life” is both an appeal and a bequest.

A saint whose afterlife is characterized by excesses, Francis of Assisi has trickled down into popular culture as a proto-ecologist. Simpler than that even, he has become a medieval tree-hugger, an ancient bird-whisperer. In the modern imaginary, Francis is sentimentalized and monumentalized as a garden statuette, a resting spot for suburban creatures. Maybe birds, mostly squirrels. Of course, this is no small afterlife for Francis. How many other saints’ lives have been retained with any accuracy, for, after all, even Bonaventure records Francis’s interactions with Perugian beasts? How many other saints can boast such protracted holds over the average, the botanic, and the poetic imagination?

Even the extraordinary poet, Galway Kinnell channels this agrestic Francis in *Saint Francis and the Sow*<sup>2</sup>:

The bud  
stands for all things,  
even for those things that don’t flower,

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<sup>2</sup> Kinnell, Galway. *A New Selected Poems*. Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin, 2000: 94.

for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;  
though sometimes it is necessary  
to reteach a thing its loveliness,  
to put a hand on its brow  
of the flower  
and retell it in words and in touch  
it is lovely  
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;  
as Saint Francis  
put his hand on the creased forehead  
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch  
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow  
began remembering all down her thick length,  
from the earthen snout all the way  
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,  
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine  
down through the great broken heart  
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering  
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and  
blowing beneath them:  
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

This poem, which brings together the potencies of blessings and contact, of words and pressure, to manifest the vitality of things, uses Saint Francis as its centerpiece. The pivot of the poem's structure, "as Saint Francis" is the twelfth of the piece's 23 lines, Francis looms over the poem. He is the sole non-animal figure; he performs the poem's self-realizing miracle – when he touches the head of the sow, she remembers her own "loveliness." Yet, Francis is also on a verse island, cordoned off, separated by time and mythology from the earthy interests of the poem that begin with "[t]he bud" and promise that "even those things that don't flower," like a sow, contain an animate beauty. This is how we like to think of Francis, reminding us and

barnyard animals of the fullness of our given beings. And this is how we like to think of animals, especially the ones with which we share a living space – docile, broken-hearted, just like we are, and awaiting a moment of recognition, just like we are.

Indeed, medieval accounts of Saint Francis’s famed sermon to the birds started this craze and offer a nice example of this type of instruction.<sup>3</sup> Praising the birds’ inherited attributes – you can fly! you don’t need clothes! you can eat wherever you find food! – Francis underscores their natural condition and encourages them both to recognize their blessings and to thank God for them. There isn’t anything to correct in the animals; they are already fit to give thanks for their perfect state. But if the birds have nothing to change about themselves, they may have nothing to learn from Francis. So, we discover that the animal is not the true object of these lessons; instead it is the fable’s human audience which begins to realize that a tree full of birds understands obedience or communal life or proper prayer better than a bunch of itinerant monks. The birds set up an intermediary, a screen for the homily’s intended non-animal audience. The human reader following along at home must understand Francis’s address ironically, since the “natural” state of the human is decidedly less free. Probably not cloistered for the likes of Francis, but not quite

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<sup>3</sup> Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 2, ed. Regis Armstrong, Wayne Hellmann, and Williams Short (New York: New City Press, 2000), 525-683.

so whimsically permitted to flit about the countryside. Perhaps the intimation is that through thanks, through an attitude of gratefulness, the believer may return to a more natural, unblemished – and free? – version of himself. These birds, and to a certain extent Kinnell's sow, are humans in disguise. What Francis aims to teach in both cases is less about what it means to be animal than what it means to define humanity, what is proper to humans and our desires.

Often when animals meet saints – or holy anchors, monks, believers of all stripes – the exchange includes scenes of dominance, of taming, of overcoming the animal's evident or assumed intentions. Geese are banished from wheat fields; crocodiles are made to ferry passengers on their spiny backs; lions are quieted with snacks or orders; flies are dispersed. These displays typically serve as testament to the saint's thaumaturgical powers – by a brief prayer pesky ravens are convinced to abandon a field of tasty barley. The interaction goes in one of two ways: either the animal is made tame, taught to be more like a human by ignoring an appetite or following a routine that will sate the appetite without the possibility of injury or aggression, or the animal shows an immediate propensity for discipline, without even being asked, and the saint can begin to instruct the animal (so often a lion, bird, or wolf) in complex moral matters. In these scenes, animals rarely challenge the saint for more than a moment or two, and the

interactions emphasize that furry mammals which act like we do are humans-in-training, just as we suspected. Animals with demeanors or habits that bear an uncanny resemblance to humans or that are quickly dominated by saintly intervention tend to be read, particularly by scholarly audiences, as symbols. Wolves are signs of bestial masculinity; birds are images of the holy ghost. After surveying the past forty years of scholarship on medieval animals, Sarah Stanbury concludes that the “textual history of animal representation is bound by the tyranny of metaphor, the anthropocentric figuration in which animals appear in texts chiefly to mark and even create human subjects”<sup>4</sup>. These animals are understood to present a sentimental foil for the human, insisting on the continuities between species – embodying the notion that given enough time and proper instruction, nonhuman animals would become more like human animals – and reinforcing a teleological understanding of animal-human relations<sup>5</sup>.

The high-profile animals in the *South English Legendary*<sup>6</sup>, however, subvert these traditions, and, it seems to me, attempt to

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<sup>4</sup> Stanbury, “Posthumanist theory and the premodern animal sign,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2 (2011): 102.

<sup>5</sup> In a recent and convincing article, Karl Steel explores both how medieval texts tend to enforce this subjection and how contemporary critical theories of the animal respond to this problem: Steel, “How to Make a Human,” *Exemplaria* 20.1 (2008): 3-27.

<sup>6</sup> I will devote the large part of this chapter to animals found in this assemblage of saints’ lives. Though I will concentrate my textual inquiries on lives found in the “standard” edition of the *South English Legendary*, ed. C. D’Evelyn and A. J. Mill, vols. 1 and 2, EETS OS 235-6 (London, 1956), vol. 3, EETS OS 244 (London, 1959), I have also made use of C. Horstmann’s, *The Early South-English Legendary*, EETS OS

carve into the human *vita* a non-human *vita*. Animals proliferate in the collection and are used deliberately to tell a fuller story of the lives that exemplify and the lives that touch the holy. While the SEL often does use animals to display the full force of human will when exercised in concert with great piety, certain noteworthy lives – those of Francis, Brendan the Navigator, and native royal saints – organize an unconventional presentation of the animal, a presentation that creates space for non-sanctified, non-human living beings in the confines of the Life. When saints encounter animals in the *South English Legendary*, the narrative introduces alternative ways of understanding the living being by allowing the animal to be alien and by demonstrating the power of the animal to disrupt narratives of mastery as well as to complicate ontological and epistemological boundaries.

### ***Becoming Legendary***

Legendaries are collections in which more life is the expectation, and the *South English Legendary* is no exception. It includes lives not just of the average, canonized saints or the kinds of folks who appear on stained glass windows, but also histories of objects – the legend of the Sancta Cruz, a more than 600-line narration that traces the

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87 (London, 1887), especially in my examination of the life of Saint Francis. Unless otherwise noted, citations will refer to the former edition and will be cited parenthetically by line number. Page references for the individual legends can be found in the table of contents in the first two volumes.

origins of the Holy Cross back to seeds Seth placed beneath the tongue of Adam just before the latter's burial – and apostles, spurious kings and unhistorical princesses on pilgrimage, voyaging abbots and actual kings. There are many theories about the intended function and audience of this collection, but few definitive conclusions about the SEL's original uses.<sup>7</sup> The lives are didactic in tone, which has led some readers to reject the compilation as rough-hewn and shallow<sup>8</sup>, written in the vernacular, and shaped into verse with rhyming couplets and a generally iambic meter. Although the earliest gathering of these lives is estimated to have been produced in the last third of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the oldest extant manuscript, edited by Carl Horstmann and known as the *Early South English Legendary*, MS

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<sup>7</sup> Klaus Jankofsky asserts that the objective of the *South English Legendary* is to inform a lay readership of topics related to theology and dogma by way of a collection of direct narratives. For Jankofsky's summary of the origins and purposes of the *SEL*, see his chapter, "National Characteristics in the Portrayal of English Saints in the *South English Legendary*," anthologized in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp 82-85. Oliver S. Pickering's excellent article, "The *South English Legendary*: Teaching or Preaching?" (*Poetica: An International Journal of Linguistic-Literary Studies* 45 [1996]: 1-14) delves more deeply into questions of audience and authorial intent, though generally agrees with Jankofsky's claims. And Jill Frederick's "The *South English Legendary*: Anglo-Saxon saints and national identity," argues for the politically and historically conservative nature of the compilation. Perhaps most relevant to this project is Anne B. Thompson's monograph, *Everyday Saints and the Art of Narrative in the South English Legendary* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), which examines the narrative and fictional acumen of the SEL-poet, looking in particular at the choices he makes about what is interesting, what is worthy of inclusion and at the dramatic, colloquial, and political tensions the poet weaves into the legends.

<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Ho points out that the SEL's life of St. Francis has been derided as a "meaningless pastiche" compared to its sources. ("The Middle English St. Francis: Text and Context" in *Mindful Spirit in Late Medieval Literature*, [ed. Bonnie Wheeler. New York: Palgrave, 2006], 81.)

Laud 108 dates to about 1300<sup>9</sup>. Likely tied to the Worcester area, but certainly to the western part of England, the *South English Legendary* enjoyed notable popularity; by the end of the fifteenth century, it circulated in around sixty manuscripts.

This plurality, of purpose, of subject, and of audience, renders the *Legendary* an ideal space for non-human animals to wander. Anne Thompson remarks that the SEL “seems to have been regarded as a kind of open text which redactors felt free to emend stylistically and thematically, or to expand through the addition of items which they might compose themselves or find elsewhere.”<sup>10</sup> This openness does not simply result in a grouping of non-identical legendaries with charming incongruities, but rather coincides with the political and poetic inclinations of the lives’ multiple authors, who, according to Thompson, participate in the thirteenth-century interest in the phenomenal world, describing what can be perceived rather than relying entirely on convention<sup>11</sup>. Such an interest in the “everyday” seems to invite the animal into the lives of saints much in the way that it would encourage reflections on local geography or climate patterns. From lions in the Egyptian desert to wolves in the East Anglian forest, animal footprints crisscross the compilation. Yet, the SEL-poet

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<sup>9</sup> For a concise but compelling summary of the SEL’s textual history, see the Appendix in Anne Thompson’s *Everyday Saints and the Art of Narrative in the South English Legendary* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 189-197.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, 197.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, 181-185.

deploys with what I take to be a clear degree of intentionality his inclusion of animal exploits in the lives, underselling some notorious beasts and leading others into narratives whose sources lack them. These choices suggest that the SEL-poet's investment in the everyday does not stop at mimesis or even scientific inquiry. Instead, writing in the vernacular without apology or explanation, the poet seems committed at the levels of language and narration to finding subtle ways to invert power dynamics, and the careful positioning of animals, especially in lives with social and political consequence, extends however obliquely a sense of mistrust in existing constructs of authority.<sup>12</sup> In this way, the non-human animals attended to by the SEL-poet slip their usual yokes and do some of this insubordinate work, work meant in fact to point up the injustice of these yokes. They are not simply convenient screens for projecting human problems, but are given by the SEL-poet roles that matter in the lives of saints.

### ***Sows & Legendary Bodies***

For all Francis's modern legacy as an animal enthusiast, the medieval versions of his activities underscore his capacity to discipline and manipulate whatever birds or wolves cross his path, and the SEL

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<sup>12</sup> Thompson connects this subversive intent to the poet's implied support for the Montfortian rebellion against Henry III (46-57) and later to a more general interest in the undoing of "the unjust rule of the 'heymen'" and in "religion's role in bringing about a just society" (180-181).

generally follows this tendency toward mastery and appropriation.<sup>13</sup> Unlike most of the lives in the *Legendary* which seem to rely on Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* as their primary source<sup>14</sup>, the life marked only by the Englished version of the saint's name - "Franceys" - translates and reorganizes Bonaventure's foundational *vita*. Listed among native saints, bookended by Oswald and Edward on one side and Alban and Wulfstan on the other, Francis's Middle English life takes on an even more anomalous tinge as if the saint himself were being made English through his first appearance in the language<sup>15</sup>. According to Cynthia Ho, this repatriation might suggest

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<sup>13</sup> As the E. Gordon Whatley's introduction to an excerpted version of the SEL Francis explains, Bonaventure interprets Francis's ability to communicate directly with animals as representative of the prelapsarian spiritual perfection achieved by the saint. (*The Life of Saint Francis in the South English Legendary (c. 1270-80): Introduction*. Ed. E. Gordon Whatley with Anne B. Thompson and Robert K. Upchurch. *TEAMS Middle English Texts*. University of Rochester and Medieval Institute Publications, n.d. Web. 23 December 2010. <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/whfrintro.htm>>)

<sup>14</sup> Although there is little question that Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* heavily influences the SEL, the tales and the shape of the collection do not seem to aim at reproducing or translating in a strict sense the source materials. The departures and novelties in the SEL have led some scholars to posit the use of additional sources, like breviaries, sermon cycles, or other vernacular texts intended to further lay instruction. While there is no reason to think that these types of popular instruction did not contribute to the SEL-poet's project, Anne Thompson makes a convincing point about the way that Voragine's narrative scope affects the quality of the SEL tales and their focus on the life, the living of the saint rather than his cultic or liturgical afterlives: "The weakening of the link between individual saint and local cult...is still more evident in the *Legenda Aurea*, whose saints hail from such widely separated horizons as Ireland and Egypt and which has no ties with a specific place. The consequences of this detachment were, I think, of considerable significance for the SEL, insofar as it offered a precedent for the foregrounding of hagiographical discourse without regard to its referent. SEL legends take their shape from the saints whose lives they narrate: a saint is born, has a life, and dies, and this underlying biographical curves subtends a formal aesthetic that shapes narrative according to a similar orderly curve." (Thompson, 122)

<sup>15</sup> As Cynthia Ho points out, this life is included in the earliest extant manuscript, MS Laud 108, and is contained in twelve other manuscripts. (Ho 83) For this

Franciscan authorship, or at least a poet attentive to the growing public relations crisis of Franciscans in fourteenth-century Britain. Francis in this version of his life becomes a mascot, a sign of the unity and orthodoxy of the order, and even a monolith, for the SEL has Francis integrate into every element of the life's narrative the order he would eventually found as a way to insist, however proleptically, on the inevitability of the Franciscan movement.<sup>16</sup> This reading of the life has the SEL-poet amplifying Bonaventure's attempts in the *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci* at justifying the order, but further, it dilates and foregrounds ideas of discipline and mastery. Not only are animals made to bend to the will of the saint, made a theater for the expression of the species hierarchy, but Francis himself is rendered an ecclesiastic tool, erasing any trace of original radicality or reform.

Indeed, the SEL-poet changes little of the source materials he selects for his translation. The tales that precede the notorious sermon to the little birds are illuminating in their contradictory representations of the saint's power and character. The account that comes immediately before the sermon describes Francis's struggle to quiet a flock of unruly birds – the SEL-poet seems especially interested in Francis's relationship with birds -- that have interrupted the

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reason, I will refer to the Francis legend printed in Horstmann edition of the *Early South English Legendary* for this discussion. References to this edition will be marked *ESEL*.

<sup>16</sup> Ho sees this colonization of the figure of Francis even in the SEL's narration of his birth which places Francis already numbered among the Friars Minor (84).

prayers of the saint and his brother. Though most birds that Francis met in his wanderings, “wilde foules, smale and grete,” recognized his saintly merits and “honoureden him i-nov<sup>3</sup>” (*ESEL*, l. 329), this lot just squawks away: “Po maden þis foules so gret noise : þat huy ne miȝhten noþing i-here.” (*ESEL*, l. 338). The racket so disturbs Francis that he chastises the congregation, demanding that they “chaungiez eouwer manere” (*ESEL*, l. 339) so that he may fit in his prayers. Predictably enough, the birds fall silent, setting up these episodes as markers of Francis’s command of nature. Not only does he encourage birds to sing in praise of their creator, but he also can manage the excitability of animals, keeping the myriad outdoor sounds from intruding too much into his devotions. This exchange with the birds enlarges Francis’s authority, and maybe even implies something about his managerial skills. It is one thing to control a cloister, another entirely to quell the obstreperousness of wild animals or mendicant friars.

To a certain extent, this example is just what we expect: animals in saints’ lives may challenge or annoy the saint, but they are easily understood and instructed by the holy figure. Bird voices are compressed into human voices. These animals indicate the direction of spiritual progress – this is the type of being into which humans might devolve without proper behavior. The love for animals

associated with Francis has more to do in these episodes with a distancing from the animal than a recognizing of it – a recognition acknowledged apologetically only through denial. There is no agency permitted the chattering birds, only chaos, emptiness (*pat huy ne mihten noping i-here*), static. And the SEL’s version of the sermon to the birds, slightly shorter than Bonaventure’s account, seems to repeat this pattern and to return to the same concerns. Yet, the SEL has Francis inform the passing birds of their good fortune, noting that God provided them with “much pruyte and ayse” (*ESEL*, 1. 358) since they “Delue ne diki ne þorue ʒe napur : ase manie Men moten do” [Neither delve nor dig as a result of the serpent as many men must do] (*ESEL*, 1. 360). This reference to digging and delving seems especially English, but it also reveals something about the SEL-poet’s interest in the place of animals in hagiographic narrative. Here the poet goes out of his way to avoid the anthropomorphizing implications of the original lecture. These birds are distinguished from their toiling human counterparts, and the birds enjoy a “pruyte,” a privacy that seems poised to acknowledge the bird as other. Not as reformable other, but rather possessed of a private space that ought to be protected from and perhaps even imitated by human animals. If Francis’s followers are meant to see themselves in this homily, the intimation is that the monk ought to become more like the animal, not the reverse.

Once the creatures find an entry into Francis's life, the SEL-poet cannot help but let them take it over. It is as if Francis's earlier life, at least the poetic representation of it, finds its truest expression in the animal encounters. Although the animal narratives in Francis's life do tend on the surface to repeat a dominion motif, their clustering, their strange violences, and their contiguity with the stigmata experience belie a simple replication of Bonaventure's *Legenda* or an intensification of it. One such violence sets up both Francis's love of animals, lambs in particular, and further overturns the mastery theme of the saint's encounters with birds:

In þe Abbeye of seint verecunde : a ʒoung lomb he founde,  
A souwe a-strangli it a-non : and fret it in a stounde.  
Seint Fraunceis stod and bi-heold : "A-mong alle bestes," he  
seide,  
"A-corsed þou beo, lufere souwe : þat dudest þis lufere dede...  
(*ESEL*, ll. 302-305)

[In the Abbey of Saint Verecundus he found a young lamb/A sow was strangling it anon and devouring it at this time./Saint Francis stood and beheld, saying, "Among all beasts/may you be cursed, hateful sow, that would do this horrible deed...]

This tale as a whole sets up Francis's love of lambs in particular, which proves less about his power than about the extension of his faith, since Christian iconography informs even his everyday likes and dislikes. Although Francis is indeed able to save the lamb and curse the sow, preserving the model of mastery advanced in the bird tales, this encounter is different from the others. These encounters with

animals participate in a world that does not belong to or right away obey Francis and his wishes. Bewildering violence takes place in this animal world, and this exceptional violence intrudes even on the Abbey of Verecundus. There is something unnatural and willful in both this intrusion and the sow's action. The sow might bite or trample the poor, little lamb, but how could a pig strangle (*a-strangli*) anything? The curse that Francis puts on the pig also sets this example apart from the others. Instead of instructing the sow in proper farmyard behavior or the righteous restraint, Francis wishes disease and destruction on the creature:

“Pat þi lijf beo schort and strong : and þi dethþ beo strong al-so,  
And þat no þing ne ete of þi flesch : ʒwane þou ert of liue i-do!”  
Po bi-gan þe souwe a-non : ase he þis word seide,  
To beo ful of schabbe and of buyles : and of oþur wrechhede  
(*ESEL*, ll.306-309)

[May your life be short and grievous, and your death also terrible/And may no thing eat of your flesh when you are undone of life!/As he said these words then the sow right away began/To be full of scabs and boils and of other wretchedness]

The emphasis here shifts to the *beste's* life and death, which will essentially be the same thing. (And indeed, the sow dies three days later.) Francis's oath reaffirms his power, but in this episode there is nothing instructive or productive that comes of the saint's ability to speak his desires into being. More than anything Francis becomes enmeshed in the aggression and decay of the original scene; he even repeats its logic by sacrificing the sow in place of the saved lamb,

which suggests that there are some practices in the natural world that even Francis cannot overrule.

But a painful, scabby death is not the only blight Francis calls down on the sow, he also mandates that the sow should die for nothing as “þat no þing ne ete of þi flesh.” Not even scavenger birds will touch the sow’s carcass after death: “And fur-rotede and stonk foule i-nov3. : no best þat it i-sei3,/ Rauon ne pie no oþur foul : nolde enes come þare-nei3” [And (it) thoroughly rotted and stunk foully enough that no beast that saw it/Neither raven nor magpie nor other bird would come close at all] (*ESEL*, ll. 312-3). Removing the sow from the agricultural economy clearly insists upon the irredeemable, *lupere* nature of this particular beast. It also attaches this episode with questions other than the influence of human will, bringing up problems of food, consumption, and husbandry. Suggesting that it is a shameful thing for the sow to be denied the opportunity to serve as food implies that sow, and other farm-raised animals, are complicit in their slaughter, that they may even find honor and purpose in such a demise, which in some way posits that animal lives participate in human lives in a kind of communal agreement. Francis’s injunction also insinuates that some animals are too immoral to be eaten, that whoever might consume a sow like this one could be contaminated with its criminality. This is certainly not a new idea but one that

grows out of and perhaps also encourages a more constant awareness of the animal world.

The food issue foregrounds the human propensity to view animals as food uncritically or at least paradoxically. Derrida suggests in his lectures, “The Animal that Therefore I Am” (*L’animal que donc je suis [à suivre]*) that the eating, the ritual slaughter and consumption, of animals serves as a cultural bedrock and turning point, distinguishing the human from the animal, setting the human outside of natural practices and also above these habits. Despite the Edenic directive to eat only things that grow in the earth, Derrida reminds us that after the Fall:

Abel will have himself preferred by God by offering up to him the sacrifices of a husbandman, whereas poor Cain remains a sedentary cultivator. Finally, Cain had been more faithful to God’s arch-primary commandment, and the whole history, that is to say, the fault and criminality that install historicity, is linked to God’s preferences for Abel’s animal offering...<sup>17</sup>

But this choice of flesh over grain is indisputably problematic in its arbitrariness, its silences, and its contradictions. As David Wood points out in his brief discussion of this “culture...of fault and sacrifice” identified by Derrida, “We may surmise that the (external) animal we eat stands in for the (internal) animal we must overcome.

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. 111.

And by eating, of course, we internalize it!”<sup>18</sup> This bind, the uncanny animal that we attempt to master but instead become more and more attached to, is staged in the SEL’s life of Francis, in a moment when Francis’s identity as a nature-lover is in jeopardy. More importantly, Francis’s curse reminds that in one way or another, in the neighborhood or at the table, animals are an undeniable part of the human body. How can we say we are not animal when their bodies become ours? When we prey on animals the way they prey on each other? As in the account of Francis and the sow, the place of food, and correspondingly the power of hunger, of appetite, repeatedly emerges in tales of holy animals. Animals that eat other animals, animals that eat too much (but then learn quickly to give up this trait), domestic animals that mistakenly become food for another human, typically an uninitiated passer-by, crowd these narratives.<sup>19</sup> Each of

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<sup>18</sup> Wood, David. “Thinking with Cats.” *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*. Ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton. London: Continuum, 2004. 139.

<sup>19</sup> The stories, like those of Bartholomew of Farne whose pet bird is gulped down by a hawk, Godric of Finchale who corrects a tree-destroying deer, or Saint Moling, a seventh-century Irish prince and bishop, question uncritical swallowing and highlight the animal within metaphorically and literally. In the latter episode, a priest is visited by a bird with a fly in its beak. While the bird was enjoying its meal, a cat attacks and kills the bird. Moved to pity, Moling orders the cat to spit out the bird, but discovers the wren did not survive the assault. It is expelled from the cat “half-eaten” (*semicomestam*). Moling revives the bird in a particularly graphic and spectacular way: “The holy priest made the sign of the cross over the bird’s corpse and it rose up alive and well, still stained with its own blood. The saint then commanded it to disgorge before him the fly which it had swallowed, and the little bird immediately disgorged the fly from its stomach like a tiny piece of dung. The holy man blessed this monstrous little lump, and thereupon the fly got up, healthy as ever, and flew around buzzing. The bird flew back to her own kind, chirping happily.” (David Bell, *Wholly Animals: A Book of Beastly Tales*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992: 96). Although the fly, wren, and cat do not do

these narrative excesses identifies the process of consumption as violent and polluted. This focus on hunger is also interesting because it implies a shared desire, a point of connection between non-human animals and human animals. We all get hungry after all. And sometimes we act in unexpected ways under the influence of such a powerful desire.

It is likewise significant that Francis's reception of the stigmata is tucked into these accounts. Wedged between the sermon to the birds and the story of a "swyþe strong qualm of orue," a livestock plague, (*ESEL*, ll. 418ff) which was cured by springwater used by Francis to wash his stigmatized hands, this sequencing seems to intend to preserve the chronology of the life, but it also aligns this "schewingue and Ansauple" (*ESEL*, l. 401) of Francis's body with the strangeness of animals that suddenly understand and obey the saint's preaching. Receiving the stigmata obviously places Francis in a special category of saints, an "exceptional being" as Cynthia Ho claims<sup>20</sup>, who has more in common with the seraph who heralds the arrival of the stigmatic marks than with other human beings. As

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anything out of the ordinary in this account, the narration is punctuated with excesses: the still-stained bird, the fly as bit of reeking dung (quasi fimi particulam), the recurring, almost rhythmic, vomiting. Moling does not participate in the chain of ingestion which perhaps sets human food choices apart from the instinctual eating of animals. Or, Moling's compassion mixed with horror may gesture at the possibility of attentiveness to both the animal world and the ways in which humans partake of it. (For the full Latin life of Moling, see Charles Plummer's *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae: Partim Hactenus Ineditae*. Oxonii: E typographeo Clarendoniano, 1910. )

<sup>20</sup> Ho 87.

Francis is opened up to an alternative kind of relationship with animals so his body is opened by the stigmata to new concerns, which the SEL life draws attention to lingeringly describing the swelling of his hands and the persistent bleeding of his wounds: “And þe woundene ornen ofte a-blode : and nameliche of is side,/ And bi-bledde is cuyrtel ofte : and is briech al-so;/ he carede mucche hou he miȝhte : stilleliche it a-wei do” [And the wounds ran often with blood and particularly the wound on his side/And it often bled through his habit and his britches also/He worried quite a bit how he might silently do away with (the bleeding)] (*ESEL*, ll. 415-417). In fact, the SEL relates Francis’s reception of the stigmata warily, intimating that the saint’s wounds emerge from within as a product of intense prayer and meditation. Although this altered view of the miracle subtracts divine contact, it does not, in my estimation, “de-radicalize” the scenario. Attaching the stigmata to the physical world, to bodily somatics and to the real life effects – bloodstains and embarrassment – seems radical enough. Moreover, the context of this episode coupled with the interest in its mundane causes and consequences adjoins the animal world, conceptually and poetically, to the world of revelation and miracle.

The SEL-poet’s willingness to look into the opened up body of Francis, to expose the saint’s life to the influence of animal lives, to the fullness of animal beings that are not deployed as props or projections

might emerge from and certainly informs the idea of a legendary collective. Thompson explains that, although hagiographic materials are often judged harshly for their debts to convention which amounts to repetition of similar plots and of miraculous acts in the lives of individual saints, these overlaps have long been defended by hagiographers as representative of a larger point about sanctity: “So let no one be disturbed even if these miracles were performed by any other of the holy saints, since the holy Apostle, through the mystery of the limbs of a single body, which he compares to the living experience of the saints, concludes that we are all ‘members one of another.’”<sup>21</sup> This justification, made by an anonymous English author of the life of Gregory the Great, does more than excuse poetic borrowings or lethargy; it imagines a saintly pastiche and a living being that does not recognize the limits of the body. To insist that the “mystery of the limbs of a single body,” that is the coincidence of the Church and Christ, compares to the lived, vital experience of saints posits an animate body that exceeds dogma and metaphor. With this in mind, the legendary itself becomes an avatar of this saintly patchwork, suggesting that jumble of saints and objects in the *South English Legendary* enjoy a corporate status. This texty body points out to the collective and communal impulses ever present in the SEL and out to the assemblages that constitute the saints’ powers and presences. No

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<sup>21</sup> Qtd. in Thompson 13.

life is an island in the SEL. This interdependence and the SEL's inclusion of animals into many of its lives suggest that non-saint animals are a part of this body, and perhaps a part of the saint's own body. As we see in the Francis life, animals not only have a space in the narrative, but Francis, as an exceptional being, may even be counted among them. However invested in the foundations of Franciscan practices the Middle English life of Francis may be, the SEL-poet cannot give the saint fully to the ranks of masters, the oppressors. By affiliating Francis in body with something not quite human and by focusing on the saint's thwarted attempts at full dominion over the animals he encounters, the SEL-poet extends these animal stories beyond exemplifying discipline to tell us something less about mastery and more about discovery, to posit a new way to look at the relationship between human and non-human, and even at the non-human in the human.

### ***Doves, Cows, & Bodies of Authority***

In the *Vita sancti Kenelmi. Regis*, the SEL-poet goes further by casting the animal not simply as strange or wondrous but an active participant in community living and even in the foundations of these communities. The narrative and figure of Kenelm in his Middle English life (with a Latin title) reverse the logic of the record of Francis's deeds. Instead of the saint's displaying foundational and

masterful authority, Kenelm's presence becomes energetic in its submission, and instead of the saint's serving to redirect or amend animal behavior, the animals and animal references of the Kenelm legend provide the corrective at local, national, and spiritual levels. Like the other narratives in which animals figure prominently, Kenelm's legend strays almost immediately from strict hagiographic convention. The SEL-poet seems positively unconstrained by form in this *vita*, even shifting occasionally into the first person. The saint himself, a seven-year-old Mercian king, continually drifts off stage, rendering the story almost always about someone or something else. In the Latin *Vita*<sup>22</sup> upon which the life found in the *SEL* is presumed to be based, Kenelm enjoys the spotlight throughout the narrative, while in the vernacular version, the saint is announced in the opening lines as the legend's subject only to be replaced immediately by a protracted catalogue, spanning roughly 75 lines, of geographical, topographical, political, and ecclesiastical information<sup>23</sup>. Near the mid-point of the

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<sup>22</sup> *Vita et Miracula sancti Kenelmi*, ed. R. Love, *Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Latin Saints' Lives* (Oxford, 1996): 74-5.19. All subsequent citations of the Latin Life of Kenelm will refer to this edition and will be cited by page and paragraph number.

<sup>23</sup>As Paul Hayward points out in an article that primarily examines the Latin lives of English children saints, "The Idea of Innocent Martyrdom in the late Tenth- and Eleventh-Century English Hagiology" [*Studies in Church History* 30, (1993): 83], narratives that center on young, holy victims of the villainy of others typically circulated orally before being formally committed to writing. In the case of Kenelm, this kind of genesis appears most likely since there is little historical evidence to support a son by his name of King Coenwulf. Rosalind Love concludes that based on the absence of any mention of a young Kenelm in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* "the events described by the Life of St Kenelm must be regarded as very largely fictitious." ["St Kenelm of Winchcombe and *Vita et Miracula sancti Kenelmi*," *Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Latin Saints' Lives* [Oxford, 1996]: xci-xcii.] The numerous folkloric

legend, Kenelm has been entirely forgotten after his own sister has ordered his murder. The queen/murderess enforces a strict silence with regard to Kenelm, not allowing any Mercian residents to mention the disappeared king or even to remember him, to give him a second thought. After a certain amount of time, a white cow belonging to a local widow begins to frequent Kenelm's secret burial location. Forsaking meals with the rest of the livestock, this cow would hurry to spend its day sitting upon Kenelm's unmarked grave. Notwithstanding lack of sustenance, this cow returned home each evening "fair and rond" and "swyþe Mielch al-so" [heavy with milk] (227-228). This wonder, however, remains only partially realized in the narrative, since the local residents acknowledge the cow's excessive milk production as an inexplicable event – "heo ne miȝten i-wite noþing;/bote in heore heorte huy onder-stoden : þat it was sum tokning" (235-6) – but cannot determine what the token signifies. Dramatic irony abounds here, for the narrative's reader who has been privy to saint's martyrdom appreciates Kenelm's fertile presence and, perhaps more importantly, begins to associate the saint with the animal. Further, this scene stages the limitations of both human law and conditions of knowledge. The wily cow initiates the textual, and social, movement by which the queen's censorship of the public discourse will be

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motifs that appear in the Kenelm legend lead Cubitt to the same conclusion ("Sites and sanctity: revisiting the cult of murdered and martyred Anglo-Saxon royal saints," 74).

subverted. In this legend, the cow does more than point out the intrusion of the miraculous or the divine in phenomenal life and more than suggest that animal bodies suffer in ways similar to human animal bodies; it draws attention to, even corrects, the blindness of the people of Mercia. As the legendarist illustrates, the Mercian citizens tacitly endorse Quendrid's tyranny by permitting their memories to be controlled by her decrees:

Þane no man nolde, þat witti was : of him þenchen ene,  
Ore louerd nolde nouȝt þat he were : allingues for-ȝite so clene;  
Ȝwane no man, þat witti was : of him ne hadde muynde,  
A doumb best, þat is with-oute witte : hadde, a-ȝein kuynde.  
(213-216)

[When no man who was smart think of him at all/Our Lord did not will that he would be so wholly and cleanly forgotten;/When no man who was prudent had him in mind,/A dumb beast that is without reason had him in mind against his beastly nature.]

Repeating the failures of the “witty” or sagacious men underlines the complicity of the populace in Kenelm's obscurity, yet this repetition also manifests the universal terrain of this royal saint since “witti” typically connotes not a learned intelligence, but rather a practical or natural wisdom<sup>24</sup>. It is not the erudite or the nobility who inherit the cult of the saint, but any human endowed with natural intelligence. Indeed, the unrestrained force of human law handed down from Kenelm's own ranks deserves the blame for the perversion of the natural human faculties, a corruption that seems to necessitate a

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<sup>24</sup> The first four entries in the MED for “witti” define the word in this way.

complex reassertion of the vitality of creation by way of the “*doumb best*.”

This beast is embedded in economies less epistemological, too. Unlike the birds, wolves, and giant fishes of other tales, the white cow that discovers Kenelm’s burial place is directly connected as a domestic animal to human practices and needs. The cow’s role in the establishment of Kenelm’s cult and veneration underscores the working relationship that human animals have forged with nonhuman animals, but also marks it as revisable, suggesting in this case a connection that goes well beyond need. Although the cow might be seen as willfully breaching its contract by leaving the herd and refusing to eat, it does not manage to remove itself entirely from its alimentary obligations given its constant milk supply. The animal’s surprising method of survival (and production), as well as its way of being, reiterates concerns about agency, both beastly and saintly. Not only is the cow moved to behave in ways not entirely inspired by its own desires, which is not so terribly different, one imagines, from the typical experience of livestock, but the *doumb best*’s silence, its inability to voice the reasons for its habits, produce the episode’s mystery and frustration, limiting in turn the knowledge and actions of the residents of Clent. In the legend, both the cow and the boy saint mark out a boundary, a limit to human understanding while also

representing in a mutual gesture the vitality of this border zone.

Moreover, even though the cow has become more useful, more productive than ever, it cannot be persuaded to give up its antics or to give up the secret it intuits.

Similarly, the miracle that restores Kenelm's name to human memory first confounds (super-)human intellect and then finds resolution through subversion, this time of a pope. The second spectacle dramatizes a more conspicuous fissure than do the habits of the cow for it interrupts the pope in the middle of a mass with a dove's delivery of a "lite writ" (254) upon the high altar in Saint Peter's Church. When the pope tries to read this sacred missive, however, he is rendered speechless:

he nuste 3wat it was to segge : ne non in-si3t he ne coupe i-  
wite—  
For he ne coupe englisch non : and on englis it was i-write.  
he liet cleopie eche-manere men : of eche diuerse londe,  
3if any covpe of þis holie writ : Ani-þing onder-stonde.  
þo weren þare men of Engelonde : þat wusten 3wat it sede,  
And onder-stoden wel þat writ : þo heo i-heorden it rede. (253-  
258)

[He did not know what it meant to say, nor no other insight could he bring to it/For he did not know English and in English it was written./He allowed to be called men of every manner from each diverse land,/to see if any of them could understand anything in this holy writing./Then there were men of England there who knew what it said,/And understood well that writing when they heard it read.]

This artifact presents a robust challenge to the scope of cognition insofar as the infallible human center of the Church proves incapable

of deciphering a divine sign; yet, unlike the Mercian natives, the pope and his congregation are not content to chalk up the sign as a mystery. Luckily, there are “men of Englonde” attending mass that day who alleviate the baffled pope’s distress. In a moment of destabilized mastery, the pope’s confusion shakes the supposedly unwavering papal authority and parallels another incidence of pontifical undoing that occurs in the SEL’s version of the life of Saint Hilary of Poitiers. In the latter, the pope who is about to reprimand, perhaps even publicly embarrass and disempower, the dissenting Hilary dies during a sudden bout of dysentery.<sup>25</sup> Both episodes represent institutional fault lines, chinks in the armor of the papacy, with a bold irreverence, and taken together, these events underscore the SEL’s commitment to questioning the inevitability of power. If the pope’s guts might spill out with no warning, then what kind of body is the papal body? If he is ignorant of a vernacular so close at hand, how universal is his reach? These disturbances in Rome also dramatize the living being in especially vulnerable moments – in the “wardrobe,” the privy, for Hilary’s pope and in a related moment of incapacity for Kenelm’s. These popes have bodies and minds that betray them, and

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<sup>25</sup> In a detailed interrogation of this life, Anne Thompson claims that the Hilary legend exemplifies the narrative and political acumen of the SEL-poet, foregrounding the studied choices about the interest he embeds in the lives and the suggestiveness of the social reversals he stages. (Thompson 7-12) For the pope’s shocking death, see ll. 59-72 in the Hilary legend.

for a time, escape their historicity, their ranks in the rosters of Saint Peter's to become in their weaknesses living beings.

Moreover, animal beings help to expose these vitalities and knit together the miraculous puzzles in Kenelm's life as well as to point up the subversiveness of the vernacular intrusion. The heavenly, disordering missive appears to operate on a nationalistic level, suggesting something to the effect of "God speaks English." And delivering the message by way of a dove – a "coluere, ʒwiʒt so ani snow" [a dove as white as any snow] (l. 247) – rather than an angel or some other human figure insists on the naturalness of the vernacular and by extension the unnaturalness of the papal court. Yet, while the message gestures at the primacy of the English language or vernaculars in general, it also associates this speech with animality. A heavenly animal, to be sure, but a being without a comprehensible voice whose effects, like the antics of the cow back in Clent, do more to bewilder than to communicate<sup>26</sup>. Still, the reciprocal quality of the

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<sup>26</sup> My attention to the possibility of animal voice and its association with a textual entity was inspired by a short article by Karl Steel in which he studies the animal voices – the cries, in particular – recorded in a work that imagines the apocalyptic end of the world: "15 Signs of the Last Days." Steel encourages, as he claims the text itself does, an attempt at hearing the voices of animals: "But the animals will not have cried out in vain, if we attend to the incomprehensibility of animal speech, not as a lacuna in the tradition's explanatory capability, but rather as a gap deliberately left open, a space that has not been stuffed with human meaning. These noisy animals appear in texts written by humans, for humans, in a genre about the end of the world that is primarily a genre about the preliminaries to a specifically human future. Nonetheless, the genre represents animals, and does so while simultaneously representing the inability of any human representation or understanding to represent animals *completely*. This deliberate representation of the ultimate unfathomability of animals to human understanding breaks sharply with the

two animal miracles posits a mode of sanctity, or of understanding holiness, that is both animal and literary, illegible and decipherable.

Digging up Kenelm's body adds human vitality back into the mix, and the result of this combination is a kind of violent, even explosive, potency.<sup>27</sup> The enduring images from Kenelm's life, however, lean toward the illegible. The stumping of the Pope and the scramble of his men to translate the heavenly letter as much to make sense of this evidently significant event as to salvage the Pope's superiority proves a more lasting image than even the unearthing of Kenelm. And the several animals that surround Kenelm – for, in addition to the fateful cow, there is the dove into which Kenelm's soul transforms at the moment of his beheading, the dove that later delivers the mystifying letter to Rome, and even Kenelm's nurse named *Wolvene* seems to have some link to the animal world – assume more

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anthropocentrism of nearly all medieval engagements with animals, where they appear for humans almost always as interpretable signs: paradigmatically, in the bestiaries, or in Hexamer commentaries, encyclopedias, or heraldry. In this case, however, animals appear while simultaneously thwarting the signifying utility humans might seek to derive from them" ("Woofing and Weeping with animals in the last days," *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* (2010) 1, 190). Similarly, the heavenly letter in the story of Kenelm's re-discovery confounds, at least for a time, human and even papal comprehension, and this challenging text is associated with a mysteriously animal/divine messenger. Although the author of the letter is not an animal, it is non-human and mystifying.

<sup>27</sup> In the final lines of the legend, at the same moment that Kenelm's body is being translated to the abbey at Winchcombe, the saint's thuggish sister, Quendrid schemes herself to death. Catching sight of the procession which bears her brother, Quendrid again turns "witles" by her proximity to Kenelm and endeavors to curse him by reading from the book of Psalms<sup>27</sup>. Quendrid's body is undone when her malice rebounds on her, causing her eyes to fall from her head onto the Psalter: "For riȝt ase heo þat vers radde : out-borsten boþe hire eiȝe/ And fullen a-down op-on hire sauter : ase manie men i-seiȝe." (ll. 348-349) After this graphic injury, the queen quickly dies, and the vernacular life concludes by recording the nasty treatment her body receives, tossed into the "fouleste" ditch the people could find.

importance in the narrative than does any examination of the seven-year-old's claim to piety. These animal imprints not only imply that in the saint's life there is a space enough to represent a range of living beings, or to explore the energy of life itself, but also that these animal entities participate in the disarticulation and constitution of holy selves and holy writs as well as national and linguistic identities.

### ***Where the Wild Things Are***

In the legends of Francis and Kenelm, animals are not just for food, for pedagogy or allegory, for work or burden. As I have argued, the stories of animals in the *South English Legendary* do occasionally propose uncommon relationships between animals and humans, and these connections tend to hinge on the surprising ways that animals show both the limits of saintly dominance and the seemingly limitless human appetite for dominion. In other legends, the focus is less on phenomenal mastery and more on imaginative possibilities. Animals in the lives of Saint Brendan and Saint Cuthbert, for example, not only eschew the shepherding and utilitarian impulses of the humans that stumble upon them, but even manage to act on humans. In certain legends, animal metaphors and animal encounters go where humans fear to tread and draw the human animal – usually the saintly variety

– beyond the boundaries of human communities into spaces where rules and beings take unexpected forms.

Animals have traditionally patrolled and crossed boundaries both literal and conceptual. As David Wood notes, “Many animals are symbolically deployed as boundary negotiating operators, servants themselves, that is, of *an* abyss...Coyote, fox, spider, cat, jackal, jaguar – have all been given this work to do – educating men, bringing fire, mediating the transition between life and death, etc.”<sup>28</sup> Animals in Kenelm, it seems to me, also move in this direction, cruising along even national boundaries, working as translators – or presenting the opportunity for an act of translation – , guiding the foreign into remote locations, and operating as a visible link to history and to the sacred. But these animals do not impart without a remainder; the animals in Kenelm’s life are not simply tools or fetches that are entirely used up in the act of pointing out. Different from the ephemeral panther who visits in dream or vision, the animals in the *SEL* combine the mystical crossings of the “boundary negotiator” with the presence of the “proximate strangers” that Jeffrey Jerome Cohen finds in Middle English poetry<sup>29</sup>, animals that share our domestic spaces but remain separate from human family structures and occasionally reveal their

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<sup>28</sup> Animal Philosophy, 138.

<sup>29</sup> Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. “Inventing with Animals in the Middle Ages.” *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008. 41.

alien nature as alien. This strangeness is inviting and at times penetrating in the *SEL*; in the far-flung life of Saint Brendan, it opens up new ways to understand history and vitality, the stuff of life.

Straddling the genres of hagiography and travel narrative, the *SEL*'s *Vita sancti Brendani, Abbatis de Hybernia*, the Life of Saint Brendan, Abbot of Hibernia, is unsurprisingly concerned with borders and boundaries geographical, narrative, spiritual, and, as we shall see, species. Critically neglected, perhaps because of its relative faithfulness to its sources, the *SEL*'s life of Brendan extends the legendary's interest in disrupting narratives of mastery. It also introduces into the space of the life a world where animals participate, organize, and even dominate, an ecosystem just beyond the horizon of strange-looking and strangely behaving creatures. Or perhaps it is more accurate to imagine the narrative life being brought out to these animals which then find places in this form. The Brendan story immediately departs from a pure hagiographic form to produce this travelogue. Hearing tales of other monks' journeys, Brendan resolves to travel to the "lond of biheste" (76), the promised land, an earthly paradise, bejeweled and mysterious, which may be the original site of Eden<sup>30</sup>. The voyage is lengthy (as is the narrative – 740 lines) and difficult to track. Not only are the abbot and his companions charting

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<sup>30</sup> 3if Adam a-3ein godes heste : ne hadde no-þing mis-do/here-Inne he hadde 3uyt i-beo : and is of-sprung al-so. (65-66)

unknown – and unreal – territories, but the travelers also seem compelled to keep moving. Pauses in the activity do not often translate to breaks in the narrative's action, and adventures pile up. And although Brendan claims to be searching for that Edenic island, the voyage becomes more cyclical, with the band of monks returning to particular locations and creatures each year following the liturgical calendar, than teleological. The narrative spirals before it reaches its object and gestures at a marvelous, chaotic world out there but does not seem ready to visit or even imagine it.

Despite the controlled progress of Brendan's expedition, the tale offers spectacles enough, especially of the animal variety. A canine messenger welcomes the crew at their first stop; an island of giant, visibly healthy sheep impress the party with their brilliance and joy; a choir of birds constitutes a "foweles parays" (150); Brendan's boat is chased by a giant fish, foaming at the mouth, but is saved when another fish rises up from the west and smashes into three pieces the aggressor. Many of the animals stumbled upon by Brendan fit into the hagiographic auspices of the life as exemplars of their species, polished and good, living out an earthly reward that entails either consensual service to kind, human masters or performing to the best of their beastly abilities in praise of their creator. In the section of the legend that precedes Brendan's arrival at the paradise island, however,

the animals and other discoveries turn darker and more belligerent, presenting the travelers with trials and frights as a way it seems to prepare them for a vision of perfection. One episode stands out because it does not fit either model – the encounter with Iastoni, or Iasconius. In the tale, Brendan’s companions mistake a giant fish for an island:

Pis monekes wende vp to þis yle : ac seint brendan noʒt.  
 Pis monekes gonne makie here mete : of þat hi hadde  
 ibroʒt  
 hi makede fur & soden hem fisch : in a caudroun faste.  
 Er þis fisch were isode : somdel hi were agaste :  
 For þo þis fur was þurf-hot : þe yle quakede anon  
 & wiþ gret eir hupte al vp— : þis monekes dradde echon,  
 & þe wei toward hor schip : ech after oþer nom,  
 God leuest hem þoʒte he was : þat sonest þuder com.  
 hi bihulde hou þe yle : in þe see wende faste  
 & as a quic þing hupte vp & doun : & þat fur fram him  
 caste;  
 he suam more þan twei myle : while þis fur ilaste. (159-  
 169)

[These monks approached the island, but not Saint Brendan/The monks planned to prepare their meat which they had brought/They made a fire and quickly boiled their fish in a cauldron./Before the fish was boiled suddenly the monks were aghast/For when the fire was very hot, the isle started to quake/ And a shot went up with a great burst of air – each of the monks was terrified/ And they ran toward their ship, each taking off after the other/Loved by God he thought he was who first arrived there./They beheld how the island sunk quickly into the sea/ And with a shake the thing hopped up and down and cast the fire from his back/ he swam more than two miles while this fire lasted.]

The monks’ naïve project, driven by hunger, and their subsequent, frightened scurrying back to the boat combined with the fish’s showy and jerky gestures – thrashing (*hupte*) around in an effort to put out

the fire on its back -- distinguishes this incident from other encounters with exceptional animals, marking it with a comic, even slapstick, tone. It is a kind of ancient whale watch gone very wrong. Yet, the misjudgment made by Brendan's cohort, but notably *not* by the saint himself, seems more than a silly mistake. That the monks treat this fish as part of the landscape insists on the limits of human perception and, more specifically, the potential inadequacies in our judgments of nonhuman animals. The scene, both as comedy and exemplum, hinges on these limits, on the unexpected. Earth and beast intermingle here: an island could with a rumble turn into an animal<sup>31</sup>. The monks' "dradde" comes not only from their fear of being plunged into the ocean, but also from the shock of this metamorphosis, shock at the vitality of this nonhuman entity. Even after the island begins to quake, the monks do not comprehend the quality of their dinner spot. "[H]i bihulde hou þe yle : in þe see wende faste": it is an island that seems to be sinking into the sea, not a burning fish. Only after Brendan explains the fish's history do the monks begin to grasp this sighting:

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<sup>31</sup> In a variety of bestiaries, whales are said to masquerade as islands and to drag unsuspecting sailors to their deaths, a practice that is read as a parallel of the devil's capacity for temptation and destruction. The Middle English life of Brendan departs from this interpretation, however, and suggests not that the fish has erred, in fact the monks ought to respect Iasconius for his lifespan, but rather that the travellers have. See the online encyclopedia, "The Medieval Bestiary" for a collection of bestiary entries (David Badke. "Whale." *The Medieval Bestiary: Animals in the Middle Ages*. N.p., 2011. Web. 24 June 2011.)

Þe monekes iseȝe þe fur wel longe : & were sore agaste :  
 hi cride ȝurne on seint brendan : what þe wonder were.  
 "Beoþ stille," quap þis gode man : "for noȝt ȝe nabbe fere.  
 ȝe wenep þat hit beo an yle : ac ȝe þencheþ amis :  
 hit is a fisch of þis grete see : þe gretteste þat þer is.  
 Iastoni he is icleped : & fondeþ niȝt & dai  
 To pulte his tail in his mouþ : ac for gretnisse he nemai."  
 (170-76)

[The monks saw the fire for a long time and were sorely aghast/they cried desperately to Saint Brendan to explain what the wonder was./“Be still,” said this good man, “for you have nothing to fear./ You guessed that it was an island but you thought wrong/It is a fish of this great sea, the greatest that there is./Iastoni he is called and he attempts night and day/To put his tail in his mouth but for his greatness he may not.”]

It is the fire -- Þe monekes iseȝe þe fur wel longe – that they watch disappearing over the horizon before Brendan reveals, rather enigmatically, the true identity of their harbor. Brendan intends to assuage his comrades’ panic by clarifying that it is not an island that has heaved out of sight, but instead a fish, the biggest in the ocean. Perhaps he means to imply that land is still constant and secure, but the idea that giant animals can masquerade as terra firma seems equally disquieting and may account for the monks’ silence following Brendan’s disclosure.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In the Latin original of this tale, the fish is not simply the “gretteste,” but “the first of all who swim in the ocean”. This primacy suggests both that Iastoni/Iasconius is a leader among fishes (whatever that could mean) and that it may be the original fish created by God. It also intensifies the travelers’ misapprehension. Misreading any old island-looking fish is one thing, but not recognizing the original fish might have epistemological and devotional consequences. If the monks cannot spot a being so intimate with creation, so connected to the inauguration of life, how can their judgments and assumptions about other beings be trusted? For the Latin life of Brendan, see *Navigatio sancti brendani abbatis*, ed. C. Selmer (Notre Dame, 1959) 20-21.

Giving these rattled monks the benefit of the doubt, the account does seem at least to question how the presence of organic beings can be reliably detected, and it awakens a doubt about the human capacity to discriminate between living being and inert matter. It disrupts the usual boundary between animal and geographical bodies. After all, the giant fish does for a short while serve as an island; the misprision is not an entirely visual one for the sailors, like seeing mermaids where there are manatees. Instead, the episode seems to posit a “possible body”<sup>33</sup>, an animal-geological hybrid. Yet, this monstrous body becomes somewhat tamed, treated as a familiar figure or even a pet by being named, rendering the fish at once terribly alien and intimately known.

This encounter with Iastoni does operate at a symbolic level, too, since this peculiar fish is attached to forms of knowledge, history, and vitality that remain foreign to the human observer (or dinner party). As the oldest fish in the sea and one of earth’s original creatures, Iastoni embodies a long history. His great size and his lumbering motion confirm this attachment: it is as if earthly, creaturely history coheres to his body like barnacles. This history is unfamiliar to the monks, perhaps finally unfathomable for them and

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<sup>33</sup> As Cohen claims, “[a]nimals...offered ‘possible bodies’ to the Dreamers of the Middle Ages, forms both dynamic and disruptive through which might be dreamt alternate and even inhuman worlds” (Cohen, “Inventing with Animals in the Middle Ages,” 40). For more on Cohen’s possible bodies, see his *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xi-xxiii.

resistant to them, implying a form of historical narrative outside the chronicle and the records kept by humans. Furthermore, the fish's habit, attempting to reach his tail with his mouth, seems to insist on the continuity of this alternate history. Brendan does not explain this inclination – nor does he, in the *SEL* version of the encounter describe how he knows so much about Iastoni – but the gesture recalls Ouroboros symbols of snakes or dragons biting their own tails, symbols of the cycle and repetition. That Iastoni cannot achieve this desire seems to indicate that his history, which charts the starting point and continues to live through his creaturely vitality, advances.

The shock, the moment of surprise and disbelief that these “wonders” provoke may return the reader and the voyaging monks to the idea that every sort of possibility may find a place in world's diversity and perhaps also in the capaciousness of the legendary. This shock further destabilizes the symbolic register of Iastoni, focusing on the giant fish as animal. Cohen contends, “As living, moving beings not well inclined to the stasis required by epistemological systems, animals are at best imperfect allegories...This inherent instability affects (indeed, infects) the human as much as the beast.”<sup>34</sup> Not only does Iastoni move, but he also suffers visibly as a result of the voyagers' recklessness. As he swims off into the horizon, it is the animal we see, not the symbol.

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<sup>34</sup> Cohen, “Inventing Animals in the Middle Ages,” 52.

The strange career of Iastoni seems to map a space in the saint's life for other living beings, fixing our attention on a vitality that may be shocking in its sharedness. Writing animal lives into the saint's life moves the genre away from a conventional understanding of the saint and moves the narrative – and often the saint or his fellows – out of spaces where life is imagined as purely anthropocentric. Like the encounters in the life of Brendan, the SEL's *Vita sancti Eadmundi regis* includes animals that seem to delineate psychic and metaphorical spaces where the non-human animal and human animal touch. Also like Brendan's life, Edmund's strays nearly immediately from a strictly hagiographic tone. Aside from mentioning that Edmund was a "holie kyng" (1), the life eschews direct examination of what renders the king worthy of his saintly title, favoring instead an introductory foray into romance: "Swyþe fair knyȝt and strong he was : and hardi and quoynte" (5) followed by a rapid transition into historical narration. In fact, the ensuing 25 lines read more like a chronicle dedicated to the "twey princes of an oþur lond," to Hubba and Hynguar's conquests, than an index of Edmund's exemplarity. The legend sufficiently outlines what not to be, unless becoming a Danish invader is one's path, but discussion of Edmund's goodness is limited to an explanation of the war that will kill him: "Of þe godnesse of seint Edmund : he [Hingwar/Ivar] hurde moche telle/In to his lond he

wende anon : to fondi him to quelle” (17-18). This is a rather backhanded statement of Edmund’s merits since the king’s moral rectitude seems magnetic and powerful, yet it is perhaps not always best to have a leader who attracts such attention. As a ninth-century king of East Anglia, a decidedly English figure, Edmund represents an ancient, but still invaded, England. Like Kenelm and even Brendan, he is a native saint who stands for an Anglo-Saxon past, yet this history is already targeted, marked by violence, and defended only barely. For when the SEL narrative does turn its full attention to Edmund, it is to recount the meeting of the three leaders in a very brief battle during which the English king hardly resists; and the legend quickly shifts from war to the body of Edmund naked and tied to a tree (35-39).

The location of this “wode,” the site of Edmund’s torment and martyrdom, is unspecified, but the space is written as one of judgment and suffering: the king is in a “luyte stounde,” a little stretch of time or occasion of physical pain as the Middle English dictionary defines it, when he is brought before the enemy army “[f]or-to a-fongue þare is dom” (35-37). In this place associated more with pain than geography, Edmund is tortured and transfigured:

So þat þis liþere turmentours : þat beote him so sore,  
 þoʒte þat þeʒ hi him schame dude : þat hi him wolde do more.  
 Hi stode afur & bende here bowes : and here arewes riʒte :  
 And as to a merke schote to him : as euene as hi miʒte.

þe arewes stode on him þicke : & al is bodi todrowe;  
& euere stod þis holi man : stille ase þeȝ he lowe.  
As ful as an illespyl is : of pikes al aboute  
As ful he stikede of arewen : wipinne & wipoute,  
So ful, þat in none stude : ne miȝte an arewe in wende.. (41-49)

[So then his wicked tormentors who beat him so sorely/thought that they who did him shame might do him more./They stood afar and bent their bows and their arrows right/And as at a target, they shot him as evenly as they could./The arrows stood on him thickly and torn open all his body;/And ever stood this holy man still as though he was fine /As full as a porcupine is of spines all about/So full was he stuck with arrows within and without,/So full that in no place might another arrow enter in...]

Edmund is likened to a short list of things in this extract – a target, a porcupine (*illespyl*), a mass of arrows. Just as the holy man becomes the focus of the poem he is captured, attacked, and erased. Even the arrows of Edmund’s attackers possess more agency than Edmund, who stands “stille” despite his anguish. It is clear that the legend locates Edmund’s sanctity in this indifference, but it is also in this assault that Edmund’s human body is changed, is opened up, “al is bodi todrowe.” Elaine Scarry notably described torture as a language. Although physical pain fragments language, reducing it to something original like the cry, acts of torture make visible what is usually inscrutable or at least intensely individual, that is the representation or communication of pain<sup>35</sup>. A version of this sharing occurs in this scene, yet no pain is communicated. Instead, Edmund’s body is transformed around him. It is at once torn open by the arrows and

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<sup>35</sup>Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 4, 27.

closed off as the saint becomes a bolus of arrows, so covered with spines that no additional shots penetrate.

Scarry contends that the language prompted by torture is taken from the victim and redirected to signify the power of the torturer and his affiliates so that the victim cannot communicate and the world around him is disintegrated, stripped of any meaning<sup>36</sup>. The SEL poet works with simile in this passage to convey this silencing and to bring the animal into the moment when Edmund becomes a saint. While the possibility of disintegration arises in this account – and perhaps even occurs – Edmund protects himself, and by extension his kingdom, through this comparison with a porcupine. Porcupines, of course, are not poked by their own quills, so the saint's association with one reverses the damage of the arrows. Yet, the simile does not stop at a simple trick of language or at the suggestion that the saint reverts to an animal state at the moment of his death. When we expect to see inside the saint, we encounter the porcupine. Or more accurately, we encounter a relation with the animal, because what is inside Edmund is not a porcupine waiting to get out, but something that bears resemblance to what makes the porcupine special, to what makes it distinct and animate, what guards its survival. The object of violence in this scenario becomes a potential agent of violence. And since the porcupine image is immediately linked to Saint Sebastian:

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<sup>36</sup> Scarry 41.

“As þe holi man imartred was : þe holi seint Bastian” (53), the metaphor compounds and provides an historical, hagiographical, and citational nexus through the animal relationship<sup>37</sup>.

Edmund’s connection to the animal world extends beyond his bodily death. As the king prays for mercy, he is beheaded, and the dissolution threatened during his torture is accomplished: “And is bodi was er al torend : þat noþing nas bileued” (58). Although the invaders take care to bury the head in a “durne stede...Among picke þornes” (l. 63-4), a wolf is drawn to the hiding place.

A wyld wolf þer com sone : & to þe heued drouȝ,  
& þer vppe sat & wiste hit fast : aȝe cunde ynouȝ  
For his cunde were betere to swolewe hit: & lickede hit ofte & custe,  
& as he wolde his owe whelp : wiȝ wyldre best hit wiste. (67-70)

[A wild wolf soon came there and drew near to the head/And there sat up and protected it securely against nature enough/For his nature would tend to swallow it, but he licked and kissed it often,/As he would his own whelp; with a wild beast it was protected.]

For all the pathos of this episode, the wolf’s function in the legend remains uncertain. It does not lead the “Cristine Men” who search for Edmund’s head to the thornbush; nor does the wolf return the head to the English community. And once the missing body part is discovered

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<sup>37</sup> This imagery and the comparison in particular are not original to the *South English Legendary*. The *Legendary*’s primary source, Jacobus deVoragine’s *Legenda Aurea*, also links the victim of multiple arrowshots to a porcupine in the account of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom. (Jacobus de Voragine. Trans. William Granger Ryan. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints, Volume 1*. Princeton, Princeton University Press. 1995: 100.)

by the search party – the head itself calls out “Al an Englisch. her. her. her.: as þe; he were alyue” (79) – the wolf disappears from the narrative. The wolf does not nurse the saint back to life exactly with its kisses and licks, but rather keeps it company and connected to the natural world until it can be restored to the body. It seems to stand as a marker and protector of Edmund’s continued life in a way not easily assimilated into even a miraculous narrative.

The animal relationship, the affiliation with the porcupine, and the wolf’s effect on Edmund’s head are left out in the “durne stede,” yet the presence of these animals, as simile or protector, in such important moments returns us to the idea of animals as boundary indicators and crossers. But these animals also foreground the boundaries between the witness, the reader of the life and the martyr. Writing about reception of medieval martyr images and legends, Robert Mills argues that “[w]hat stands out in medieval devotional writings is the notion that pain is *transferable* from one body to another: from the body in an image to the body of a devotee.”<sup>38</sup> What is so interesting about this life of Edmund is that the transfer happens between the saint’s body and an animal body rather than the saint and the devotee, which leaves the reader of the legend in a position to identify, to suffer along with the porcupine or the wolf in addition to Edmund.

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<sup>38</sup> Mills, Robert. *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure, and Punishment in Medieval Culture*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2006): 148.

The reader feels an animal's pain and pleasure, the fear of the cornered porcupine and the maternal affection of the wolf, along with (or perhaps rather than) the transcendent suffering of Edmund.<sup>39</sup>

Following Mills, this unexpected affiliation of both saint and devotee with an animal body presents an ambiguous amalgam of vitality, of living beings, and perhaps even a queer image. Mills explains that episodes depicting torture often produce ambiguously gendered figures: "Male saints are visually de-phallicized by being decapitated, disemboweled and flayed...Martyrs such as Sebastian are subjected to a proliferation of phallic instruments (in Sebastian's case, arrows), in order to symbolize their figurative transformations from wielders of earthly power to tortured purveyors of divine presence"<sup>40</sup>. Edmund's decapitation and penetration by countless arrows certainly follow this pattern. And in addition to breaking down sexual binaries, Edmund's sacrifice questions the finality of the animal-human divide. Even so, this bridge is not complete or enduring, and the distance between animal and human that shrinks is at the same time reaffirmed in this extreme suffering. Edmund has already become something unreachable, a possible hybrid body but a mystical one. Even so, the possibility that this transfer to the animal represents

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<sup>39</sup> Mills claims that "[s]aints' lives, as such, set up a tension between two alternative conceptions of pain: on the one hand, the martyrs' body-affirming discourse, which emphasizes corporeality as a route to mystical pleasure and spiritual empowerment, and on the other, the mind-body dichotomies of dualist pain concepts" (158).

<sup>40</sup> Mills, 173.

might prove more enduring. Mills concludes that the torturing and the opening up of sacred bodies “welcomes the loss of the self” as the beginning of new identities<sup>41</sup>. In the case of Saint Edmund, the subject gets out of his human skin and into an animal one before making the leap to a spiritual body, a transition that seems to make possible a human animal identity in which the non-human animal is not denied, not the thing to be transcended, not the aggressor or the bumbling ignoramus, but the analogue and the caretaker and even the instructor.

### ***More Life: Imagining the Breakdown***

The animals in the *South English Legendary* draw our attention again and again to the vitality of multiple living beings and thereby back to the question of organic life. What we find in the SEL is not just a curious collection of saints’ lives, although that would certainly be interesting enough, but a legendary that is open to an assortment of living beings. By including animal lives the SEL-poet imagines a vitality that is not ensouled, a vitality that is ours and not ours, human and non-human.

The more enigmatic of these animals serve as examples of a vitality that dissolves and reifies the separation between human and

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<sup>41</sup> Mills, 175. He also argues that the “painful ordeal...shows how acts of torture might temporarily disrupt the identities of sacred subjects, producing a confusion of categories such as gender.”

non-human animals. The SEL's short life of Cuthbert closes with a particularly enigmatic animal encounter. Just ten lines before the narrative announces Cuthbert's death, we learn of the saint's nightly meeting with otters:

Eche niȝt wanne þis monekes : to bedde were igone  
Sein Cuberd wel stilleliche : wendeþ forþ al one,  
Into þe colde se he ȝeode : anon to þe chinne;  
Forte it was nei mid niȝt : so he stod þer inne.  
Panne wende he up þerof : & wanne he cam to londe,  
For feblesse he uel adoun : for he ne miȝte noȝt stonde.  
Panne come þer up of þe se : tweie oteres grete  
And lickede him in eche stude : ar hi him wolde lete.  
And wanne hi him hadde þus ilikked : hi neme him into þe se,  
And sein Cuberd hol & sound : wende into is celle aȝe... (85-94)

[Each night when the monks were gone to bed/Saint Cuthbert very quietly went forth all alone/Into the cold sea he went up to his chin/Although it was near midnight he stood there like this./Then he went up from there and when he came to land,/For feebleness he fell down for he could not stand./Then came up out of the sea two great otters/And they licked him in each place before they would release him./And when they had licked him thus they returned to the sea,/And Saint Cuthbert went again to his cell whole and sound.]

Although it is not explicitly stated, it seems that Cuthbert's nocturnal bathing is a form of penance or ascetic discipline. When saints undertake such dramatic practices much is usually made of their suffering and their endurance, yet Cuthbert's efforts are not even named as penitential, let alone proclaimed for their extremity. Instead, the narrative turns its focus to the otters whose actions also go unexplained, though perhaps for more obvious reasons. In Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert*, the otters only use their hair to dry the shivering

man<sup>42</sup>, and in Aelfric's version, it is not otters but seals, "seolas," which seems quite a bit more likely on the coast of Lindisfarne, that tend to the saint, drying his feet and warming him with their "blaede," their breath<sup>43</sup>. Aelfric also claims that the seals lay at the feet of Cuthbert: "licgende aet his foton." It is possible that, in the SEL, *licgende* becomes *licked*. Or it is also possible that the otter/seal confusion is compounded even further by the licking, associating Cuthbert's otters with the bear of medieval and ancient bestiaries<sup>44</sup>. The story goes that this oral fixation attaches to the origins, both organic and linguistic, of the bear, which gets its name from the word for mouth (orsus) because bears must lick their cubs into a proper bear shape right after birth. Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologies* writes: "Bear cubs are born as a shapeless lump of flesh; the mother, by licking it, gives it shape." Not only does the otters' licking, then, imply a nonhuman element in the formation of the saint, perhaps even figuring Cuthbert, notorious for his incorruption, as an amorphous lump before the otter intervention, but the scenarios also in its overlapping of seal, otter, and bear seems interested in the uncategorizable, the unfamiliar, the unfathomable nonhuman body.

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<sup>42</sup>Bede, *Life and Miracles of St. Cuthbert*, in *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, trans. J.A. Giles, Everyman's Library 479, (London: J.M. Dent; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1910), 286-349.

<sup>43</sup> Wyatt, A J. *An Anglo-Saxon Reader*. Cambridge: The University Press, 1919: 82.

<sup>44</sup> I am grateful to Professor Peggy McCracken for suggesting this analogue.

The scene also overturns the dominion model taken up in Francis's legend, since Cuthbert's otters act entirely of their own volition. In fact, it is interesting that there is no mention of the animals' working contrary to their natures. Instead, it seems entirely to be expected the "tweie oteres grete" arrive to tend to Cuthbert in his exhaustion. Cuthbert's otters seem to know Cuthbert's needs better than he does and even show the legendary's audience something about the limits of mortification. Their care of the saint, which returns him to a "hol and sound" condition after his attempts at mortification, is the appropriate response, or at least it is a response that goes without critique from the hagiographer or the holy man, and the encounter positions vitality entirely on the side of the nonhuman animal. The otters have agency and restorative energy, while the saint can't even stand on his own. Despite the intimacy of the scene, there is something uncanny and a little creepy about the otters' behavior. The incident is suggestive on multiple levels: the licking reverses the human-animal food relationship, but also hints at the saint's body as a potential object for consumption, dietary and erotic. While Cuthbert may be figured as a food source, it is the otters' eating action that transfers energy back to the eaten, that reanimates the frozen saint. In this nurturing, there is something nourishing, too. This animal

vitality is dependent not on human command, nor is it imitative of human practices.

In fact, this scene highlights animal behaviors that do not imitate human patterns or expectations. Tasting the saint's body, out of care or desire, becomes, particularly given the silences surrounding the interlude, a transgression, a strangeness that resists explanation and allegorizing. The otters are not the huggable, furry mammals that frolic on their backs and hold their food like humans, but rather oversized sea creatures that emerge from and retreat to an abyss under cover of darkness, more monster than playmate. The benign licking threatens something more sinister, which suggests that the SEL's use of animals in a genre that addresses life could be more radical than it seems at first. David Wood concludes that in theorizing about the importance of the non-human animal "[p]erhaps the point is that we must try not to allow our moral imagination to end with those creatures who seem to function like us. And that it is where obvious continuities break down that the ethical begins."<sup>45</sup> What Cuthbert learns from the otters and what the SEL exploits in many of its legends are the insurmountable ruptures between humans and animals that paradoxically force us to acknowledge that the animal in its difference and defiance participates in and helps to produce the life. This defiance from the animal that contravenes expectations and acts very

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<sup>45</sup> *Animal Philosophy*, 140.

little like the human animal stretches the possible sources and possible bodies included in a request for and a bequest of “more life” as it stretches our obligations to them.

### CHAPTER 3

#### *Thing Power in Literary Lives: Vital Materials in Pearl and The Second Nun's Tale*

Making space for the lives of non-human animals, however unensouled and however indomitable, likely fails to scandalize or even surprise us in a time when more than one cable television channel is entirely dedicated to animal programs, whole weeks are given to sharks, and a dog that can respond to more than a thousand words and that can put away its own toys is featured in *The New York Times* and on the *Today Show*<sup>1</sup>. While interest in and regard for nonhuman animals certainly was not invented in the age of mass culture or even in the relative luxury of industrialized societies, inserting animal lives into the expressly sanctified context of hagiography, introducing lives without souls, lives without obvious spiritual concerns into the saint's life illustrates an investment in vitality itself. Or perhaps these introductions yield to the life force that cannot be controlled, that pops up even where it has not been invited. This chapter turns to the literary work of the life to explore how shifting the context of the vita into an intentionally literary or performative space, like the storytelling performances in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, changes the focus and the attachments of the life. How does relieving the life of its exemplary

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<sup>1</sup>Nicholas Wade, "Sit. Stay. Parse. Good Girl!" *The New York Times* 17 January 2011: D1. Web. 13 February 2011.

responsibilities usher in different concerns and involvements? What other lives are allowed to emerge in these decontextualized, regenerated lives? To address these questions, this chapter examines two literary texts: one in which the hagiographic form falls away but sacred questions are dramatized and figured in a self-consciously literary mode and one in which a martyr's passion is appropriated but reformulated to investigate the mechanisms of the genre. That is, in *Pearl*, the dream vision frame finds a kind of saint's life kernel once the Dreamer encounters his lost *Pearl*-maiden on the shores of a heavenly river. The poem stages to a certain extent the making of a saint's life, a quasi-autobiographical saint's life, insofar as the maiden recounts for the Dreamer the motives for her induction into the Lamb's bridal corps. By contrast, Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* offers the frame of a saint's life to work through social and generic perplexities. In both poems, the digesting of hagiographic material invites a test of the limits of the form and allows speculation about the sources and threshold of vital energies.

In putting these two narratives in contact with each other, I examine the work of poets important to the Middle English canon, but these particular narratives – *Pearl* and *The Second Nun's Tale* – do not represent these poets' most canonical or critically popular pieces. While more central to medieval literary history and studies than the

*South English Legendary* or Aelred of Rievaulx's life and writings, discussed in previous chapters, these texts still remain outside of the body of poetry typically studied and commented upon. Labeled – let's face it – boring, straightforwardly symbolic, doctrinaire, immature, or unliterary, these poems are connected in their critical neglect. They are made neighbors by their peripheral status, forced out into the suburbs of the canon, but also of course in their content, their investment in the literary status of hagiographic materials. Much in the way that the issue of life – as a big question mark or as a force acknowledged as important but not worthy of inquiry – is neglected in favor of the soul or in the way that things are dismissed as possessions or dead objects not having any real impact on organic agents, these two works are often avoided for their apparent lack of literary depth. But it seems to me that these assumptions, like assuming that life, an animating force, is a category that cannot be interrogated, are not well founded and even miss the point. Although I make my own assumption in this chapter about the debts that *Pearl* and *The Second Nun's Tale* owe to hagiography, I think that the adoption of devotional themes and the structure of the saint's life in these poems is not a result of cataleptic habits. Both of these poems question the appropriation of this form directly and through distortion, debate, and reinvention press the limits of the life; both works

question not only what it means to be alive, but how vitality can be recognized and ethically represented. And like many of the other narratives I explore in this project, both *Pearl* and *The Second Nun's Tale* begin with what appears to be a singular, human (all too) living being and conclude with a vitality that is multiple, discovering that it already was so.

Turning to more recognized narratives also opens up a new scope for the question of representations of vitality. Hagiographic materials used in these poetic settings are distilled, stripped to a certain extent of their devotional roles in favor of other ends, which suggests the plasticity of the form, the problem, and the idea of life itself. That the question of the living being – its definition, its limits, its representational possibilities, its animating energies – emerges in the work of Chaucer and the *Pearl*-poet attests that interest in vital principles is not merely a by-product of legendaries, of the reproduction of many lives, or of the recreational biographer in the case of Walter Daniel, but rather these poems demonstrate that thinking through the notion of life happens outside of the works that identify as hagiographic in genre and intent. Although both narratives I explore in this chapter address to a certain extent the problem of life as an ontological problem, a philosophical inquiry, these texts also are inclined to consider the experiential and ethical affiliations of vitality.

Appropriating a form that itself seems to have crystallized into a thing, *Pearl* and *The Second Nun's Tale* examine not only the commonality of a life force that unites organic bodies, but also imagine this animating energy's connection to substance and postulate a relationship with the inorganic.

### ***Turn on Your Heartlight***

Near the close of the vision in *Pearl*, the Dreamer experiences a radical reorganization of his dream's universe, and perhaps of the phenomenal universe, too. As a part of his glimpse of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Dreamer discovers that the source of light in that substantial yet wandering city is neither sun, nor moon, but Jesus Christ figured as a shining lamb: "Of sunne ne mone þay had no need;/Þe Self God watz her lombe-lyȝt"<sup>2</sup>. The Pearl-poet's clever metaplasms reveals the reach that this dream vision ought to have – even giants of the solar system can be replaced by spiritual bodies, a substitution that might console the Dreamer who has been mourning the lost body of his "pearl." Alan Fletcher sees this pun as a term that

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from *Pearl* refer to *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), here lines 1044-1045. All subsequent citations from the poems are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

“condenses alternative meanings effortlessly into itself”<sup>3</sup>. It conjures the light given by a lamp and the lamb as a light, spiritual illumination through the figure of the lamb. “Lamb” and “lamp” would have been homophones according to Fletcher, so the hybrid term is both only lamplight, a concrete and plausible image, and a radiant lamb, an image more eccentric. The misspelling hypostatizes the effectiveness of rhetoric and figuration in the poem – if substitutions of letters can animate a lamp into a lamb, then the Pearl-maiden’s explications of heavenly practices must surely have resonated with her jeweler. Moreover, this particular combination, the Lamb and the light, at the vision’s apex illustrates the kinds of vital presences that circulate in *Pearl*, for the *lombe-lyȝt* is the combination of inorganic (light) and organic (lamb) materials. It is both inanimate and manufactured – a lantern – and animate in the most perfect way. In this moment, and many others, the poem seems to ask what qualifies as living, to ask how it is possible to tell the difference between lights and lambs. As Jane Bennett puts it in her captivating inquiry into the life of metal, “[c]an nonorganic bodies also have a life? Can materiality itself be vital?”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Fletcher, Alan J. “Reading Radical Metonymy in *Pearl*.” *Sacred and Secular in Medieval and Early Modern Cultures: New Essays*. Ed. Lawrence Besserman. Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010: 53.

This *lombe-lyzt* vibrancy has something to do with what Bennett calls “vital materialism.” Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett identifies “life,” a power that animates but cannot be reduced to biology or assigned to soul (since it moves un-ensouled creatures, too) as “a restless activeness, a destructive-creative force-presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body...a vibratory effluence that persists before and after any arrangement in space: the peculiar ‘motility’ of an intensity”<sup>5</sup>. This is the force that is not eradicated simply because a body ends or degrades. Nor is it equivalent with mind or spirit, since even those beings not believed to possess these attributes, like a snail or a bristlecone pine tree, are believed to have life. Bennett wonders if this vitality can be seen in materials typically understood as nonorganic -- metals, foods, weather events. *Pearl* takes up this question in intriguing ways. It matters to the Dreamer that life, in some form, continues for his Pearl, and his dream vision gives him, as we will see, more than he expected.

As I noted earlier, *Pearl* does not assume the form of a vita, nor does the poem tell the story of a recognized saint, but *Pearl* does take up the question of life: what counts as life in heaven, what kind of living qualifies a soul for salvation, how the living mind can comprehend life without body, to name only a few of the problems raised. The human living being in a rather pared down state is

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<sup>5</sup> Bennett, 54, 57.

especially important to the poet, as a hefty portion of the poem's theological debate centers on how so young a child, likely under two, could merit a mystical marriage with Christ. As Nicholas Watson points out, the conclusion presented in the poem deviates from the conventional notion that only those who make a practice of virginity earn conjugal privileges with the Lamb. Watson sees this departure as indicative of the poem's interest in redefining "every aspect of human salvation" as having more to do "with a person's external and 'objective' state than with her or his internal or moral one"<sup>6</sup>. Taking this reading a step farther, I believe that *Pearl* in its concern with externals, both theological and ritualistic, also illuminates a material vitality. Building the poem around a dispute seems to have emboldened the poet to proffer moderately controversial allegations about heavenly rewards, claims which channel the reader's attention toward embodied living; the structure of conflict and testing as well as the topics of lived life and living body within the context of Heaven lead the Dreamer to wonder about a life force that can be reduced neither to body or form nor to matter.

### **DEAD ZONES**

It is hard to deny that *Pearl* is as much about things, about objects that inspire, confound, and seduce as about disputing

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<sup>6</sup> Watson, Nicholas. "The Gawain-Poet as Vernacular Theologian," *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*. Ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 302.

theologies or paying tribute to a life lost too soon. At the most obvious level, a primary concern and figure in the poem is a precious object – a pearl. Descriptions of heavenly landscapes and edifices also abound. Gemstones and glitzy outcroppings populate nearly every section of the poem, but there are also coffers and gardens, outfits and headdresses, vines and phoenixes. Everything in the Dreamer’s vision of heaven is blazing, shining, reflecting, as if it cannot be touched or even seen properly, as if Vaseline were smeared on a camera lens. Perhaps because objects seem to drift in and out of focus, critics have paid more attention to the ideological topics the poem addresses – consolation, salvation, separation of body and soul – than the adamant presence of things in the text<sup>7</sup>.

The opening lines of the poem introduce the pearl, which is described in loving and conventional detail.

Perle pleasaunte, to prynces paye  
To clanly clos in golde so clere:  
Oute of oryent, I hardyly saye,  
Ne proued I neuer her precios pere.  
So rounde, so reken in vche araye,  
So smal, so smoþe her sydez were;  
Queresoeuer I jugged gemmez gaye  
I sette hyr sengeley in synglere. (1-8)

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<sup>7</sup>David Aers divided the readings in *Pearl* scholarship into two veins: (1) theological interest in the poem and (2) rhetorical interest, especially in the love language (Aers, “The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*.” *Speculum* 68 [1993]: 56). Since the publication of Aers’ article, not much has changed, though some discussion of the materials, both cultural and phenomenal, in the poem has emerged and is addressed below.

“Pleasaunte” surely does not do the Pearl any justice since its perfection is extolled and bemoaned repeatedly throughout the poem, yet this first modifier aptly evokes the speaker’s attitude: the pearl is an object meant to satisfy him. The mourner’s senses are moved by the object and its memory, but the pearl’s power depends upon the mourner and can be perceived only through his experience of it. His judgment, his depiction, and perhaps even his craft as a jeweler matter in these lines. Although the pearl clearly affects the poem’s narrator, the object itself does not have a terribly stable presence. It is a pearl that is buried at the narrator’s feet and linked to exotic lands, both here and there, a pearl that is both an ornament and child, lost but visible.

And the problem of *Pearl*’s first section hinges on the death of the Maiden and the speaker’s unchecked mourning of this loss, so vitality seems displaced, if not altogether absent. Repeating the link-word “spot” throughout this first part of the poem engenders a feeling of geographical and textual fixity, binding the narrator to the Pearl’s gravesite. The play on the word – *spot* as both location and blemish – ramifies this attachment, since, as a stain, the spot represents something that cannot be removed, which also seems to allude to the immobility of the Pearl’s corpse<sup>8</sup>. Yet, the narrator contends that the

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<sup>8</sup> Katherine Terrell claims that an understanding of the decaying body as a companion to the saved soul and the spotless Pearl is a crucial component in the

spot is precisely what the Pearl does not or did not have: “þat pryuy perle wythouten spot” (12). Of course, the fear is that now the Pearl *has* been marred, if not spiritually at least physically following her death, that her body suffers the indignities of all bodies no matter her spiritual purity or the love of the narrator: “Forsoþe þer fleten to me fele,/To þenke hir color so clad in clot./O moul, þou marrez a myry iuele...” (21-23). Despite the narrator’s protests, the spot, like his attachment to the burial place, cannot be denied.<sup>9</sup>

This entanglement extends to other images as well as the tone and pace of the section, too. All the talk of enclosure – the pearl’s setting, “clanly close in golde,” the narrator’s oppressed heart, “þrych my hert,” even the “erbere,” likely an enclosed garden<sup>10</sup> where the pearl was lost and ostensibly buried -- doubles the stillness. It is also August (“I entred in þat erber grene,/In Augoste in a hy3 seysoun...”[38-39]) when the narrator has his vision, which suggests

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Dreamer’s development. “Rethinking the “Corse in clot”: Cleanness, Filth, and Bodily Decay in *Pearl*.” *Studies in Philology* 105.4 (2008): 429-447.

<sup>9</sup> Ad Putter has argued that “wythouten spot” might indicate the displacement of the Maiden, that she in fact is not in the *erbere* but is in heaven, which the Dreamer must come to accept (*An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* [London: Longman, 1996], 148). While the dream vision certainly bears out this reading, the woeful visit to the garden that precedes the vision, it seems to me, rests on the logic of stasis and enclosure. As David Aers claims, the Dreamer’s insistence on memory before the vision and when he finally encounters the Maiden is an attempt to render the world fixed. But as Aers continues, “Using memory in such ways may encourage a consoling denial of our transience, which is at the same time a denial of our creatureliness...” (Aers 63). This creatureliness is an important part of what the poem teaches about vitality and insisting on the purely spiritual residue of the Maiden seems to miss this point.

<sup>10</sup> See Andrew and Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 53, note to line 9.

not only the start of the harvest, but also the stifling dog days of summer. And the “sleep slaughter,” *slepyng-slaȝte* that concludes the first part of the poem and inaugurates the dream vision fits with this stagnation and with the Dreamer’s mourning, which seems to have trapped him in a physical and spiritual morass.

Yet, the narrator insists, perhaps in an effort at self-consolation or appropriately restrained mourning<sup>11</sup>, on the fertility of his surroundings.

Pat spot of spysez mot nedeȝ sprede,  
Per such rychez to rot is runne,  
Blomez blayke and blwe and rede  
Per schyne ful schyr agayn þe sunne.  
Flor and fryte may not be fede  
Per hit doun drof in moldez dunne,  
For vch gresse mot grow of graynez dede;  
No whete were ellez to wonez wonne. (25-31)

This passage seems to balance out the narrator’s compulsive returning to spots: new life, he explains, has grown from the “rot” of the Pearl. In fact the Pearl proves so productive that flowers and fruits are riper than ever – do not fade – at the place where the body lies. The Maiden’s death is assigned a purpose, a rather vital, colorful (white, blue, and red), restorative purpose in these lines; even in this grieving, repetitive space, a certain lively energy breaks through. Likewise, the liturgical setting for the poem, the Feast of the Assumption, according to Elizabeth Petroff, brings to mind another eruption of vitality since

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<sup>11</sup> See Terrell (437-8) for a discussion of the tradition of this brand of consolation.

on this feast day, “lay and religious people brought medicinal plants from their kitchen of infirmary gardens so that the healing power of the herbs might be sanctified,” and recalling the ascension of Mary, “their having their own herbs blessed reminded them of the immediacy of the spiritual world in the most material and earthly things”<sup>12</sup>. Seeing this imagery drawn from the gospel as “an allegory in little” of the exegetical and thematic investments of the poem, Alan Fletcher claims that the “graynez dede” represent the necessary evacuation of singular, monadic identity in favor of a multiplicity of identities, the field of wheat from a single grain<sup>13</sup>. The vegetal metaphors and celebrations as well as the promise of multiplicity imbue even the space of mourning with a material vitality that resists the pathetic fallacy. The narrator, however, cannot resist the impulse to re-enclose these sprouts, noting that the wheat that might grow from “graynez dede” is bound to a household, to “wonez.” If these homes are nourished and satisfied, the reader might be obliged to recall that the narrator’s is likely sterile and empty without Pearl.

### ***Debating Lives***

Waking to dream, the narrator discovers a dramatically different place. The dream vision landscape is brilliant and hard. Everything

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<sup>12</sup> Petroff, Elizabeth, “Landscape in *Pearl*: The Transformation of Nature,” *The Chaucer Review*, 16.2 (Fall, 1981): 181.

<sup>13</sup> Fletcher, 53.

shines, blinds, and distracts with “crystal klyffez” and trees with glossy silver leaves. And soon, though not too soon since the Dreamer devotes over a hundred lines to description of the bejeweled surroundings, the solitary mourner meets an interlocutor, the “mayden in menske” (161) who turns out to be the girl with whom the Dreamer yearns to reunite, the soul of the dead child “[h]o watz me nerre aunte or nece” (233). The Maiden, however, shows herself to be less pliable than the Dreamer has remembered (although anyone who has engaged in debate with a child about two years old knows that toddlers are mostly everything but submissive), for the first speech the Maiden gives amounts to a correction:

'Sir, 3e haf your tale mysetente,  
To say your perle is al awaye,  
Pat is in cofer so comly clente  
As in þis gardyn gracios gaye... (257-260)

Apparently unmoved by the Dreamer’s list of sufferings which he attributes to his separation from his child, the Maiden chastises the Dreamer’s account. She does not simply offer an alternative to his loss, consoling him with claims that her coffin has been transformed into the vast and glittering garden in which they meet, but rather the Maiden attacks the Dreamer’s very “tale,” his own account of his melancholy. The Dreamer’s “mis-setting” is a dig at both his claims to be a “joylez juelere,” implying he may not be the artisan he believes himself to be, and his comprehension of his emotions and their

situation more broadly.<sup>14</sup> The “mysetente” of the pearl maiden’s critique looks and sounds something like “mysententia,” which might suggest that the Dreamer has problems with rhetoric as well as with craft. And the chastening continues throughout the poem, proving the impetus for the Dreamer’s education. For each of the Dreamer’s theories or readings, as in the discussion of the Parable of the Vineyard, the Maiden proposes a counterpoint. Their debate covers topics from the redemptive rewards of innocence as opposed to a doctrine of works to questions of value or competition.

One particular problem to which the couple returns, and which is arguably central to the Dreamer’s development, has to do with the quality and conditions of earthly and heavenly lives. After all, the poem owes much of its tension to the disparities between father and daughter, especially insofar as the father/Dreamer is alive and the daughter/pearl maiden is not. When the Dreamer announces that he plans to remain in his heavenly vision with his found daughter, the

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<sup>14</sup> Whether the poem’s narrator can be considered more jeweler than mourner and whether the poet himself might have worked with precious stones has recently interested critics. There is little agreement on either the narrator’s or the poet’s métier, but these discussions turn our attention to the material elements of the poem. Imagining the narrator as jeweler has led Felicia Riddy to examine the material and economic implications of the poem, concluding that the poem benefits from a tradition of European luxury (“Jewels in *Pearl*” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*. Ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997]: 149). Tony Davenport, however, concludes that jewels in *Pearl* remain more symbolic than material (Tony Davenport, “Jewels and Jewellers in *Pearl*,” *The Review of English Studies*, 59.241, [Fall 2008]: 508-521). While I follow these investigations insofar as much of my reading focuses on the things in *Pearl*, I choose to refer to the narrator as a Dreamer primarily to emphasize his visionary and theoretical intentions.

Pearl-maiden reminds him that this relocation is not so easily achieved. As she explains, if the Dreamer wants to stay with her in paradise – *won in þis bayly* (315), he first must die: *þy corse in clot mot calder keue* (320). It is odd that the Maiden must instruct the Dreamer on so obvious a requisite. The comment, however, makes it clear that at issue is the Dreamer's decision to live or die, but also that living, and not living, are not entirely in the power of the human agent. And perhaps the Dreamer has forgotten that the vivid vision of his daughter is not a living one but instead a manifestation of her soul. The Pearl-maiden's insistence on the dead, cold body underscores this. Yet, the Dreamer cannot relinquish the earthly idea of life so easily and does not learn the lesson. He protests that he would be a fool to recover his pearl only to lose it again: *Why schal I hit boþe mysse and mete?* (329). Although the Dreamer concedes that knowing something about the whereabouts of Pearl will assuage his suffering and his ignorance, he continues to employ earth-bound rhetoric, asking the maiden to describe "wythouten debate...[w]hat lyf 3e lede erly and late" (392). These returns to the problem of the life, which the maiden does this time indulge, illustrate the difficulty in excising the rhetoric of earthly vitality and the structures for understanding what it means to dwell somewhere. How can you be somewhere (*won in þis bayly*) and not live there?

Into this repositioning of the spaces and the relevance of life in heaven, things intrude. As part of the Dreamer's re-education, the Maiden revises his application of metaphor, making it clear that the poem's, and the mourner's, principal image is inapt, for even as a living being she was never a pearl:

For þat þou lestez watz bot a rose  
þat flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef.  
Now þurz kynde of þe kyste þat hyt con close  
To a perle of prys hit is put in pref.

This suggests something about the poem's interest in the protean nature of things, and the redefinition also points to space outside of the categories of organic and inorganic. The human being straddles this divide, or perhaps demonstrates the intersection of the two categories, since the Maiden was once a rose, whose properties, in particular the capacity to die, were determined by nature (*kynde*), but transformed into a pearl through a natural process, through the "kynde of þe kyste" – the nature of the chest or coffin in which she was buried. On one level, this account imagines a humanly parallel to a mollusk's production of a pearl, which modifies the Dreamer's earlier horror at his daughter's decomposing body by suggesting that that process might be less grotesque, or at least more productive, than he believes. On another, this description implies a kind of minerality as part of the human living being. Even the soul, the "perle of prys," seems to be associated with a type of thingness, a mineral vitality,

despite the Maiden's claims about its absolute distinction from the cold, dead body<sup>15</sup>. Outlining the progression from rose to pearl also serves to highlight the hazy categorization of pearls as gemstones or entirely inert objects. The organic origins, the bodily origins, even if an animal body, of the pearl render it at once mineral and alive.<sup>16</sup> In this heavenly terrain, a life force cannot be entirely banished.

### ***Cities & Stones***

And when the debate goes silent, the powers of stone and decoration dominate the poem. The Dreamer is seduced by the landscape, filled with joy at its beauty and richness to the extent that his mourning starts to diminish: "The dubbement dere of doun and dalez,/ Of wod and water and wlonk playnez,/ Bylde in me blys, abated my balez,/ Fordidden my stresse, dystryed my paynez" (121-124). He even fails to recognize the object of his melancholy when he

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<sup>15</sup>In his reading of the Pearl-maiden's revision of the jeweler's pearl metaphor, Fletcher argues that the rose is a better choice because it is used up in its metonymic move much in the way the human body is exhausted in living. (55) In the essay, Fletcher claims that *Pearl* stages metonymic shifts as a way to weave exegesis into a literary context. What metonymy typically does, he instructs, is remind us of the literal. It is a kind of backwards reading that pretends to privilege the association, but is always moving back to something more concrete. To speak of the "crown" is in fact to refer to something more solid than the concept of royalty, that is, the body of the king. This movement and this tension produce a figurative network, but as we discover, this network built on substitutions trends toward literal. Fletcher claims that the literal was "increasingly considered in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to be of fundamental importance" (49), and this mounting attention, it seems to me, emphasizes the material elements of a poem that appears so intent on spirituality and interiority.

<sup>16</sup> As Tony Davenport reports, "So, against the established divine power of God's twelve stones, the pearl appears a more malleable and flexible image, with a strange origin combining natural process with a sense of mystery and evanescence..." (521).

first encounters her, perhaps because the jewels and general luster dim his own pain<sup>17</sup>. Although there is something aloof and inorganic, perhaps a little cold even, about the glittering backdrop, it is undeniably vibrant. And as the Dreamer approaches the river that serves to divide the narrator from the Pearl and the heavenly terrain but also to connect him to his earthly life, the setting becomes more and more organic:

Ʒe fyrre in Ʒe fryth, Ʒe feier con ryse  
Ʒe playn, Ʒe plonttez, Ʒe spyse, Ʒe perez;  
And rawez and randez and rych reuerez,  
As fyldor fyn her bonkes brent.

I wan to a water by schore Ʒat schereƷ — (103-7)

While the heavenly ecosystem continues to stun by its multiplicity, the plantings grow less metallic as the Dreamer advances. The organization, in hedgerows (*rawez*) and riverbanks (*randez* and *reuerez*), becomes familiar, navigable. The Dreamer has names for these sights and orders them into a list, a kind of garden inventory.

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<sup>17</sup> Aers addresses the first encounter with the landscape, noting its distracting qualities and that it inaugurates a forgetting, but he also argues that this reaction strays from the conventions of praise for the creator of such wondrous views: “It does not involve attention to the creator of either the landscape or himself” (59). This is at once a delight that might overwhelm, a danger in Christian art, and the phenomenal attachments of the Dreamer who can go from thing to thing, but not from thing to idea. On the other hand, Petroff asserts that “it is the function of landscape imagery to embody mental states, emotions, emotions which are being experienced by the persons within the landscapes and which need to be objectified in order to be understood. Nature can be used in this way to depict the inner life of man, precisely because each object in nature has a fathomable, intrinsic spiritual meaning, its meaning in the mind of God” (183). While it seems to me that the wonder that the Dreamer experiences as he traverses the heavenly/dream terrain goes beyond pathetic fallacy and that in the poem the material presence of the bejeweled cliffs exceeds the psychological needs of the Dreamer, I do think that the Dreamer’s evolving relationship with his vibrant surroundings tells us something about the function of and quality of both materiality and vitality in the poem.

Even the river, which has many textual resonances from the stygian to the apocalyptic, is manageable and recognizable as simply “*a water*.” Its description combines the section’s early wonder with a sense of intimacy:

In þe founce þer stonden stoncz stepe,  
As glente þurȝ glas þat glowed and glyȝt,  
As stremande sterneȝ, quen stroþe-men slepe,  
Staren in welkyn in wynter nyȝt... (113-116)

This multifarious river unites element and mineral, shine and blur, movement and fixity, here and there, living and dead, yes and no. It is paved with stones, likely jewels given how they “glente” and resemble glowing glass, which suggests an ancient and intentional permanence. The riverbed may be the work of an ambitious artisan or a natural revelation, and it combines, too, the coolness of the jewel-studded heavenly topography with the vitality of water, which is so necessary for and original to life, so seemingly alive, but still elemental and not exactly animate<sup>18</sup>. Yet, the river does have something to do with life as the Dreamer, and probably the reader, knows it. The gemstone surface evokes a starry winter’s night -- a sight that all “stroþe-men,” earth dwellers recognize. It is a protective (sensed while the earth-men sleep) and common image that tethers the heavenly river to earthly spaces.

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<sup>18</sup> For Petroff’s evaluation of the absence of water in erbere and the significance of the river in the dream landscapes, see pages 185-188 in “Landscape in *Pearl*.”

Across this river, on the opposite bank, the Dreamer spies his daughter, the Pearl-maiden. The river provides the point of their connection, both a source and a limit of knowledge, recalling the notorious exchanges between Zozimas and the desert saint, Mary the Egyptian, but also marks a divide: on one side reside all things paradisiacal, on the other, the Dreamer. The Maiden warns the Dreamer repeatedly to remain on his side of the river, and the idea of this transgression, the undertaking of which finally terminates the dream, generates an important source of tension in the poem, implying perhaps most notably the hazards of unchecked grief and the absence of self-control. The beauty, the mystery, and the power of the river depend on the intensity of these contrasts; and since this river tends to be considered analogous to the river of life in Revelations<sup>19</sup>, it draws attention to both the place of vital, life-giving energy in heaven and the participation of both organic and inorganic matter in this energy.

If the question of living in heaven is left undecided by the Pearl-maiden, the vibrant liveliness of heavenly matter is less equivocal. If the souls in the Dreamer's vision have given up their relationship with animate, atomistic, particulate existence in favor of something more eternal and more whole, and it is not entirely clear that this has happened, then a remainder of this life force seems to have been cast

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<sup>19</sup> See Andrew and Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 59, note to line 107.

out into the scenery that witnesses the dream debate and encases Dreamer and Pearl-maiden. Rather than the pathetic fallacy, which stages an exteriorization of psychology, the landscape in *Pearl* mirrors a coincidence of vitalities, the exteriorization of the life force of things and once embodied humans. As the locus of the source of life, it makes sense that Heaven would be imbued with this vibrational vitality. And the early sheen of the scenery finds its partner in the final vision of the heavenly Jerusalem. On the glittering city Petroff opines, “natural landscape has become city, artifact, so that all that remains of natural landscape is the river”<sup>20</sup> (190). The progression from wilderness to city seems to privilege the material and assigns the inorganic a kind of vitality as a counterpoint to the vitality of the heavenly figures – or the lack of vitality, since after all they are only spirit now.

It is interesting that in both moments the Dreamer loses track of the Pearl-maiden, so overcome by the splendor that he forgets his project. The excess of these visions seems intended to disorient:

I sy3e þat cyty of gret renoun,  
Jerusalem so nwe and ryally dy3t,  
As hit was ly3t fro þe heuen adoun.  
Þe bor3 watz al of brende golde bry3t  
As glemande glas burnist broun,  
Wyth gentył gemmez an-vnder py3t  
Wyth bantelez twelue on basyng boun... (986-992)

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<sup>20</sup> Petroff, 190.

Jerusalem seems almost afire it gleams so powerfully – *brende* and *burnist*. The section goes on to describe each of the twelve levels of stone that form the city’s foundation: jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, pearl, emerald, sard, ruby, beryl, topaz, crysopase, jacinth, and amethyst (1009-1018). These gemstone strata seem to be less manifestations of the soul or mind, less manifestations of virtue than actual minerals. Perhaps the ideal formation of each rock, but certainly real, weighty, glimmering things. There is no ignoring the city’s density or its power to impress. The Dreamer even makes a point of the reality of his vision of heaven: “As John þe apostel hit syȝ wyth syȝt,/I syȝe þat cyty...” (985-6), “As John deuysed ȝet saȝ I þare...” (1021), and “As John hym wryteȝ ȝet more I syȝe...” (1033). The seeing is real and the sight is, too. So, it is unlikely that the stones, described in minute but still evocative detail, are meant to be read as ghostly or spiritual in nature. Yet, the city might be said to yield some of its visual stability as a result of its mobility. Because the Dreamer cannot cross the river to visit the city and because the city is only open to unstained souls (“withouten mote” [972]), the Dreamer has been granted permission only to view the heavenly Jerusalem from afar, which means that the city must travel to him. Even after the city is rolled down from its usual, more blissful location, it still seems to move. The Dreamer reports that he can see three gates on each side of

the palace: “Vch pane of þat place had þre ʒatez” (1034). A few lines later the Dreamer claims to have X-ray vision: “Þurʒ woʒe and won my lokyng ʒede” (1049). It is as if the city itself is spinning or opening itself up to the Dreamer. At the very least, this impossible perspective reflects the intensity of the Dreamer’s vision and the motile minerality of the new Jerusalem.

### ***A Life of Things***

But the heavenly citadel does more than sparkle and twirl – it, and other lively inorganic materials in the poem, changes the Dreamer. Toward the close of the description of the heavenly architecture, the Dreamer explains his transformation:

I stod as styлле as dased quayle  
For ferly of þat frelich fygure,  
þat felde I nawþer reste ne trauayle,  
So watz I rauyste wyth gylmme pure. (1085-1088)

The vivid sight proves powerful enough to render its viewer a “dazed quail.” If the Dreamer has become the hunted animal, then the city with all its enigmatic stones and its sometime transparency is the hunter, capturing, acting upon (*rauyste wuth gylmme pure*) the Dreamer. That the Dreamer feels his own grasp on humanity imperiled by this experience underscores not only the force of the aesthetics of the scene, but also the things of heaven as living agents or actants, which is a term taken from the work of Bruno Latour that

Bennett uses for objects that seem to possess the powers of thingness, the powers of activity<sup>21</sup>. This term fits here because the poem repeatedly questions the soundness of the Dreamer's agency, implying that letting go of the desire for mastery, for total understanding and acknowledging the influence of other actants might bring him peace, even redemption. Further, in a text so dedicated to debate, to the continual shifting of positions and expectations, it seems necessary to represent non-anthropomorphic point of views. One of these points of view adheres to the divine, but the poet goes perhaps a step farther to include the things that make up Jerusalem itself. What is salvation to a stone? Critics have discussed the ways in which the poem works to give a voice to the Pearl-maiden, to offer a view from a saved place, but what is the story like from the pearl's perspective?

Although I am not sure the poem manages to answer the last question, it does seem to ask it indirectly. Life in *Pearl* is more than a genre or a catalogue of virtues and miracles; even so, catalogues and lists attain a heightened structural presence in the poem and introduce another non-anthropomorphic life into the mix. *Pearl's* use of concatenation – repeated words and phrases that begin and end stanzas in each section of the piece – configures a machine. From this listing, this iteration emerges both the intricacy and the fluidity of the poem. In the first section, as we have seen, “spot” bounces from

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<sup>21</sup> Bennett 9.

meaning location to blemish; in the ninth part, the link-word “date” suggests rank, calendar day, natural or cyclical time of year, and a stopping point. Although the Pearl-poet seems expertly to manipulate these repetitions, hitching the poem to the concatenation form invites flexibility. It acknowledges the associative forces that construct the poem and that read into and out of it. The concatenation even suggests that the poem participates in its own production, that the poem as an object and an associative machine hums along at its own pace. Like a dream that is always a little bit out of the control of the Dreamer, *Pearl* takes seriously the life of things and perhaps even imagines the poem itself traversed by mechanical vitality.

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In Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, lives that evoke saints’ lives abound. The portraits of the pilgrims in the General Prologue present as mini-biographies, earning once upon a time charges of realism and prompting investigations into the figures’ possible connections to historical people, the poet’s contemporaries. Tales of example, of how to be a proper knight, of how to embody virtues, of how not to be a bad wife, too, render the Canterbury set invested in questions of the living being. Chaucer’s concern with private and domestic spaces also brings into relief an interest in intersubjective experience, in what happens when people, families or pilgrims, are packed into close

quarters. With all this interest in narrating lives, in telling stories that speak to a diverse audience and represent their speakers, it is not surprising that Chaucer includes several tales that explicitly or obliquely appropriate the rhetoric of hagiography.

The lives that Chaucer tends to favor, particularly in the Canterbury book, are not your average saints' lives. Far from the lives of monastic or historical saints, the legends Chaucer selects are intense, bordering on operatic. Griselda undergoes incredible torment at the hands of her husband; Cecilia succumbs to a very public and very prolonged martyrdom; Custance is victimized at every port of call. Even the Prioress's account of the luckless clergeon, a Miracle of the Virgin rather than a conventional *vita*, pushes the limits of a hagiographic subset already known for its intensity. On the one hand, these extreme holy athletes seem chosen expressly for the acute affliction they endure and the curiosity they engender -- these figures live (and suffer and die) more than others. There is more to the stuff, the *matere*<sup>22</sup>, of their lives than, say, a St. Dunstan. On the other, the

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<sup>22</sup> As Kellie Robertson points out, associating materiality with poetry and in particular the act of making poetry was commonplace in the Middle Ages. Not only was poetry a vehicle for discussing matter for the likes of Alain de Lille and Bernardus Silvestris, but later poets like Chaucer and Gower often termed their stuff of their poetic endeavors *matere*. "The Middle English term *matere*, like its Modern English counterpart, can refer either to a physical substance (either prime matter or elemental matter) or to an "immaterial" activity – for instance, a business affair or a subject of discussion. However, in Middle English (unlike in modern English), it also had more common and more specialized textual meanings: it regularly referred to a scholastic question or to the literary subject matter of a work...It is this homologous relation between textual matter and physical matter – the origin of a metaphor now

inordinate adversity that these poor souls bear waives the question of sanctity. To a certain extent, it is obvious what makes the clergeon, Griselda, and Cecilia worthy of veneration. Since the matter in these lives is not how to achieve salvation, or even legendary status, the tales seem free to turn to other, less theological concerns, focusing on how forces other than spiritual purity affect the life and, in particular, drawing attention to the enigma of the living being itself.

### ***Still, Fertile Spaces***

The Second Nun's Prologue begins with stillness, or to be more specific "Ydelnesse," which seems to threaten the tale's narrator, tempting her (or him<sup>23</sup>) to yield to inertia, to indulge in bodily pleasures like sleeping, eating, and drinking, and presumably to

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dead – that animates much of the post-twelfth-century didactic poetry" (Kellie Robertson, "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto," *Exemplaria*, 22.2, [Summer 2010]: 112).

<sup>23</sup> As Lynn Staley points out, the Second Nun never takes full ownership of the narration and the speaker here seems to be the poet, or at least some writer/translator who identifies as male. The narrator's reference to himself as the "sone of Eve" (62) seems to be the first clue that the speaker is not your average Second Nun. Lynn Staley also explains that certain phrases attach the *Second Nun's Tale* to "Troilus and Crisseyde" and other texts believed to have been composed around the same time. (Aers, David, and Lynn Staley. *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996: 199.) According to Catherine Sanok, however, the "slip has, of course, long been read as the evidence of the hasty inclusion of the tale in the Canterbury collection, a mark of its original (and therefore implicitly authoritative) identification with Chaucer's own voice rather than with the Second Nun, who may be, after all, only a scribal fiction" (Sanok, Catherine. "Performing Feminine Sanctity in Late Medieval England: Parish Guilds, Saints' Plays, and the Second Nun's Tale." *Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies* 32.2 (2002): 293). Most likely an editorial oversight or an example of the Second Nun's appropriation of the authority necessary to offer her sermon, as Sanok goes on to argue, the line might also indicate the impossibility of a biblical lineage, a biblical precedent for spiritual women. After all, the only named children attributed to Eve are sons.

abandon her artistic pursuits, a temptation that most writers periodically endure. While the antidote to this enticing torpor is simply enough “faithful bisynesse” (24), the menace of idleness seems larger than its personification. In fact, the *Second Nun’s Prologue* and *Tale* is often charged with an sluggishness that infects its structure and even its readers (particularly modern ones) who see Cecilia as a kind of dead letter, an overly textual exemplar of a piety uncharacteristic of and unimaginable for the poet, a character without humanity in a tale without drama or anything original to commend it<sup>24</sup>. Earlier audiences, however, proved more sympathetic to both Cecilia and Chaucer’s retelling of her passion, which seemed to have operated as much as portable hagiography as performance since the tale stands alone in two late medieval manuscripts.<sup>25</sup>

Even so, the prologue’s first lines produce an atmosphere of immobility and inflexibility by relying on images of being boxed in: the “thousand cordes slye” and the “trappe” of the “feend.” Idleness is said to be the porter at the gate of “delices,” which implies that these

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph Grossi notes that critics regret that Chaucer steeps the tale with “a piety..hopelessly remote” and that the characters in the narrative are “deprived of all will except the will to self-destruction” (Grossi, “The Unhidden Piety of Chaucer’s ‘Seint Cecilie’”, *The Chaucer Review*, 36.3 [2002]: 298). Sanok points out the poverty of characterization in the tale: “Given no portrait in the General Prologue, the Second Nun has no ‘body’ or personal history to ground her performance, and in the absence of a clearly distinguished voice in her tale...no distinct personality emerges” (Sanok, 289). For similar critiques of the relevance and merit of the tale, see Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1985 and Jennifer Summit, “Topography as historiography: Petrarch, Chaucer, and the making of medieval Rome,” *Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies*, 30.2 (2000): 211-46.

<sup>25</sup> Grossi, 299.

pleasures might be found in an all too enclosed garden. The Sloth and Idleness duo seem to have at their disposal not just the allure of unscheduled time but a series of well-defined spaces, enclosures.

This space gets a little narrower when the narrator invokes the intervention of the Virgin and imagines her pregnancy: “Withinne the cloistre blissful of thy sydis/Took mannes shap...” (43-44)<sup>26</sup>. Praising the purity of the Virgin and noting her good fortune in being chosen as the dwelling place for God (“In whom that God for bountee chees to wone” [38]) is one thing, but using such graphic terms to represent the fetal Jesus, a kind of ultrasonic vision, seems to insist on the physical presence of Mary. Yet, this presence is not as whole and intact as Marian images tend to be. Catherine Sanok postulates that the appeal to the Virgin is another move to authorize the Second Nun’s public preaching within the context of the Canterbury pilgrimage as the speaker implicitly compares the cloister of the womb to the cloister of the nun’s monastic home. According to Sanok, this metaphor becomes the Second Nun’s “strongest argument for women’s performance of sacred speech”<sup>27</sup> because it reveals the spaces typically open to the conversation of spiritual women as severely restricted. But if the voice in the womb is likened to the Second Nun’s voice, it seems to me that we encounter another gender substitution – the

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<sup>26</sup> This and all further references to the *Canterbury Tales* are to the *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> Sanok 291.

nun's voice joins with Jesus's voice -- as well as a potentially generative association. Since this metonym involves a womb and not a tomb, the boxes and enclosures of the *Prologue* in their most miniaturized versions toggle between the stiflingly narrow and the possibly expansive.

The etymological dissection of Cecilia's name produces a related image. According to the narrator (or perhaps Jacobus de Voragine upon whose version of the *vita* the poet claims to rely), Cecilia's name aligns her with heavenly lilies, sight for the blind, the biblical figure Leah, and "the hevене of peple" (104).

...Or elles, loo, this maydens name bright  
Of "hevене" and "leos" comth, for which by right  
Men myghte hir wel "the hevене of peple" calle,  
Ensample of goode and wise werkes alle.  
For "leos" "people" in Englissh is to seye,  
And right as men may in the hevене see  
The sonne and moone and sterres every weye,  
Right so men goostly in this mayden free  
Seyen of faith the magnanymytee... (102-110)

In the final (entirely spurious) meaning, Cecilia becomes both a place of redemption and an object to inspire faith and good deeds. While the narrator seems to retreat from the spatial association, from opening Cecilia up to the *leos* by explaining that it is by "goostly" seeing that men will recognize the saint as a kind of paradise, the comparison imbues both her name and her form with an extension that seems

more connected to visible heavenly objects – the sun, moon, and stars – than a spiritual vision.

Outlining these spaces also opens up a relationship between people and things, between the animate and the inanimate that characterizes the life of Cecilia itself. Moreover, these continually link back to something vital. “Ydelnesse” is both the minister and the “nорice” of vices; the biblical Leah is especially fertile and associated with the origin of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The natal and etymological projects seem to endow the Second Nun and Cecilia with both a spatial dimensionality outside of her human body and a nominal generativeness and instability.

The text of the prologue and tale further hypostatize this relationship. The tale and much of the prologue consist of a translation, which the narrator openly acknowledges and which render the Second Nun’s contribution more writerly than other stories. Taking the tale from the road to the library, from a public to a private place reproduces the dangerous but oddly fruitful enclosures. Yet, the translation is not entirely separated from the public arena, since foregrounding this activity as an act of salvation, if only from the perils of laziness, has political resonance in late medieval London. Lynn Staley has read this undertaking, along with much of Cecilia’s life, as

influenced by the Wycliffite agenda<sup>28</sup> which advocated for vernacular translations of the Bible: “Wyclif linked the ability to understand and to communicate the meaning of Scripture to grace...translation is at once a labor and a sign of the transformative actions of grace upon a sinful man, re-dressed in knowledge and truth.”<sup>29</sup> As Staley later concedes, there was little objection to the translation of saints’ lives, so this particular rendition falls short of radical. Nevertheless, Cecilia’s life might be considered a kind of safe protest space, a revisionary fortress that somehow manages to expose the narrator’s interiority, the grace with which he has been endowed. The translation as an object seems to work as both a sign and a vehicle for this grace (does the translation emerge from a saved soul or penetrate to confer salvation?) and a bridge between the narrator’s inner condition and worldly production. Understanding the translated legend in this way foregrounds the materiality of the text. It is something to be worked on, but also something that works on the translator herself<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup>While Staley does not ultimately assert Chaucer as a supporter of Lollardy, she does find that Chaucer “used his poetry to ask questions about urgent social issues that were inevitably related to the politics of devotion or sanctity. His legend of saint Cecilia is at once an early probe into the subject of spiritual authority as it was articulated in the early 1380s and a work he thought interesting enough to insert into the Canterbury book at a later date” (Staley, 216 and for the links between the Second Nun and Lollardy, 201-217).

<sup>29</sup> Staley 201-202.

<sup>30</sup> Grossi offers a different view of the translation undertaken in the tale, underscoring the differences between Chaucer’s vernacular version and those of Jacobus de Voragine and the Franciscan abridgement. In Grossi’s estimation, “the English poet wished to enhance Cecilie’s strength and the prefect Almachius’ weakness even more obviously than Jacobus had done” (Grossi 298 and for additional divergences from the original, see 300-302). Other treatments of

These contracting spaces reappear in Cecilia's legend wherein the saint and her growing train of converts shuttle between Cecilia's bedroom and Pope Urban's hiding spot among the tombs of other martyrs: "Among the seintis buryeles" (186). Even once the hunt for Cecilia is underway, the saint does not suffer public exposure until her debate with the Roman prefect, Almachius. In the home of one of the first of the "sergeantz" who detain her, Cecilia convinces Maximus and his "folk echone" of the falseness of their faith. Hearing of Cecilia's successes, Almachius has the saint brought before him: "Almachius, that herde of this doynge,/Bad fecchen Cecile, that he myghte hire see..." (421-422). While the prefect's court is likely somewhat open, a domain for governance and other public affairs, Cecilia's questioning does not happen before a panel of wise men or ministers, and no interlocutor besides Almachius interrogates her, which again suggests a private encounter. The saint's execution, too, occurs within specific confines; Almachius bids his officers to boil her alive at her home: "And he weex wroth, and bad men shold hir lede/Hom til hir hous, and 'In hire hous,' quod he,/ 'Brenne hire right in a bath of flambes rede'" (513-515). Although the boiling fails, a final beheading attempt also takes place in the saint's house.

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Chaucer's source materials include Sherry L. Reames' articles "The Cecilia Legend as Chaucer Inherited It and Retold It: The Disappearance of an Augustinian Ideal," *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 55.1 (1980): 38-57 and "A Recent Discovery concerning the Sources of Chaucer's 'Second Nun's Tale'," *Modern Philology: A Journal Devoted to Research in Medieval and Modern Literature*, 87.4 (1990): 337-361.

Like the act of translation, Cecilia works her grace, her ability to persuade and convert in interior spaces. She seems intimately connected to these spaces from the beginning of the legend when she and her new husband, Valerian meet on the prescribed night to consummate their marriage:

The nyght cam, and to bedde moste she gon  
With hire housbonde, as ofte is the manere,  
And pryvely to hym she seyde anon,  
“O sweet and wel beloved spouse deere,  
Ther is a conseil, and ye wolde it heere...” (141-145)

The bedroom is both a space of coercion, or at least expectation, and liberation for Cecilia, where she awaits her fate, but also hides a secret, “a conseil.” As she explains to Valerian, the secret turns out to be an angel who seems to have arranged a spiritual marriage with Cecilia. The “conseil” is not just the creeds and rituals of Cecilia’s unlawful faith, but an other-worldly relationship with some kind of physical commitment. In this first private space as in those that follow, Cecilia is able to bend the bonds of the marital contract and to redefine her connection with Valerian. So too in Urban’s illicit graveyard and in Maximus’ “safe house” Cecilia is able to get around the laws of Rome and to rewrite beliefs.

Aligning Cecilia with these nooks both encases the conversion group and opens up the saint. As in Cecilia’s etymology, the saint merges with the space of redemption, which might open up the holy

body, as often happens in martyr legends, to inspection, to find out what makes it tick. Yet, much of the liberation that Cecilia discovers, enjoys, and deploys in these spaces is rhetorical since these enclosures enable her preaching and debates. The saint's affiliation with these locations, the dimensionalizing of her, seems to threaten to turn her into an object, something to be marveled at, spoken through, or lived in. While complicated agency and physical status are common for the martyr who is always on the verge of dying or expected to be dead, it does not posit Cecilia as an especially lively character<sup>31</sup>. The spaces and the rhetorics of Cecilia's legend at first seem to distract from an exploration of the material vitality of the saint. And still, Cecilia, ever "lyk a bisy bee," ever active, remains lively and vibrant; there is a kind of blazing, rolling activity that moves her in Chaucer's translation despite the threat of rhetorical dispersal:

And right so as thise philosophers write  
That hevene is swift and round and eek brennynge,  
Right so was faire Cecilie the white  
Ful swift and bisy evere in good werkyng,  
And round and hool in good perseveryng,  
And brennyng evere in charite ful brighte. (113-118)

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<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen refers to Cecilia as "still and confident" in the first chapter of *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003: 22). Although Cohen is writing more about the time that Cecilia seems to inhabit and embody than the structure of her legend, I think a very different reading of the saint develops once we move beyond the prologue. Cecilia does remain confident, but the stillness of the tale's introduction is shattered on a number of levels.

## *Converting Things*

What maintains this vitality in *Second Nun's Tale*? Where is its source? Its sustenance? What makes Cecilia so very persuasive? As Staley points out, Chaucer's version of Cecilia's legend foregrounds the saint: "Chaucer subtly reshaped the legend in order to highlight Cecilia herself. She dominates Chaucer's account in ways she does not other medieval English lives of Cecilia."<sup>32</sup> Cecilia becomes a kind of hero, a protagonist in almost a novelistic sense in the *Second Nun's Tale* as she rolls through challenges, tortures, grilling, boiling, and beheading with indefatigable aplomb. Not only does Cecilia have real pluck, but nearly every act hinges on her presence or direction. Valerian and Tiburce's conversions and subsequent martyrdoms shift into the background<sup>33</sup>, transformed into one step in Cecilia's conversion of Maximus, the Roman officer sent to silence her:

But whan they were to the place broght  
to tellen shortly the conclusioun,  
They nold encese ne sacrificise right noght,  
But on hir knees they setten hem adoun  
With humble herte and sad devocioun,  
And losten bothe hir hevedes in the place.  
Hir soules wenten to the Kyng of grace.

This Maximus, that saugh this thing bityde,

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<sup>32</sup> Staley, 205.

<sup>33</sup>Sherry Reames finds that in the Franciscan version of Cecilia's life which Chaucer used for the second part of his translation, Valerian and Tiburce had significantly reduced roles, so at least some of Cecilia's vibrancy might be attributed to the poet's sources (Reames 1990).

With pious teeris tolde it anonright... (393-401)

The beheadings of Cecilia's husband and his brother immediately become the property of Maximus, who uses the miraculous sight of the brothers' souls' ascension as part of his preaching. Even before this rapid appropriation, Valerian and Tiburce seem elided into a single entity, a tandem "they" in their final objections and executions. A short "conclusioun" indeed.

But Cecilia cannot accomplish this eclipsing entirely alone. At nearly every important turning point – conversion, confrontation, expiration – in the narrative, Cecilia's efforts are accompanied by the emergence of potent objects<sup>34</sup>. Valerian's acceptance of the saint's request for a chaste marriage and his conversion to Christianity depends on the revelation of the angel that Cecilia has claimed will protect her purity with any means necessary. So, to Pope Urban's hiding spot the new husband goes to profess and expose (though the couple has differing opinions on the order of these activities); following Urban's warm welcome, Valerian begins to see things:

And with that word anon ther gan appeere

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<sup>34</sup> Sanok posits that these material investments associate Cecilia's preaching with "lay access to theology" which results in a tale that "demonstrates a relation between women's sanctioned preaching and the theological substance and seriousness of lay devotion" (293). Emphasizing the relevance of materials, books, idols, vegetation, etc., also seems to validate women's participation in religious practice, for materiality is so often gendered as feminine, as with the Aristotelian "hyle" and the Platonic "chora." My understanding of the relationship between gender and primal matter grows, of course, out of Judith Butler's commentary on Plato's *Timeaus*, and Luce Irigaray's reading of it, in Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993: especially 36-49).

An oold man clad in white clothes cleere,  
That hadde a book with lettre of gold in hond,  
And gan before Valerian to stonde. (200-203)

Although this conceivably evangelical apparition<sup>35</sup> does not qualify as an object, he is not exactly a living being either. He appears as an “oold man,” but is not constrained by the laws that typically govern earthly bodies as he is able to disappear at will: “Tho vanysshed this olde man, [Valerian] nyste where” (216). And as Valerian’s baptismal process ensues, the gilded book emerges as the focal point:

And on his book right thus he gan to rede:  
“O Lord, o feith, o God, withouten mo,  
O Cristendom, and Fader of alle also,  
Aboven alle and over alle everywhere.”  
This wordes al with gold ywriten were. (207-210)

While the reading material is evocative – though perhaps not for the newly initiated – the excerpted section is hardly remarkable, yet the golden letters in the ghostly text fascinate, awe-inspiring enough to cause Valerian “as deed” to “fil doun for drede” (204). The vision then speaks to the stunned novice, and the “olde man” asks, “Leevestow

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<sup>35</sup> This figure has been identified with St. Paul, since the text Valerian reads is from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 4.5-6. (See Florence H. Ridley’s Explanatory Notes to the *Second Nun’s Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., gen. editor, Larry Benson [Boston, 1987], 945.) The evanescence of this “oold man,” however, seems to connect him more with the angel that looks after Cecilia than a representation of ecclesiastical authority or history. The choice of epistles also seems curious as an oath. Nevertheless, the epistle is appropriate as it is concerned with the completion of conversion and the separation of the Ephesians from their fellow Gentiles in thought and action. It also emphasizes the physical connections, the network of Christ’s followers: “That we...may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.” This insistence on the believers as a kind of connective tissue is taken up in the *Second Nun’s Tale* with surprising effects.

this thyng or no?" (212) To which Valerian replies, "I leeve all this thyng.../For sother thyng than this, I dar wel say,/Under the hevене no wight thynke may" (213-215). "Thyng" in this exchange clearly refers to the profession of faith made through Valerian's reading: that is, the God of Christendom is the one true god. Yet, repeating the ambiguous term "thyng," instead of any number of other more specific terms, underlines the strange presence and ephemerality, the weight and the dissolution of the golden lettered book and the Pauline specter<sup>36</sup>. *Thyng* here does not only gesture at the new belief, the oath-swearing, and the submission to the Law, but it also affirms the reality and the significance of the glittering book: as Valerian says, no living being could think a truer thing.

This ritualized dialogue also reminds that this book, the appearance of the old man, and the flowers and angels that materialize later in the narrative count as things and not objects<sup>37</sup>. Shannon Gayk summarizes the differences between things and objects in her article on things in the *Prioress' Tale* thus:

Strictly speaking, a thing is not an object. The things stands at the crux of subject and object, of the singular and the universal...Insofar as things lie before and outside cognition, they resist our attempts to objectify them, to render them the

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<sup>36</sup> For a look at another tale in which Chaucer highlights thing-power, see Shannon Gayk, "To wondre upon this thyng": Chaucer's Prioress's Tale,," *Exemplaria* 22.2 (2010): 138-156. Kellie Robertson explores even more broadly the medieval ideas of things in her article "Medieval Things: Materiality, Historicism, and the Premodern Object" (*Literature Compass*, 5/6 [2008]: 1059-1080.)

<sup>37</sup> Gayk 140.

passive objects of our interpretation and categorization. In this respect, things are other than and antecedent to objects (140).

And Jane Bennett offers a similar explanation of this distinction, noting that objects are not like things because things are “vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.”<sup>38</sup> Such resistant and excessive things that are “as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension”<sup>39</sup> cluster around Cecilia. Valerian’s book was obviously not made by any human subject (and cannot in fact be properly modified by any possessive noun), and it is not available as a tool or an item to be incorporated into a context constructed by a more conventionally active subject. Even its original author, now a kind of heavenly hologram straddling animate and inanimate realms, can no longer lay claim to it. These things, not directly crafted by any human but still entangled in human production and human theologies (this is not, after all, a burning bush or the unmediated voice of a divine being), flaunt their unknowability, their failure to be possessed and even to be observed, since Valerian must perform a tacit submission (he is “meke as evere was any lomb” [199]) before he is permitted to see them. This unmoored golden book, more through the force of its unexpected appearing than through the persuasiveness of its doctrine, enacts the conversion that Cecilia

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<sup>38</sup> Bennett 5.

<sup>39</sup> Bennet 20.

initiated. Likewise, when Valerian manages to return to his new wife, he discovers more heavenly objects presented by Cecilia's custodial angel – two floral crowns, lilies for him and roses for her. The angel explains:

“Fro paradys to yow have I hem broght,  
Ne nevere mo ne shal they roten bee,  
Ne lese hir soot savour, trusteth me...” (228-230)

These flowers from “paradys,” a place perhaps earthly, perhaps heavenly (or as in *Pearl*, able to move between both levels), boast a surfeit of vitality; they will never die and never fade. These wondrous things follow their own agenda: their incorruptibility cannot be and is not explained in the text, rendering them both natural, a recognizable part of nature with all the expected attributes of roses and lilies, and not exactly living (or maybe extra-animate) since they cannot decay; they can be seen only by those who are “chaast and hate vileynye” (231) which suggests that these vegetal things discern, make choices, or at least react in a mode that cannot be called entirely passive. For instance, Valerian's brother, Tiburce, perhaps because of his potential for good works or perhaps through Valerian's prayer<sup>40</sup>, may smell but not see the flowers at first. Altering their sensible effects given the readiness of the perceiver, the flowers enter into a mutable relationship with Tiburce. And even in their invisible state the crowns

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<sup>40</sup> “I have a brother,” quod Valerian tho,/”That in this world I love no man so./I pray yow that my brother may han grace/To knowe the trouthe, as I do in this place.” (235-238)

retain the power to penetrate by their scent the very heart of the would-be believer:

“For though I hadde hem in myne handes two,  
The savour myghte in me no depper go.  
The sweete smel that in myn herte I fynde  
Hath chaunged me al in another kynde.” (249-242)

Although the thing is entirely outside and unknowable to Tiburce, the flowers’ aroma is powerful enough to modify the sniffer’s very nature, rearranging him at a molecular level before leading him to comprehend the truth of the “myracle of thise coronoes tweye” (270) and finally, after quite a long bit of preaching by Cecilia, to seek out Urban for his own baptism.

These injected things redistribute vitality in Cecilia’s legend. Undoubtedly, Cecilia shows herself to be a worthy and convincing teacher in her own right, but still, the intrusion and the promise of things in connection with Cecilia’s influence accomplish the narrative’s major conversions. The saint’s reliance on things to participate in her miracles contests the idea that she is more vital (or more chosen) than others, which perhaps accounts for the general perception that the *Second Nun’s Tale* and Cecilia in particular lack vigor. The tale spreads out the vital energy and even privileges the role that the material world has to play in religious experience. Perhaps Cecilia’s power is drawn from the recognition of this vitality, her ability to enable and to submit to the dynamism of these arrivals. And to a

certain extent, Cecilia's own propensity for resistance – her impenetrability (“round and hool”) and her vocal redefinitions of kinship and citizenship, as well as her predetermined martyrdom – as signaled by the crown of roses – align her more with the thing vitality than with a human vitality. The non-human objects are not just her tools but her compatriots: that everyone is turning into a dead body around her seems to confirm such a reading.

### ***Getting in Touch with the Inanimate***

In Cecilia's universe, which is at once temporally distant from the world of the poet and perhaps also, if we follow Staley in believing that Chaucer might have deployed the legend to imagine a reformed church hierarchy, potentially very close to the poet's contemporary world, things have a vitality that even certain animate beings, like Almachius, lack. Although the *Second Nun's Tale* does not pinpoint the source of the life force or even locate definitively the impetus for conversion, Chaucer's translation of the life of Cecilia centers on the vital energies of things and in particular the powerful effects of nonhuman energy in conjunction with the human energy.

Cecilia's final moments dramatize this force. After failing to be boiled for a night and a day, Cecilia is subjected to a beheading attempt, which like the fiery bath does not finish her off. Only

permitted three strokes, the “tormentour” gives up on Cecilia: “But half deed, with hir nekke ycorven there,/He lefte hir lye, and on his wey he went” (533-534). Like those unfading crowns of roses and lilies, Cecilia possesses an apparent excess of vitality as she is able to endure three days beyond her execution. In a very thorough reading of the *Second Nun* set, David Raybin argues in part that, in this tale, Chaucer responds to Dante’s infernal bodily figures – that is, the paradoxical figures that suffer effective and lively torments in hell without souls but apparently with bodies – by pushing “the idea of death as an escape from fleshly life beyond what would seem to be its logical limit, suggesting the possibility of a kind of invisible death that comes not *after* life but *in* life”<sup>41</sup>. As often is the case with logical limits, reversals abound; where Raybin sees the death in life, I would argue that Cecilia demonstrates the reverse, a defiant vitality that is severed in this protracted textual moment from the notion of body, incorruptibility, and soul.

Moreover, even particularized, Cecilia works as the connective tissue between the things that surround and surprise her and the members of her burgeoning community. In her vulnerable state, Cecilia manages to keep up her proselytizing and to distribute her belongings:

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<sup>41</sup> Raybin, "Chaucer's Creation and Recreation of the 'Lyf of Seynt Cecile'." *The Chaucer Review* 32.2 (1997): 206.

And hem she yaf hir moebles and hir thyng,  
And to the Pope Urban bitook hem tho,  
And sede, "I axed this of hevene kyng,  
To han respit thre dayes and namo  
To recomende to yow, er that I go,  
Thise soules, lo, and that I myghte do werche  
Heere of myn hous perpetuely a cherche." (540-546)

Cecilia's legacy and her final desires are bound up in things; doling out her possessions seems to be akin to or even a part of last sermons. The repeated grouping – saint, confined space, teachable opponent(s), and vivid thing – produces a kind of conversional magic. In such small groups, the relationship is highlighted: no one converts in isolation, but no one converts in a cathedral either. There is a kind of cellular unity in these mini-congregations that idealizes the diffuse authority and mutability of the ancient church but also stages configurations that could happen in any period<sup>42</sup>.

These linked groups, it seems, might qualify as examples of Deleuzeguattarian *assemblages*. Jane Bennett defines this concept as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within."<sup>43</sup> Positing Cecilia as a member of such a formation reaffirms the human life's connection to a nonhuman life, even

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<sup>42</sup> Grossi argues that Chaucer amplifies the community, particularly the one that surrounds Cecilia, that appears in the Franciscan abridgement. While the poet "relegates Almachius to a sort of epistemological solitary confinement," he renders Cecilia the standard bearer of common sense and represents Rome as naturally inclined to support the saint (Grossi 304).

<sup>43</sup> Bennett, 23-4

suggesting that the human life may not be at the top of the vitality chain. The saint does not always take the lead in her conversions, and in the final assemblage, the house-church and Cecilia's furniture seem more durably dynamic than the dying human. Opening up the "hool and rond" Cecilia (though she seems to open herself to these confederacies even before the beheading) to the influence of the assemblage, to contact with a variety of things reminds that she (and we) are not always in charge.

The *Second Nun's Tale* stages the effects of vital things in the saint's life. It is not just ensouled beings that live, and it is not just heavenly actants that play a role in living exemplary lives. Yet, it seems to me that the assemblages of the Cecilia legend might also inform the larger structure of the *Canterbury Tales* and the evolving understanding of the hagiographic genre. The Canterbury pilgrims seem the perfect medieval example of an assemblage with their contestations and roiling reformations of the company's topography. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has pointed out, the pilgrimage and structure of the tales themselves move by "rhizomatic drift."<sup>44</sup> The compilation is varied and nonhierarchical, prone to welcome unanticipated new members like the Canon Yeoman, whose tale is entwined with that of

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<sup>44</sup>Cohen, 23. "The *Tales* combine politics, religion, art, commerce, social critique into an unsynthesized amalgam of romance, hagiography, history, fabliaux, fantasy, sermons, exemplary narratives, poetry, prose. They produce a motley assortment of persons who often overstep the boundaries of their textuality and begin to act as if alive."

the Second Nun, and aimed at a hazy target. Bennett explains that the very idea of the assemblage developed in response to the exigencies and awarenesses of late twentieth-century globalization, which recognized that the many parts of “this giant whole” were connected but also irreconcilable<sup>45</sup>. Perhaps we see a similar awareness in the shifting purposes and evolving vitalities of hagiography in the latter part of the fourteenth century. From the confines of the monastery to the chaos of the city, the *vita* for the extra-monastic audience must contend with an influx of newly animated entities.

Moreover, it seems as though the conscious appropriation, the taking as an object or artifact, or even as a thing, of the life genre guides the Pearl-poet and Chaucer toward a consideration of materiality itself. The glittering visions, buildings, and landscapes in *Pearl* and the “throbbing confederations” in *Second Nun’s Tale* illustrate the expansion of the category of the life, which more and more concerns itself not only with the rhetorics of salvation but the vital forces that animate forms saintly, not so saintly, and even nonhuman. Assemblages produce new forms without consuming their constituent parts. “A form in which the materials themselves have a say”<sup>46</sup>: maybe what we see in the secular appropriations of hagiographies is that life begins to have a say in its own genre.

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<sup>45</sup> Bennett 23.

<sup>46</sup> Cohen 20.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Entanglements: The Monk's Tale, Piers Plowman, and the Mesh*

*I seigh his sleves purfiled at the hond  
With grys, and that the fyneste of a lond;  
And for to festne his hood under his chyn,  
He hadde of gold ywroght a ful curious pyn;  
A love-knotte in the gretter ende ther was.  
His heed was balled, that shoon as any glas,  
And eek his face, as he hadde been enoynt.  
He was a lord ful fat and in good poynt;  
His eyen stepe, and rollynge in his heed,  
That stemed as a forneys of a leed... (GP, 195-202)<sup>1</sup>*

The Monk we meet in Chaucer's *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* has an air of epicureanism about him. Enclosed in plush squirrel furs and ornamented with gold, he becomes the type of thing, glittering and luxurious, that so transfixes the *Pearl-Dreamer*. The sheen that coats his head and face, perhaps a greasiness or perhaps a more appealing glow of a man "in good poynt," renders him rather inapproachable, and also defines the Monk by his costume. The rolling eyes and steam-pipe energy, which might be the force responsible for his love of "venerie" (166), associate the Monk with excess both material and humoral. Like the Miller, whose mouth is described as "as greet...as a greet forneys" (559), the Monk blazes and roils. Read as a mark of his moral inadequacies, the Monk's vaporous

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<sup>1</sup> This and all further references to the *Canterbury Tales* are to the *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

inclinations are often presumed to result from unconstrained immersion in bodily pleasures<sup>2</sup>. Yet, Monk's simile does not seem to stop at image – it is not the suggestion of any cauldron, but a leaden one, a dark, heavy, mineral presence that not only points out the Monk's fiery passions and personality, but also underscores the importance of his material investments<sup>3</sup>.

Likewise, in the *General Prologue* as in the *Prologue to the Monk's Tale*, the Monk's interests and presence have less to do with the pious enterprises expected of a cleric, less to do with questions of devotion and ethics, than with animals, fashion, and corporeal desires. These predilections to a certain extent overtake the Monk's identity and his portrait. Animal metaphors and characters populate in both accounts: not only as items in the Monk's wardrobe, but as the objects of his hunting trips and extravagant dinners ("A fat swan loved he best of any roost" [205]) and as the companions – dogs and horses – for his excursions. Cloisters are compared to oysters and monks to fish. The Monk's portrait even concludes with a close-up of the man's horse: "His palfrey was as broun as is a berye" (207). Replaced throughout

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<sup>2</sup> See Benson's Explanatory Notes to the *General Prologue*, 807.

<sup>3</sup> For Robert Worth Frank, Jr., this investment conjures Chaucer's own residence in Aldgate, where the poet might have witnessed the ironworks of bell-founders "busy melting metal for buckles or pots or bells" ("Chaucer and the London Bell-Founders," *Modern Language Notes* 68.8 [Dec., 1953], pp. 527.) In a less mineral vein, Paul Beichner reads the Monk as a functionary, an "up-to-date, progressive, an 'organization man'" who served as an outrider, doing business for a monastery outside of the cloister ("Daun Piers, Monk and Business Administrator." *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 34.4 [1959]: 611-619).

by this menagerie, the Monk is depicted as disproportionate in his love for animal life, a love that renders him a little more and a little less than human,

Yet the Host, later in the *Prologue to the Monk's Tale*, construes this excess differently. He notices the Monk's robust and commanding demeanor: "Thou art a maister, whan thou art at hoom" (*PMT*, 1938), remarking even on his "ful fair skyn." Apparently moved by the Monk's vigorous presence and gleaming skin, the Host bemoans Don Piers' removal from the gene pool:

Thou woldest han been a tredefowel aright.  
Haddestow as greet a leeve as thou hast myght  
To parfourne al thy lust in engendrure,  
Thou haddest bigeten ful many a creature. (1945-1948)

In part, this commentary functions as a critique of the Monk's misplaced zeal, in particular his gluttony which has translated into "so wyd a cope" (1949)<sup>4</sup>, than of clerical celibacy, yet these remarks again highlight the Monk's material dispositions, connecting him to yet another animal (a chicken) and suggesting that his breeding endeavors would produce "ful many a creature" rather than explicitly human

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<sup>4</sup> Frank points out that "cope" is a term for the clay shell that works to form molten metal into the proper shape in bell-making: "First a clay 'core,' exactly corresponding in shape and volume to the inside of the bell, was formed and hardened by baking. Then the 'thickness,' originally of wax but by Chaucer's day loam or earth, was built up on the core. It corresponded in shape and thickness to the bell to be cast. Over the thickness a thick clay 'cope' was built. Then the clay cope was raised, the thickness was destroyed, the cope replaced over the core, and the metal poured into the space between core and cope" (Frank, 527). Although Frank further explains that the term 'cope' was not used in this sense until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the resonance of formation, earthiness, and objects is at least relevant here.

children. Even if the Host is “playing” with the Monk, as he later claims (1963), the same points about the Monk’s habits and affiliations are underscored in both the *General Prologue* and the prologue to the tale. He might be a good breeder, but of what exactly?<sup>5</sup> He is corpulent, but there is something praiseworthy, even sexy, in it. The Monk may be conspicuous for his girth, but his talents and his flaws, as well as the difference between them, prove hard to discern. Moreover, in resisting his innate, according to the Host, abilities to reproduce, the Monk shows his piety and his sincerity. Despite the Monk’s departures from traditional monastic codes – hunting rather than farming, holding to the new rather than studying the past – he does not become an entirely contradictory or hypocritical figure, just a slightly unorthodox one.

Even so, the Tale that ensues, a kind of legendary of mostly secular tragedies in which prideful or at least fortunate historical figures suffer a fall, is often read as a bad match for the Monk. For a figure so immersed in appearance and indulgence to recite, with a certain measure of satisfaction, a long list of the comeuppances seems rather incongruous.<sup>6</sup> The Monk’s originally promised tale (“or two, or

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<sup>5</sup> Tison Pugh claims that the Host with this remark calls the Monk and the Nun’s Priest “chicken-fuckers.” See Pugh, “Queering Harry Bailly: Gendered Carnival, Social Ideologies, and Masculinity Under Duress in the “Canterbury Tales.” *Chaucer Review* 41.1 (2006): 59.

<sup>6</sup> For a reading of the Monk’s flawed deployment of his exemplary materials, see Douglas J. Wurtele, “Chaucer’s monk: an errant exegete,” *Literature and Theology* 1.2 (1987): 191-209. B. W. Lindeboom presents an alternative understanding of the

three”), however, complicates this reading in that his aim is to “seyn the lyf of seint Edward” after he has run through a few “tragedies” (1970, 1971). This context, the unfulfilled promise of a life and unsuitable narrator, posits the life genre as a kind of literary-historical *telos* while also forestalling the notion of teleology, literary or otherwise. Although he never manages to squeeze Edward in among the tragedies he favors, his intentions conform to his station at some level. The tale also imagines the possibility of intersections between the lives that the Monk narrates and the unspoken saint’s life. Most importantly, though, not only does the Monk claim to be progressing toward hagiographic topics, but the legendary structure of his tale also sets up this possibility. We are primed for hagiography in the *Monk’s Tale* – it is the perfect place for it – and yet we never get it. The tale thwarts our expectations, and may even be going so far as to disallow the saint’s life, to banish it poetically. Taken together with that of the Second Nun, two compositions supposedly drafted early in Chaucer’s career<sup>7</sup>, the *Monk’s Tale* indicates an ambivalence toward hagiography

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Monk, claiming that the Monk’s selection of tragedies permits the narrator to interrogate his own beliefs and to arrive at a more harmonious and appropriate representation of self in his article: “Chaucer’s Monk Illuminated: Zenobia as Role Model.” *Neophilologus* 92.2 (2008): 339-350. While I agree that the Monk described in the prologues seems an unexpected candidate for offering a moral education, I am not sure that either as a character or as a teacher the Monk must be perfectly fitted to his subject matter. Perhaps part of the point is the disjunction that seems entirely reasonable and even desirable to the Monk (and the Harry Bailey, too).

<sup>7</sup> See Benson’s introductory remarks to the tale (*The Riverside Chaucer*, 929-930). Lindeboom comes down on the side of a later composition or at least revision in his article (“Chaucer’s Monk Illuminated,” 341-342).

and about what it might contribute to a project like the *Canterbury Tales*, but it also implies the poet's repeatedly grappling with this problem.

This chapter will consider the shape and the attachments of later 14<sup>th</sup>-century reformulations and even implied repudiations of the saint's life. A brief examination of one of the tales included in the Monk's collection builds on the thing-powers in *The Second Nun's Tale* and offers an example of and an introduction to the structure of a life that flirts with hagiographic hallmarks without explicitly adopting them. Then, turning to William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, this chapter's chief interest, I explore the afterlife of hagiographic forms which continually take up the question of the vitality. The dislodged and unhallowed lives in Langland's dream vision revise a focus on vertical movements, looking at the living being in the process of sanctification, to horizontal ones in which the life is produced as much by other lives, worldly materials, historical contingencies – produced in a kind of “mesh” – as by whatever lurks above, suggesting that the living being is not something deposited or static, not a monad, nor even a body sewn around a divinely unbroken soul, but rather a fluid part of multiple ecologies. In imagining the organization of Chaucer and Langland's saint-less lives as a mesh, I employ Timothy Morton's

principal emblem for achieving what he calls “the ecological thought.”

Morton revisits this image often in his project and defines it thus:

The ecological thought imagines interconnectedness, which I call *the mesh*. Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom? The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully ‘itself.’<sup>8</sup>

I will return below to Morton’s *mesh*, particularly as it applies to encounters and perspectives in *Piers Plowman*, and the awareness that this image of interconnection arouses.

### ***Zenobian Nexus***

If the Monk’s ultimate end is to work his way around to the life of Edward, there must be some correspondences between the tales he does manage to address and the idea of historically-inflected sanctity. Zenobia’s story, in this respect, is especially illuminating. It is an enigmatic tale: the only narrative in the Monk’s set that describes the fall of a woman and the longest tale in the grouping. Although the source of Zenobia’s account is easy enough to trace – it is taken from

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<sup>8</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, (2010): 15. As strangely as Morton phrases and insists on phrasing this idea, he offers a convincing reason for his expression - he claims to be attempting to critique and develop a structural approach to the problem: “Of course there are ecological thoughts. And this book has no monopoly on ecological thinking. But there is a particular kind of thinking that I call *the ecological thought*. It runs like a strand of DNA code through thousands of other kinds of thoughts. Moreover, the *form* of the ecological thought is at least as important as its *content*. It’s not simply a matter of *what* you’re thinking about. It’s also a matter of *how* you think. Once you start to think the ecological thought, you can’t unthink it: it’s a sphincter – once it’s open, there’s no closing” (4).

Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* – what the tale is doing in the collection remains perplexing. Does it properly belong to another Tale, another teller, another work entirely, like the *Legend of Good Women*? Why Zenobia? What does her undoing add to or underscore about the Monk's project? Even if such questions of intention were fully resolvable, the narrative of Zenobia's journey from freedom to imprisonment would still stand out. Unlike Sampson or Julius Caesar, Zenobia is not an immediately recognizable figure, nor is her biography the stuff of adage. The account of her fall from majesty reads as dramatically as the other tales, but its eccentric, even intentionally exotic, details and the tale's form set it apart.

Zenobia's life becomes a kind of miniature of the Monk's compilation, providing a meeting point for several forms of hagiography. The tale reflects the Monk's needs and training in its form: as a type of "lay saint's life"<sup>9</sup>, Zenobia's story seems a generically appropriate exemplar for the Monk in spite of the tale's other enigmatic properties. While Lindeboom claims that Chaucer's readership would have noticed the poet's efforts to mold his Italian source into a hagiographic history, it seems to me that readers might first appreciate the rhetoric of the life foregrounded in this way. Although it is striking that Zenobia stands as the sole female in Chaucer's adaptation of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum*, the Syrian

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<sup>9</sup> Lindeboom, 348.

queen does not acquiesce to traditionally feminine roles<sup>10</sup>. She hunts, governs, conquers, resists and redefines marriage. As the Monk puts it, “From hire childhede I fynde that she fledde,/Office of wommen, and to wode she wente” (2256-57). Like the narrator, Zenobia seems to have much in common with animal life, impelling her even to imitate their living habits: “She dorste wilde beestes dennes seke,/And rennen in the montaignes all the nyght,/ And slepen under a bussh...”(2263-65). Yet this apparent metaphor for womanly waywardness and disorder reverses sharply. As in touch with a version of unfettered nonhuman vitality (and we must wonder if it is *vitality* that a hunter pursues) as Zenobia at first appears, the strict controls she applies to her sex life contradict her wildchild portrait.

They lyved in joye and in felicitee,  
 For ech of hem hadde oother lief and deere,  
 Save o thyng: that she wolde nevere assente,  
 By no wey, that he shoulde by hire lye  
 But ones, for it was hir pleyn entente  
 To have a child, the world to multiplie... (2277-81)

One of the stranger elements of Zenobia’s narrative, the pattern of her sex life, sketches out a nuanced character unlike others in the *Tale*

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<sup>10</sup> And if we take seriously the idea that Zenobia functions as foil for the Monk, a projection through which he may examine his own tastes, habits, and relationship to the didactic batch of tales he tells, then it only makes sense that Zenobia’s gender should tip toward the masculine. As Harry Bailey has insisted, the Monk is a great specimen of masculinity, so if Zenobia is his textual reflection, perhaps there are no women in the Monk’s Tale. For a more precise examination of masculinity in this tale and others, see Tison Pugh’s, “Queering Harry Bailly: Gendered Carnival, Social Ideologies, and Masculinity Under Duress in the “Canterbury Tales.” *Chaucer Review* 41.1 (2006): 39-69.

whose most significant attribute is to suffer at Fortune's whim, which is not so unique an experience. But before Zenobia's defeat, she already has quirks. Irrational in her highly structured marital routines, Zenobia seems intent to protect a version of her freedom by imposing such parameters, but, at the same time, she consents, perhaps unwittingly, to other limits. She decides when Odenake, her husband, will be allowed to "doon his fantasye" (2285), but attaches this decision to biological rhythms and to the mysteries of conception. Moreover, her desire to have children suggests that Zenobia's "entente" may not be entirely about extending the apparent freedom of her untamed youth, as both pregnancy and motherhood produce attachments not easily escaped or controlled. In fact, this arrangement resembles in both purpose and action a chaste, or semi-chaste, marriage. Despite the tone of censure in the Monk's description of Zenobia's sexual habits, the queen stands as icon of perfect wifhood, perhaps even perfect Christian wifhood though both the narrator and likely the reader would be aware of this inaccuracy. Even so, Zenobia's moral project assumes a decidedly Christian tenor; not only does she devote herself to reading primarily about "how she in vertu myghte hir lyf dispende" (2310), but Zenobia also tells Odenake that "[i]t was to wyves lecherie and shame,/...if that men with hem pleyde" (2297-98). Lechery, virtuous living, spousal restraints, the

Monk's Zenobia hits recognizably righteous notes which testify to the Monk's integrity and complement his own knotty piety.

The hagiographic correspondences in the Zenobia narrative do not stop at her desire for chastity and interest in edifying reading material. The tale begins with Zenobia's noble lineage and her unchildish childhood spent outside the usual social circles and requirements. Although she ultimately gives in to marriage, her initial resistance ("She kepte hir maydenhod from every wight," 2269) aligns the queen with the virgin martyr tradition. And Zenobia's conspicuous successes as a ruler affiliate her with the royal saints, perhaps even with Saint Edward whose appearance in the Monk's catalogue she preempts. Like the Monk, Zenobia has a taste for the hunt and for luxury, but also wishes to conform to a relatively austere moral code. B. W. Lindeboom contends that Zenobia's tale acts as foil and warning to the Monk, that the Monk singles out this particular story to validate his own behaviors – showing precedent for mixing upright living with outdoor enthusiasm – and, perhaps less consciously, to chastise his excesses with Zenobia's tragic end.<sup>11</sup> The life's reach, however,

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<sup>11</sup> "To begin with, there is their common love of hunting, which may well have been the exact reason why Zenobia was made to participate in the Monk's histories. If so, then her example is used to demonstrate that this is something that need not keep one from a celibate life or taking time off for the pursuit and contemplation of virtue. With respect to the Monk, the moral of her story thus becomes a warning at his address. If this mighty huntress, so noble, beautiful, virtuous and courageous could fall so low, let the Monk—as keen a hunter, goodlooking and chaste as per his vow, but a slave to his appetites—beware unless he be humbled likewise." (Lindeboom, 348.)

extends beyond passive reception of repetition, as Zenobia's life works to touch – to reflect and correct – the life of the narrator himself.

The range of the Zenobia narrative goes further. It provides a bridge in the Monk's anthology of tragedies from biblical and mythological narratives to more contemporary histories. For a peripheral figure, in Chaucer's sources and in a broader view of history, Zenobia takes on a rather connective formal role in the *Tale*. Acting as a substitute, perhaps, for the promised life of Edward, the historicity of the Zenobia story becomes important. It at once speaks to the local, although somewhat distant, history of the tale's audience, both pilgrim and actual, and to an exotic and even more remote past. As a conqueror and then a prisoner, the queen is a point of contact, often described as a violent contact, between regions and peoples. Zenobia's history starts to look like a many-tentacled thing, a neuron of a life connecting time, place, genders, activities, example, and the authorial persona.

Zooming out, the *Tale's* anthological structure also seems to reflect the pattern established by the life of Zenobia. Although the *Monk's Tale* adopts the form of the legendary, it goes beyond the genre. While the legendary, and even compilations like *De Casibus*, are designed for portability, for disarticulation for feasts and sermons rendering the life discrete and distinct from those around it, the

Monk's selections move in the opposite direction. Because the narratives are remembered and spoken, we assume that Don Piers (and perhaps the poet, too, who also worked from memory) connects them, at least unconsciously. Intentionally removing the accounts from a chronology, the Monk invites this kind of speculation: "Though I by ordre telle nat thise thynges/...But tellen hem som bifore and some byhynde,/As it now comth unto my remembraunce" (1985-89). The possibility of other associations highlights the entanglements of the literary life, suggesting too that lives – and living beings – bestow upon and derive vitality from what surrounds them, a relationship that rethinks the hagiographic genre as well as the concept of life.

### ***Animating Allegory***

In a poem dedicated to polemic and figural representation, it seems almost foolhardy to look for an interest in vital energies. Concepts that double as habits of behavior like Dowel and characters that personify psychological faculties like the poem's Dreamer-narrator, Will make for the kinds of things sought after in and glossed by readers of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Most of the "beings" in Langland's poem hover between character and idea. Like Ymaginatif in Passus XII, the closer these apparitions come to something human, the more personality – or personhood – they accrue, the more apt they are to dissolve. Just as Ymaginatif mimics

the thinking and customs of Will, he evaporates: “and right myd that he vanysshed” (12.295)<sup>12</sup>. In a circuitous way, however, we discover that it is not so far-fetched to imagine these allegories as alive<sup>13</sup>.

Figures like Kynde Wit, Conscience, Anima, Ymaginatif, to name only a few, have many of the features that are believed to distinguish humans: they have bodies, move freely, and speak – at length in most cases. Gloton, the embodiment of that deadly sin, even suffers from graphic, if all too recognizable, digestive disturbances (5.354-57). They are also social presences, participating, for example, in rituals of court, marriage, and war. Although not exactly human, the figures that march through Will’s dreamscape enjoy a vitality robust enough to breathe life into theories. After Will exhausts Thought’s understanding

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<sup>12</sup> Quotations of the poem, cited parenthetically by passus and line number, are from William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A critical edition of the B-text based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by A. V. C. Schmidt (Everyman: London, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Anne Middleton writes that, in Passus IX of the A text, Will’s encounter with Wit and Thought sets up this pattern. Thought and Wit are likened through simile to Will – Thought looks like Will and Wit is long and thin like him. Different from figures like Clergie or Peace, Thought and Wit seem to have emerged from the Dreamer himself, and because of this association, they are not much use: “whatever Thought’s and Wit’s intrinsic capacities as faculties, the reader may at this signal justifiably begin to suspect that they resemble Will too much to do him any good” (Middleton, “William Langland’s *Kynde Name*: Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England,” in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1520*, ed. Lee Patterson [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993]: 39). Sarah Tolmie has noted a different type of dissolution in the poem, arguing that *Piers Plowman* is less about the narrative construction of personhood than it is about attempting to get out of the person to experience the thingness of the world more intensely. For her discussion of this self-effacing impulse, see “The Book of the World as I Found It: Langland and Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.” *Exemplaria* 20.4 (2008): 345-347. David Aers responds to the allegories from a slightly different angle, noting that Langland creates “an allegorical vision whose procedures makes it impossible to postulate individuals and their spiritualit independently of the politics and narratives within which they have life as determinate human beings” (Aers, “Visionary Eschatology : Piers Plowman.” *Modern Theology* 16.1 [2000]: 3-17.)

of the distinctions between Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, Thought directs the Dreamer to Wit: “’But Wit konne wisse thee.’ quod Thoght, ‘where tho thre dwelle;/Ellis woot I noon that kan, that now is alyve” (8.112-113). Thought implies here that Wit, and possibly his animated allegorical fellows, is indeed alive. Will does not seem surprised or at all unsettled by this allegation, nor does it bother him that his own faculties boast separate lives. What does it mean to think thought and wit outside the mind? How would these be gathered back in? Or to go a step too far, is this something that only things, like the personified figures, can think about themselves? Can they be allowed to think it? Sifting out a figure like Gluton or Repentance seems plausible enough, even salutary in the former’s case, yet separating Wit from Will is a more striking division. If Wit is “the knowledge derived from experience, the understanding that comes from reflection on what we sense and are (informally) told by others”<sup>14</sup>, then Will’s experiences, capacity for reflection, and even senses can be divorced from him. This separability assigns a certain vital energy to mental faculties or modes of perception and calls into question one’s mastery of these abilities as well as the knowledge they produce.

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<sup>14</sup> See Schmidt’s explanatory notes, p439.

Ymaginatif warns against questions like these and against too much curiosity about what makes the natural world tick<sup>15</sup>:

And so I seye by thee, that sekest after the whyes,  
And aresonedest Reson, a rebukyng as it were,  
And willest of briddes and of beestes and of hir bredyng knowe,  
Why some by alough and some aloft, thi likyng it were...  
And of the stonnes and of the sterres – thow studieth, as I leve,  
How evere beest outhir brid hath so breme wittes  
Clergie ne Kynde Wit ne knew nevere the cause,  
Ac Kynde knoweth the cause hymself, no creature ellis. (12.216-225)

Ymaginatif's solution to Will's queries about nature's workings, which Will had made not to Ymaginatif directly but to Clergie and Reason while Ymaginatif watched, is to berate him into abandoning his interest. For Ymaginatif, Will's inquisitiveness counts as prying, perhaps even a lascivious form of meddling given his study of the breeding "of briddes and of beestes." This knowledge of breeding, species differences, and natural objects belongs only to Kynde, even the keen minds of Clergie and Kynde Wit fail to comprehend the motivations of the natural world. Such admonitions about delving into the purposes of nature proliferate in the poem; as with close examination of the allegorical figures, the more Will interrogates and magnifies the subtleties of natural operations the more ephemeral the knowledge he gains. His inquiries are interrupted, condemned,

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<sup>15</sup> Michelle Karnes argues that the Aristotelian concept of imagination, which would have circulated in Langland's time, works resolve the experiential with the revelatory or the theological. It is a psychological space or presence that mediates between the sense perceptions and cognition, acting as a bridge between the material details of the world and the abstractions of thought. See Karnes, "Will's Imagination in Piers Plowman." *Journal of English & Germanic Philology* 108.1 (2009): 27-58.

displaced, or dispersed entirely by a waking moment. And still, despite the caveats, these questions about what animates nature as well as what living life entails refuse to go away.

The matter of living emerges first in the poem's prologue. In this first sleeping vision, Will benefits from a panoramic view of the landscape which his subsequent dreams will revisit. Although the Prologue passus spends time disparaging gluttonous beggars and outlining the poem's political concerns by introducing the King and his lunatic foil, it also indulges in surveying what this conjured community of human animals, allegorical figures, and nonhuman animals (the rat parliament in particular) is up to, its "liflode." A working life, perhaps that of a plowman or more broadly a person with tangible, productive crafts or skills, is deemed a "trewe lif" (Prol.120)<sup>16</sup>; life also is understood, even by such luminaries as the King, the Commune, and Kynde Wit to assume various shapes and standards: "The Kyng and the Comune and Kynde Wit the thridde/Shopen lawe and leaute – ech lif to knowe his owene" (Prol.121-122). And the "fair feeld ful of folk" differentiates, at least discursively, life activities.

Activity and demeanor, the work and show of living, seem applied to

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<sup>16</sup> These lines are heavily revised in the C-text. "Trewe lif" is omitted, and the section loses some of its ambiguity in favor of a specific valorization of agricultural work: Kynde Wyt and þe comune contreued alle craftes/And for most profitable a plogh gone þei make,/ With lele labour to lyue while lif on londe lasteth" (C, Prol, 144-146). It is not just a true or honest life that Kynde Wit favors, but an economic one. William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C-Text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1978; 1994). Further citations of the C-Text will refer to this edition and appear parenthetically, noting the version, passus, and line number.

the folk, something to put on as Will sees “[s]omme putten hem to the plough...somme putten hem to pride...[i]n preieres and penaunce putten hem manye” (Prol.20-25)<sup>17</sup>. But anchorites and hermits, who seem to be both part of the vision, the field, and detached from it by their very way of life are said to be living:

Al for love of Oure Lord lyveden ful streyte  
In hope to have heveneriche blisse –  
As ances and heremites that holden hem in hire selles,  
Coveiten nought in contree to cairen about  
For no likerous liflode hir likame to plese. (Prol.26-30)

So those with the least investment in fleshly indulgence can claim, at this point in Will’s development, to be living. This living is still, rooted to a particular place in contrast to the swarm of people in the field “werchyng and wandryng” (Prol.29). This distinction reinforces Ymaginitif’s counsel to avoid too much involvement in living, suggesting that the “liflode” represents a burden, something to cast off or to eschew.

As Ymaginitif explains, the key to natural wonders and banalities remains inaccessible; Kynde alone has the answers, tucking these away perhaps in the mysterious space of his allegorical characterization. Nonetheless, Ymaginitif’s claims cannot be taken as definitive. And as hidden as natural causes may be, their powerful

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<sup>17</sup> Another way to think of this is to imagine life composed of particular postures or gestures, as a kind of rhetorical and devotional performance. See Mary Clemente Davlin, “Devotional Postures in Piers Plowman B, With an Appendix on Divine Postures,” *Chaucer Review* 42.2 (2007): 161-179; John Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge, U.K., 2002).

energies give the dream its strange cast. But the surfeit of vital energy that animates every idea also proves rather unruly and even divisive in the poem. The partitioning of faculties, senses, ideas, souls, and other less categorizable things in *Piers Plowman* seems to dissect the living being, both the poet and the Dreamer; and to open up the living being in this way reflects a desire to generate insights into the forces that animate it. In an influential essay that examines the “occulted” signatory practices in the A-, B-, and C-versions of *Piers*, Anne Middleton argues that not only is the poem interested in exploring the mysteries of living, but it also endeavors to probe authorial and textual vitalities<sup>18</sup>. Middleton traces, in the first part of her essay, the effects of Langland’s erasure in modern critical approaches, which initially attempted to find Langland in the archive, to identify him through external references, to locate “Langland as the producer of the text rather than its product”<sup>19</sup>; this relationship is problematized by Middleton, for she suggests that discovering Langland even in external annotations does not definitively posit Langland as a producer. In fact, just the opposite happens as the needs of those making the records decide the shape of the author. But Langland does manage to assert, or at least to hypothesize, his own living presence by a series of

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<sup>18</sup> Anne Middleton, ‘William Langland’s “Kynde Name”: Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-century England’, in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson, Berkeley, 1990, 15-82.

<sup>19</sup> Middleton, 22.

subtle and anagrammatic signatures. These signatures take as “their referent...not the absent maker but his confectioned presence; a living ‘entente’ animated and reproduced in the act of reading. What the name inscribed in the poetic text proclaims is not the author’s verbal fabrication, but an ethical fabulation of which he makes himself the center; the value signified is not that of his craft but that of his life”<sup>20</sup>. This seems to suggest that by writing himself into the poem, Langland creates a live being in it; he is able to bring words to life; or at least this is the point and the desire of these inscriptions. My aim is to take this even a step further to claim that the inscriptions are the mark of Langland’s broader interest in animation, in what it takes to make something typically considered to be outside the frame of life – inert matter, the manuscript composed on dead skins and written with the dead juices of vegetal and animal beings – part of the living swarm. Can Langland’s signatures go beyond a verbal pun? Beyond the play of banners and badges and acrostics? I think Middleton does suggest this inscription matters to Langland, but I’m not sure she wants to acknowledge anything outside the rhetorical. This is not to suggest that the rhetorical does not have its own animating reach, and Middleton implies that *Piers Plowman* creates an assemblage – a text,

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<sup>20</sup> Middleton, 28.

poet, reader connection as a source of vitality for all<sup>21</sup>. Likewise the anagram produces an even more microscopic assemblage with words instead of text as the place of connection. For Middleton, these assemblages point back to an animate entity behind the text:

They encourage the reader's sense that the author's social, vocal, and even physical presence is also somehow "in" the text, that the words on the page represent a person as well as his product, and that it is his coherence as intelligible actor and the paradigmatic and exemplary form of his life, rather than the formal properties of the work as artifact, that secure its value to the user. They define a problematic of bodily presence and biographical integrity into the act of reading and specify the boundaries of meaning within which signatures are articulated as the literary career, the life-in-writing, not the single work.<sup>22</sup>

This passage articulates precisely the tension that I investigate below: how this vitality, its representation and its implications, becomes a problem, an idea, and a presence in the text.

In what follows, I will examine the implications of this ambivalent vision of the living being, a vision that seems intrusive and almost scientific but also resistant and evasive. Like the examples addressed in chapters 2 and 3, *Piers Plowman* employs hagiographic forms – sometimes referring to saints' lives as in the encounter with Anima and sometimes implanting the life directly into the poem's

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<sup>21</sup> "Occulted signatures induce in the reader a momentary high awareness of his operative arts of reading, a perception that is the counterpart of the bodily self-consciousness that both heralds authorial self-reference and supports its use in indicating an operative poetics. By foregrounding for an instant the textual medium itself, forcing one to notice not only the arts of making and reading such disclosures but also the shared social space and physical circumstances within which that art is exercised they insist on the embodied social dimension of literary processes." (Middleton, 33)

<sup>22</sup> Middleton, 36.

narrative (as directly as Langland ever does anything poetic) as in the salvation history in later passus – which sparks, it seems, a pervasive interest in vitality, in an animating force itself. In fact, Langland’s poem goes farther than Chaucer, the *Pearl*-poet, and the *SEL*-poet’s works in interrogating the implications and attachments of an unensouled vital energy. *Piers Plowman* is a poem that “thinks big”<sup>23</sup>, and the thinking of bigness is in part what opens the poem up to vital energies and more specifically to the forces and lives of its own circumstances, its own social, material, textual, and figural circumstances. Its many, markedly different textual iterations, its cinematic perspectives, its multiple dreams, and its allegorical pretensions indicate the poem’s universalist scope and ambitions.

Both the promise and the horror of such a dizzying perspective result from the vision Will experiences when he encounters the personification of nature, Kynde<sup>24</sup>. When Kynde catches up with Will,

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<sup>23</sup> This is Timothy Morton’s phrase that measures the reach of his “ecological thought.” Although I will return to Langland’s version of big thinking in the section dedicated to Kynde below, Morton defends his shift away from the local, claiming: “We may need to think bigger than totality itself, if totality means something closed, something we can be sure of, something that remains the same. It might be harder to imagine four and half billion years than abstract eternity. It might be harder to imagine evolution than to imagine abstract infinity. It’s a little humiliating. This ‘concrete’ infinity directly confronts us in the actuality of life on Earth” (Morton, 5). For a more extensive exploration of this notion, see Chapter 2, “Thinking Big” in Morton’s *The Ecological Thought* (20-58).

<sup>24</sup> Kynde is a figure who is intriguing and seemingly, appropriately endlessly productive. For the history, permutations, and implications of this allegory, see Hugh White’s *Nature and Salvation in Piers Plowman*. Cambridge [England: D.S. Brewer, 1988]; Mary C. Davlin, “Kynde knowing as a Middle English Equivalent for ‘Wisdom’ in Piers Plowman B.” *Medium Aevum* 50.1 (1981): 5-17; Masha Raskonikov, “Promising the Female, Delivering the Male: Transformations of Gender in *Piers*

he treats the Dreamer to a sublime trip to the “mountaigne that Myddelerth highte” (11.323) where Will surveys a diverse collection of flora and fauna. But the vision turns bitter when Will discovers what “thinking big” has led him to recognize – that human beings have been cut off from nonhuman beings:

I seigh floures in the fryth and hir faire colours  
And how among the grene gras grewe so manye hewes,  
And some soure and some swete – selkouth me thoughte:  
Of hir kynde and of hir colour to carpe it were to long.  
Ac that moost meved me and my mood chaunged -- (11.354-368)

After marveling at the diversity of color, vegetal life, and even the odors of the landscape, Will realizes that “Reson rewarded and ruled alle beestes/Save man and his make” (11.369-370); what seems a look at the teeming multitude of vital matter and, just before it, a glimpse into the instinctual patterns of animals (their post-mating habits in particular [11.336-343]), Will reads the scene as governed by Reason rather than Kynde, who has silently dissolved into the background<sup>25</sup>. That this perception moves Will, and moves him to anger and to demand answers from Reason, the latest interlocutor to appear, establishes the necessity and peril of thinking big. From the

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*Plowman*” *Body against Soul: Gender and Sowlehele in Middle English Allegory*, 181-188, and Gillian Rudd, “Thinking through earth in Langland’s *Piers plowman* and the Harley lyric ‘Erthe toc of erthe’.” *Ecotheology* 8.2 (2003): 137-149.

<sup>25</sup> As Raskolnikov contends, “The poem seems to take the view that ‘man’ alone is constituted so as to be able to experience his own contingency, to know himself as needy and mortal in ways unavailable to beasts” (185). This contingency becomes, it seems to me, the germ of ethical investment.

mountaintop, Will is able to see the scope of the corruption, the extent to which human animals have become unmoored, as well as to sense how important it is that humans get back into that milieu. Life, or more specifically human vitality, is not something that can be isolated, discovered, or set apart – that is one of the points of *Piers Plowman*. It is a poem that manages to think big and stay invested in things – in coats, armor, bodies, ploughs, dirt, and birds, among others. It returns not just to political, social, or experiential immediacy but also to an intimate materiality. Drawing out and drawing on a brand of vitality that balances between the material and the heavenly worlds, Langland portrays the living being as something fugitive, a moving, dismembering, and re-membering target, and something interlaced and dependent on this interlacing. This depiction seems to allow, too, for rewriting the life of Christ, a kind of hagiographical crux, as a life with murky intentions and a life very much attached to a vivid, quivering vitality. Although certain knowledge is hard to come by for Will or the reader, the importance of interconnectedness is never discounted<sup>26</sup>. Even as certain knowledge of this vitality and its implications becomes more improbable, the call to acknowledge one's

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<sup>26</sup> This chapter's interest in Langland's theories about material, vital, and ethical connectedness owes much to Masha Raskolnikov's book chapter "Promising the Female, Delivering the Male: Transformations of Gender in *Piers Plowman*" *Body against Soul: Gender and Soulehele in Middle English Allegory*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009. In this section, Raskolnikov claims that *Piers Plowman* posits the need for "interdependence," specifically homosocial interdependence, to achieve the answers which Will desires.

implicatedness in a present, material situation and to be responsible to and for human and nonhuman beings in this environment resounds. The investigation that follows is divided into four parts, each of which attempts to look closely at some of the important encounters in the poem that take up the problem of vitality and its relationship to environments, places, beings, and things. Addressing Will's meetings with Haukyn and Anima, and his participation in the life of Christ, I trace not only the treatment of the ideas of living (there are many in this very long work), but also the poem's move toward an intimate and ethically motivated understanding of the experience of living.

In examining the models of vitality and living that emerge in the poem, I will draw upon the work of contemporary scholar, Timothy Morton, whose recent writing (and YouTube videos) about environmental philosophy offers a useful lens and vocabulary for considering the entanglements of the organic and inorganic. Although Morton remarks that the "ecological thought in its full richness and depth was unavailable to nonmodern humans"<sup>27</sup>, likely because knowledge of evolution, microbiology, and cosmology play such an important role in the modern conception of this thought, Morton does imagine tribal cultures as particularly suitable to space travel and

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<sup>27</sup> Morton, 5.

“thinking big”<sup>28</sup> and he also tackles topics, like the figuration of Nature, interdependence, and the uncanny, that do not hang on awareness of Darwinian mutations and that are certainly relevant to a poem like *Piers Plowman*<sup>29</sup>. Most germane to the moments in Langland’s poem that I will discuss is what Morton calls “the mesh.” Appropriately enough, the mesh is a kind of allegory, an allegory with extra-rhetorical and material implications, of the relationship between living beings and things. And this relationship is interconnectedness: “Each point of the mesh is both the center and edge of a system or points so there is no absolute center or edge...All life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings.”<sup>30</sup> Envisioning this mesh unmakes the idea of capital-N Nature because neither nature nor something like the environment is distinct from or a place set apart from living beings, human ones in particular<sup>31</sup>. To “see” this icon more accurately, Morton contends that the ecological thought demands a global perspective – the “thinking big” mentioned above –

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<sup>28</sup> See Morton, “Tibetans in Space,” 25-28.

<sup>29</sup> I think it is even possible that “nonmodern” texts like *Piers* might add to Morton’s theories and fit into his ideas about the importance of imagining bounded totality.

<sup>30</sup> Morton, 29.

<sup>31</sup> In a recent essay, Sarah Stanbury contends that Chaucer, and by extension his 14<sup>th</sup>-century compeers did not imagine a nature as separate or over there, but rather a force that acted upon and within human animals. That is, even in constructing an allegorical Nature, Chaucer never parceled out a wilderness or a “nature” to which a person could get back or visit with a backpack. Chaucer’s nature, then, was more like that of the ecological thought than like contemporary rhetorical approaches to it. See Stanbury, “Ecochaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature,” *Chaucer Review* 39.1 (2004): 1-16.

because a wide-angle view contests the validity of singular and anthropocentric judgments <sup>32</sup>.

The mesh, and conceiving of matter in this way, makes for strange bedfellows/meshfellows. Much like a dream vision, one never can predict what or who will draw near in this mesh; Morton advocates for a brand of intimacy with other beings, living and not, that does not seek a secure understanding of the other being, which Morton names the “strange stranger”<sup>33</sup> after Derrida’s *arrivant*, that does not aim to dissolve differences into a blob-like wholeness, but rather to admit the strangeness. “They are strange, all the way down” (94). Although the strange stranger seems an almost too perfect fit for figures like Anima or Haukyn who march in and out of Will’s field of vision, I am more interested in what Morton claims as the upshot of these meetings, a practice of intimacy. Morton writes: “the ecological thought is about warmth and strangeness, infinity and proximity, tantalizing ‘thereness’ and head-popping, wordless openness” (12). While *Piers Plowman*

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<sup>32</sup> This spaced-out outlook also takes into account the extent of the current climate crisis, which of course was not a concern for Langland. Even so, it seems to me that Langland is sensitive to crises of scale, particularly spiritual and social ones, and attempts to feel out the implications of such emergencies. Morton posits that just as we become aware of interdependence, just as we discover the environment isn’t out there but is inside us too, the world is disappearing, “melts into nothing in our hands” (31). Langland seems finely attuned to the experience of having the rug pulled out from underneath his feet, at spiritual, epistemological, and ontological levels. And surely, both Will and Langland’s readers recognize the feeling of knowing less the more they learn: “We are faced with the extraordinary fact of increasing detail and vanishing fullness. The ecological thought makes our world vaster and more insubstantial at the same time” (Morton, 37).

<sup>33</sup> Morton returns to the idea of the “strange stranger” throughout, but see especially 38-50.

often frustrates its readers by refusing clear answers in its concluding apocalyptic vision, it seems that the final encounters introduce a similar type of intimacy with things, with other living beings, with a whole network of ideas, beings, and matter.

### ***Activa Vita: Things on the Inside***

Through Will's encounter with Haukyn, who seems more like a being than most of his allegorical counterparts, we see again the dangers of isolation, of the exclusion, in this case through institutionalized confession, of the human being from the environment. Although *Activa Vita*, otherwise known as Haukyn the Actif Man, certainly has the fugitive part of vitality down – he claims from the first “al ydel I hatie” (13.226) – and seems more like a character than a personification, there is something decidedly unhealthy and lacking in vigor about him. He sweats profusely (“al biswatte his cote” [13.403]) and is prone to sluggishness. But the most disconcerting element of his character, both for the walking party composed of Conscience, Pacience, and Will and for the reader, is Haukyn's grubby coat<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> A. Robin Hoffman writes convincingly that Langland's interest in the material qualities of textile and weaving, both the conditions of production and the things produced, shows the poet's resistance of overly calcified boundaries between genders and classes. See A. Robin Hoffman. "Sewing and Weaving in *Piers Plowman*." *Women's Studies* 35.5 (2006): 431-452. Rosanne Gasse also notes Haukyn's attachment to the material world, focusing in her essay on Haukyn's medical treatments and his inability to move beyond his own bodily presence. See Rosanne

He hadde a cote of Cristendom as Holy Kirk bileveth;  
Ac it was moled in many places with manye sondry plottes  
—  
Of pride here a plot, and there a plot of unbuxom speche,  
Of scorning and of scoffyng and of unskilful berynge...  
(13.274-277)

This “cote of Cristendom,” which refers to a baptismal dress<sup>35</sup>, has not done much to protect or purify the Active Man. That Haukyn still wears this garb is perplexing. It seems to imply either that he is a child, artless with regard to worldly temptations, or that he trusts a little too much in the rituals and promises of “Holy Kirk.” In either case, the baptismal cloak has been all but blotted out by the traces of Haukyn’s sins, reversing to a certain extent the process of baptism, which metaphorically cleans from the outside to the inside. For Haukyn, the inside, the record and memory of his transgressions, has seeped out in splotches somehow identifiable by his peers. It is even as if he has been opened up for scrutiny, but instead of discovering qualities like Conscience and Peace as Will encounters in his own inquests, Haukyn is found to be populated by rather specific and abundant indiscretions. If Will’s various visions of, discussions with, and reintegrations of the parts of his living being present the value of disarticulation, then Haukyn’s inversions represent the nightmare scenario.

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Gasse. "The Practice of Medicine in *Piers Plowman*." *Chaucer Review* 39.2 (2004): 177-197.

<sup>35</sup> See Schmidt explanatory note p.462.



as the reader might imagine, since Haukyn awakens Will with his hysterics and then the Actif Man disappears from the poem. Though perhaps only the first stage in his conversion, Haukyn's lament in this passage lacks any of the expected forward-looking promise. In fact, he seems all too attached to his former sinful life, preferring to have died and been buried for "Dowelis sake" than to disentangle himself from his errant past and the filthy garments which expose it. Of course, conversion typically does entail a severe break with one's prior life which is often construed as a kind of spiritual death. Yet, in Haukyn's case, a swift death offers more potential for escape than metaphor because he comes to realize the inevitability of sinning. "So hard it is...to lyve and to do synne" (14.322). Despite Pacience's efforts to instruct Haukyn in a manner of living which might eschew transgression, Haukyn seems principally to have retained the negative elements of the lecture, and a dark vision of living emerges in which life cannot be purified and living does not reach for higher truths but lingers in the muck. Even Pacience's detailed glossing of Vincent of Beauvais's endorsement of poverty misses the mark with Haukyn, who does not appear to have digested more than the opening paradox: *paupertas...est odibile bonum* (14. 275). The poor man's overcoming of each of the seven deadly sins in Pacience's explication indicates to

Haukyn not the appeal of charity but the persistence of sin, which  
“seweth us evere.”

Haukyn’s confusion translates into what looks to be his first  
deed as a converted man: to rid himself of his clothing.

‘I were noght worthi, woot Good,’ quod Haukyn, ‘to werien any clothes,  
Ne neither shert ne shoon, save for shame one  
To covere my careyne...’ (14. 245)

This Passus opens with the recommendation that Haukyn clean his  
foul coat – that is, launder his soul –, not that he strip himself of it  
entirely. Haukyn’s misjudgment further asserts the materiality of his  
confession. In a way, he anticipates Anima’s teachings about the  
“childissh” (15. 149) quality of a charitable soul by proposing to revert  
to a primal condition whereby Haukyn may wear his shame on his  
flesh rather than his “hater” (14.1). Alternatively, wishing to “change  
his clothes” to array himself in shameful or humble attire might point  
to a desire to give up the active life in favor of a contemplative state.  
Moreover, that Haukyn refers to his body as his “careyne,” corpse or  
carcass, presents a two-fold problem with his conversion. On the one  
hand, this choice of vocabulary might hypostatize his renunciation of  
the active life, manifesting a nascent paralysis associated with his  
conversion. On the other, Haukyn may be attempting to fulfill his  
earlier inclination toward dying rather than suffering the challenges  
inherent in leading a holy, active life. Either way, we witness through

Haukyn's conversion an instance of dissociation from the self as opposed to a cleaving to the *vita nuova*. Fortunately for Haukyn, it is not as if he remains too bound to his corrupt past to complete his transition into sanctity. Instead, he seems frozen at the process of conversion, unable to consummate his transformation, perhaps, because he cannot envision it by any means other than the negative paradox Pacience tendered. Haukyn's conversion is not only predicated on misunderstanding and failure, but also on extreme isolation and separation, questioning thereby the wisdom, the efficacy, and perhaps also humanity of such an inward turn.

Although the point is predictably lost on Haukyn, there is, tucked into the opening of Pacience's disquisition, a way out of the isolation of confession and pious living. In an associative lecture about dietary temperance that moves from *liflode* to alimentary prayers to lechery born of gluttony and finally the superiority of oral confession ("shrift of mouthe" [14.90]), Pacience explains that the first step toward a wholesale restoration of Haukyn's besmirched soul demands more restrictive eating habits.

'And I shal purveie thee paast,' quod Pacience, 'though no plough eryl,  
And flour to fede folk with as best be for the soule;  
Though never greyn growed, ne grape upon the vyne,  
Alle that lyveth and loketh liflode wold I fynde,  
And that ynogh – shal noon faille of thyng that hem nedeth.  
We should nought be to bisy abouten oure liflode...' (14.30-34)

Subordinating the desires of the gut to the health of the soul seems to be Pacience's point, but even a figure defined by endurance acknowledges the alimentary needs of the body. Yet, Pacience claims that food will be provided to those who need it; either Pacience will rustle something up or God might. Haukyn, of course, the waferer believes this advice absurd, and when Pacience offers a bit of the Paternoster for a snack (14.49), one understands why. But the implications of this somewhat commonplace (yet also potentially extreme) recommendation are important. On the one hand, Pacience distinguishes between the mechanics that keep the being, birds and beasts included, alive and living itself. *Liflode* in this context takes on multiple meanings: the business of life, the requirements of a living being, and a living separate from these categories, a life force that persists even in intense want. This mutating sense of life affirms living as a process, and a surprising one at that. Too much eating produced the "meschief and the meschaunce" of Sodom, but, in "Elyes tyme," men were able to tolerate long winters of hard work without food and "Seven slepe, as seith the book, seven hundred wynter/And lyveden withouten liflode – and at last thei woken" (14.65-69). There seems to be a range of responses people can and have had to food; further, the effects of too much or too little are shown to be deeply transformative, perhaps even in ways that the eaters or abstainers could not imagine

or control, clearly more transformative than confession. Likewise, Pacience's offer of "a pece of the *Paternoster – Fiat voluntas tua*"(14.49) underscores the power of food to change he who consumes it. Eating a prayer is a forceful and maybe even innovative act, yet the suggestion is that the will of God, of the prayer through digestion will replace the will of the eater<sup>37</sup>. Haukyn might become what he eats, but it is also critical that he remember and accept that what he eats is not identical to him<sup>38</sup>.

On the other hand, Pacience's command to expect care for both body and soul from an external source extends the passivity of digestion into a social space. In response to Haukyn's disbelief, Pacience digs out of his pockets "[v]itailles of grete vertues" and

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<sup>37</sup> This metonymic mix-up calls to mind Anne Middleton's description and reading of an instance of the "mastery of improvisatory self-definition" during the 1381 Peasants' Revolt. Middleton retells the story of dispute over milling rights between tenant farmers and the Abbey of St. Albans recorded by Thomas Walsingham: "decades before the revolt an earlier abbot had confiscated the tenants' household millstones and used them as the paving-stones of the floor of the monastery parlor, then under construction. In the first days of the 1381 revolt, the people of the town of St. Albans and the surrounding countryside had heard rumor of the events in London...Besides invading the abbot's woods and fields in procession 'with great pomp,' releasing his prisoners from jail, and demanding of the abbot a new charter of their liberties, the rebellious tenants now break into the abbey parlor, pull up the millstones from the floor where they had been 'set as a memorial of the ancient dispute between the abbey and the townsmen,' and carry them outside and 'hand them over to the commons breaking them into little pieces and giving a piece to each person, just as the consecrated bread is customarily broken and distributed in the parish churches on Sundays'..." (Middleton, *William Langland's "Kynde Name,"* 71). In turning prayers into food and stones in material expressions of doctrine (and into the semblance of food), agency is redistributed, but so is the relationship between semblance and matter.

<sup>38</sup> As Jane Bennett writes about eating, "Eating appears as a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry: my meal both is and is not mine; you both are and are not what you eat" (*Vibrant Matter*, 49)

justifies his position: “Lo! Here liflode ynogh, if our believe be trewe./For lent nevere was there lif but liflode were shapen,/Whereof or wherfore and wherby to libbe” (14.38-41). According to Pacience, life is not created without associated sustenance – worms have their earth, fish have the sea, beasts have grasses and grains (14.42-45). Pacience represents the natural world as dependent on both a balance and a promise; life is never self-sufficient, never entirely alone. More important for the likes of Haukyn, this balance establishes a necessary and wholesome connection to the outside. Although Pacience does introduce the possibility of extended hibernation or long-term abstinence, waiting for *liflode*, counting on sustenance, material and perhaps also metaphorical, spiritual, and psychological, imagines Haukyn *as* the outside (which explains to a certain extent the failure of his confession). Building on readings of Haukyn as a figuration of the active life, the stage of human development associated with employment and desires, with worldly engagement and struggle, Stella Maguire has argued that Haukyn merges with the dream vision itself, dilating or atomizing into the poem’s background: “Haukyn does not merely belong to the world of the *Visio* rather than to the more abstract world presented in the rest of *Dowel*; he is, in his own person, the embodiment of that world”<sup>39</sup>. Though Maguire contends that this

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<sup>39</sup> Stella Maguire. "The Significance of Haukyn, Activa Vita, in Piers Plowman." *Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English*

fusion testifies to “the fundamental wholeness and singleness” (109) of this section of the poem, I think it does more to reveal the poem’s ecological thought. Haukyn’s blending into the atmosphere of the vision itself also implies that he has taken this world, like eating a prayer, into himself, yet neither Haukyn nor his ecosystem is fully absorbed in this exchange<sup>40</sup>. Morton writes of the weather:

We can no longer have that reassuringly trivial conversation about the weather with someone in the street, as a way to break the ice or pass the time. The conversation either trails off into a disturbingly meaningful silence, or someone mentions global warming. The weather no long exists as a neutral-seeming background against which events take place. (28)

Weather is not a backdrop in the way that Will’s dream-world is not a stage, not an “over there” where animals know the rules, where Nature resides. Haukyn’s struggles – his efforts at contrition and getting clean – highlight this interconnectedness. A recognition of this interdependence does not ensure salvation<sup>41</sup>, but it does help to develop an understanding of the investments of living.

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*Language* 25.98 (1949): 99.

<sup>40</sup>To a certain extent, this reading parallels the argument made by Anne Middleton that the “Land of Longyng” Will sees in Fortune’s mirror counts as the first signature of the B-text. According to Middleton, the Land of Longyng is a representation of the desire for mastery, a desire to seize upon the middle of life, to enact the will (or to enact the Will), but she claims it is also a space of self, since this is Long Wille’s land – the Longland/Langland. This seems to suggest that Will not only identifies with the psychological faculty of the will but also with desire, longing. Moreover, it imagines a spatialized, geographical body for the self, a topographical body, albeit a dreamy, possible one, which Will himself can traverse.

<sup>41</sup> According to Morton, “Awareness of the mesh doesn’t bring out the best in people” (31).

### ***Levels of Anima***

In his waking life, Will mirrors Haukyn's bewildered defiance, representing his endeavor to understand the "Dowel" enigma as a journey into the domain of the holy fool.

Ac after my wakyng it was wonder longe  
Er I koude kyndely knowe what was Dowel.  
And so my wit weex and wanyed til I a fool were... (15.1-3)

Too much pondering of and questing after Dowel seem to have spun the poet-Dreamer to the social periphery. To a certain extent, Will performs the outcome of Haukyn's flawed conversion, struggling to make sense of and to live with the inadequate knowledge imparted by Pacience, not to mention the various other figures who had previously defined this elusive category. Nonetheless, this brief account of marginalization seems to imply a willful yet passive foolishness. Not the kind of thinker content to hole himself up in his study, Will describes his public refusal to "reverencen" his social superiors with blessings or bows. This deliberate silence nicely doubles Will's tendency to sleep wherever the spirit moves him so long as it not be in his own bed. (Until Passus XVIII, that is.) Again, what is deemed "fool-like" by the community is Will's propensity to turn inward, which he at once critiques (for the poet himself admits he "raved") and accepts as inevitable.

That the troubles related to this inwardness penetrate even into the imagery of Will's dreams suggests the primacy of this issue. One

might of course argue that some semblance of reflexiveness is bound to occur in a Passus involving a dialogue with Anima, even though this character does not stand in for the poet-Dreamer's own soul. Yet the construct and style of Anima pushes Will's gaze and investment outward again. By Will's fifth vision he has acclimated to a dream world populated by unlikely creatures, but Anima proves an organism without precedent or analogue in the text. Even the toughened Dreamer at first believes the figure before him the product of "sorcerie," so "sotil thyng" it is (15.12). The being Will encounters is not exactly human or even recognizable as a personification:

Oon withouten tonge and teeth, tolde me whider I should  
And wherof I cam and of what kynde, I conjured him at the laste,  
If he were Cristes creature for Cristes love me to tellen. (15.13-15)

That the only visual description offered of Anima focuses on his missing oral elements is evocative. Is the rest of his body equally decaying? Is he all mouth, albeit a partial mouth?<sup>42</sup> How does he manage to tell Will so much – where he came from, where he should go – without organs of speech? Does he qualify as human or more simply

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<sup>42</sup> On Anima as body parts, see James Paxson's "Gender Personified, Personification Gendered, and the Body Figuralized in *Piers Plowman*," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12 (1998). Raskolnikov also remarks that Anima might be an orifice of another sort, perhaps a vagina (Raskolnikov, *Body Against Soul*, 190). Imagining Anima an anus might offer a way for allegory to think about its own waste, since Anima not only is a figure of interconnectedness, but also of excess. Even so, as with everything related to Anima, it is hard to know for certain what to name or how to define him. I agree with Raskolnikov, though, that "what is important to draw from any interpretations of Anima as some part of the human anatomy is that Anima's is a type of allegorical body or object that seems radically and challengingly open" (191).

a “creature?” For a figure so defined by lack and omission and so emphatically identified as “oon,” however, Anima rapidly evolves into a shimmering variety of names, concepts, occupations, and forces. Responding to Will’s asking what he is called, Anima runs through a long list of his apparently associated names: Anima, Animus, Mens, Memoria, Racio, Sensus, Conscience, Lele Love, Spiritus<sup>43</sup>. These appellations extend in a kind of widening gyre from the figure’s nondescript center, and they apply in a given moment depending on the creature’s role, his activity. “The whiles I quykke the cors,’ quod he, ‘called am I *Anima*; / And whan I wilne and wolde, *Animus* ich hatte; / And for that I kane and knowe, called am I *Mens*, “Thoughte”...” (15.23-25). Anima seems to move between names and actions at will, but not always his own will. There is the sense in these lines that Anima is as much called upon (as he is repeatedly called different names) as he is free to perform his several roles. His tendency to translate the Latin terms into English emphasizes this accommodating spirit. But Anima goes beyond accommodation; this representation of a crowd of psychological and even biological functions, faculties, attributes does more than propose casual correspondences among the various entities. In the figure of Anima, thought and sense perceptions, love and spirit, an animating life force

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<sup>43</sup> For an annotated list of Anima’s names, see A.V.C. Schmidt “Langland and Scholastic Philosophy” (*Medium Aevum* 38 [1969]: 134-56).

and the will are intimately related. Although operationally, Anima seems to cycle in and out of these traits/personae, there is no denying that these all exist in the strange, little body of that “sotil thyng.” These capacities operate distinctly, like a molecular model, offshoots from a nuclear (perhaps unnamed) core, but intermingle, too.

Anima’s tangled model that combines the intellectual, psychological, spiritual, biological, and that other category that “quykke the cors” might be understood as a multiplied trinity, a triple trinity. While the numbers and divisions may or may not be significant, this mode of thinking was undeniably widespread in fourteenth-century literature as well as fourteenth-century extra-literary life. Envisioning multiple entities as divided but united, as dependent and sovereign, that is, viewing spiritual and mundane life through a lens colored by Trinitarian principles extended from the esoterics of certain theological inquiries to the practices of everyday life<sup>44</sup>. The compounded Trinitarian tone in this passage, like the eccentric body of Anima, proffers plentiful, possible resonances, but it is the form of thinking and personifying that seems most relevant both

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<sup>44</sup> See Andrew Galloway’s article, “Intellectual Pregnancy, Metaphysical Femininity, and the Social Doctrine of the Trinity in Piers Plowman.” (*Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12.[1998]: 117-152) for a discussion of the relevance of Trinitarian psychology in vernacular poetry. Alan J. Fletcher also addresses Langland’s engagement with this structure in “The Social Trinity of Piers Plowman.” *Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language* 44.175 (1993): 343-361. M. Teresa Tavormina examines the trinity as a foundation for imagining relationships in “Kindly Similitude: Langland’s Matrimonial Trinity.” *Modern Philology: A Journal Devoted to Research in Medieval and Modern Literature* 80.2 (1982): 117-128.

to Anima's subsequent diatribe and to the problems of interiority. Anima seems to embody and to advocate "transversal" thinking. Building on the work of Felix Guattari, Jane Bennett discusses the modern relevance of acknowledging the nonhuman in the human given advances in medical and micro sciences and uses a Trinitarian model, based on Guattari's "three ecologies" to map a way of relating to the world of vibrant matter.<sup>45</sup> So too the layered attachments, activities, and interests of Anima seem to have more to do with tracing pathways between inwardness and outer phenomena than with spiritual transcendence. Or more simply, Anima seems to stand as an exemplar of the division and the union of the human and nonhuman. He collects sense data from the outside world and experiences the powerful inner churning of love and the inner journey of memory, but also is touched by and, at least in the B-text, becomes synonymous with a force that gives the body life, a force which is not represented as entirely one with the "cors," a force that must come from outside<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Of Guattari's program, which theorizes both the corruption and disciplinary control of modern psychologies and the redirecting of our attention toward more sustainable habits for person and planet as trinities, Bennett writes: "Guattari's rhetorical strategy here echoes that pursued by Roman Catholicism to express the mysterious unity of the three persons of God. There are three ecologies, says Guattari, or, as the Baltimore Catechism says, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons 'really distinct from one another.' And yet, says Guattari, the three ecologies form a single whole, IWC [Integrated World Capitalsim], or, in the worlds of the catechism, 'The trinity is One.' We must, says, Guattari, learn to think the three-in-one: to think 'transversally' or fix our mind's eye on the interlacing of the mechanosphere, the social sphere, and the inwardness of subjectivity." (*Vibrant Matter*, 114)

<sup>46</sup>That Anima's parting thoughts encourage Will to find Charity, which turns out to be a tree, and that the figure metamorphoses into yet another figure Liberum

Much of Anima's lecture, however, is concerned with notions of exempla and instruction. Anima, a problematic type of guide given his ability to mutate into any number of interconnected entities, replies to Will's inquiry about the nature of charity – where to find it and how to recognize it – with a brief definition and an extended list of highly charitable humans. Saints, especially those found in Voragine's *Golden Legend*, figure prominently in Anima's list. Edmond and Edward stand for the possibility of charity in the face of temptation, since they were both kings who managed to lead devout lives (15.223-224). And Francis demonstrates that even friars, heavily reviled by Anima, have a liberal lineage. But desert fathers in particular, those who "suffrede/in hunger, in hete, in alle manere angres" (15.270-271), attract Anima's admiration, and he tells the stories of Antony, Egidius, and Paul the hermit, all of whom subsisted on food brought by animals.

..Egidie after an hynde cride,  
 And thorough the mylk of that mylde beest the man was  
     sustened...  
 Antony on a day about noon tyme  
 Hadde a brid that broughte hym breed that he by lyvede...

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Arbitrium in the C-text underscores the importance of interconnections. On the Tree of Charity and Liberum Arbitrium, see Ralph Hanna "The Tree of Charity – again," in *Medieval Alliterative Poetry: Essays in Honour of Thorlac Turville-Petre*, ed. J. A. Burrow, Hoyt N. Duggan, and Thorlac Turville-Petre. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010: 125-39). For the possible meanings, correspondences, and divergences of Liberum Arbitrium, see Schmidt, "Langland and Scholastic Philosophy," and Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "Will, Actyf, Pacience, and *Liberum Arbitrium*: Two Recurring quotations in Langland's Revisions of *Piers Plowmans C Text*, Passus V, XV, XVI," in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30 (1988): 461-77, 472.

Poul *primus heremita* hadde parroked hymselfe,  
That no man myghte hym se for mosse and for leues.  
Foweles hym fedde fele wyntres with alle...” (15.279-288)

For Anima, these examples reveal the presence and efficiency of charity in the animal world. Even animals appreciate true need and are ready to sacrifice their own well-being, their own time to respond. Anima extends this reading to condemn excessive donations to monastic organizations already flush with capital and property, suggesting that human mechanisms of discernment have degraded and concluding some lines later that the “folk” suffer because humanity has lost touch with its earthy roots: “Now failleth the folk of the flood and of the lond bothe—“ (15.367). In contrast, the habits and choices of the desert fathers present a model of connection to the world of nature. Paul the hermit even camouflages himself in moss and leaves as a form of social distancing, but also, it seems, reconnection. Moreover, the animals in these legends adopt postures and practices more akin to an ideal human community than to the realm of nature, bloodied in tooth and claw. Whether Egidius’ suckling deer or Antony’s baking birds have been tainted by contact with human society or human charity springs from a not entirely human source, it is clear by these examples that a decisive partitioning of human and nonhuman cannot be sustained. And when Anima explains that the significance of these exchanges is “that meke

thyng mylde thyng sholde fede” (15.306), it is difficult to be certain which is human and which not.

Anima posits a more explicit form of connection, though, in response to the claims Will makes as to how he has come to know Christ. Will confesses that he has learned Christ dwells in all “places,” but never has he encountered him plainly except in his own reflection: “Clerkes kenne me that Crist is in alle places;/Ac I seigh hym nevere soothly but as myself in a mirour:/*Hic in enigmatē, tunc facie ad facie*” (15. 161-63). This is a deceptively complex statement which indicates both Will’s penchant for misuse of scriptural convention and his heightened awareness of the misstep. More importantly, however, the mirror image which confers such enlightenment upon Will generates the possibility of other connections, depending on what we take “as myself” to mean: either Will meets in the mirror an image of himself that he recognizes as a distant relative, a derivative copy of Christ or he see an image of Christ as substitution of his own<sup>47</sup>. Anima crafts his “argument” based on the first possibility, clearly the more logically stable of the two, reiterating the imperative to look beyond the self for knowledge of virtue. The lecture’s devolving into a call to proselytize

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<sup>47</sup> For a reading that posits this episode as constitutive of subjectivity, see Anne Middleton’s “William Langland’s ‘Kynde Name,’” pp 44-46. See also Middleton’s “Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in *Piers Plowman*.” In Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel, eds. *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, pp 91- 122. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1982.

the distant heathens languishing in a state of near-Christianity highlights the real topics of Anima's disquisition: the need for dialectic instruction, the call to efface the self, at least temporarily, in order to learn, the appeal to give one's self up to evaluation by another. Or at the very least to see in the mirror something other than one's self, to realize through Anima's modeling and lessons that in the "I" there are its and others, to have a foundation for empathy. Grounding this connection in the image of Will, in a moment when charity, a Christian project, becomes the Dreamer's own, renders self-interest multiple, other-interest, outside-interest. There are dangers in privileging self-interest, but for the previously disaffected Will, this reflection helps to provide a bridge between the inwardness of confession and conversion and the demands of the outside.

***"For we beth bretherene of o bloed..."***

By the end of Anima's seminar, the other put forth as suitable to judge is very curiously (and reflexively) Piers Plowman, the Dreamer-poet's titular alter ego, who "parceyveth moor depper/What is the wille..." (15. 199-200). A more felicitous mirror, Piers seems also to hold the key to what is Will. Although the poem never makes entirely clear what marks out Piers as so special or why in particular he has been chosen, that the vision ends with yet another quest to find Piers suggests that he is both indispensable but always elsewhere, rather

like Jesus, whose life Piers helps to narrate and dramatize in the final sections of the text.

The lives of Christ that develop in Passus XVI, XVIII, and XIX in the B text are multivalent, disorienting, orienting, vital and ghostly, tangible and discursive, condensed and scattered. These lives which do not always look like conventional *vitae* and are buried within discourses and visions which sometimes intend more than a life and sometimes draw power from the life, act like a kind of battery, a life force itself meant to keep the poem vital, moving, fugitive to the very end. Like many a worthy devotional text, these lives operate on several imaginative levels, characteristically seeming more evocative than definitive. But lives of Christ are different from other hagiography, at once less prevalent and more foundational. After all, every saint's life in some way refers to the life of Christ, imitates its practices and embraces its teleology, yet perhaps because it functions as a source and is always expected to be kept in mind – and even more importantly it has been “done” rather definitively or at least canonically in the Gospels – *vitae Christi* appear less frequently than the lives of saints that adopt it as model. This could, of course, be explained away as a product of numbers – there is only one Jesus, but there are crowds of saints. Even so, Langland's incorporation of salvation history, specifically the life and afterlife of Christ, into his

poem is conspicuous and also presents a limit case for the literary use of the life insofar as salvation history seems to have so little to do with conventional saints' lives, to stretch, squeeze, and deform the fabric of the genre, but also to distill and encapsulate it, to provide of course the very foundation of hagiographic literature. Moreover, Langland's literary and somatic revisions press the structural, temporal, and figural foundations of the life, which produces a number of effects, not the least of which is opening up the *vita* to a vitality rooted in ecological and communal attachments.

Indeed rooting becomes a central metaphor in connection with the first instance of the *vita Christi*; the story of Christ's conception grows out of Will's witnessing Piers Plowman's rather mercurial tending to the tree of Charity. And as the life gets underway, the tree image develops along with it:

To a maide that highte Marie, a meke thyng withall,  
That oon Jesus, a justice sone, most jouke in hir chambre  
Til *plenitudo temporis* tyme comen were  
That Piers fruyt floured and felle to be rype. (16.91-94)

The ripening of the tree's fruit parallels that of the fetal Jesus, which suggests a kind of naturalness to the conception, the life as a thing of nature, despite its discursive, vaporous beginnings. Piers even assumes, however obliquely, the role of midwife, cultivating the tree which has been conflated with the body of Mary. Extending images of

tethers to nature and medical care, the life seems to gloss over Jesus' infancy, positing instead a newborn prepped for combat: "And in the wombe of that wenche was he fourty woukes,/Til he weex a faunt thorough hir flessh, and of fightyng kouthe,/To have yfought with the fiend er ful tyme come" (16.100-102). Childbirth here offers a training ground for a rather vigorous, soldier Christ, and it sounds even as if the infant Jesus will burst through Mary's body. While much of the vision and poem has inured Will and the audience to the idea that life is a test, even a battle, the aggressive tone of Jesus's earliest moments (as a living human, that is) seems intent to overwrite the infancy, the humanity of the life's subject. Langland gives us the non-affective Christ, the Christ his contemporaries would be less likely to expect, which makes this Jesus strange. Not the Christ of the zeitgeist, but another Christ whom we are surprised to meet and who seems harder to get to know<sup>48</sup>. Yet, along with the newborn as warrior motif comes the possibility of wounds and suffering, a vulnerability that prompts the perhaps quickly ageing Jesus to "lered hym lechecraft" (16.104). This bodily vulnerability also informs Jesus' emotional state, since a few lines hence he cries real tears at his resurrection of Lazarus: "And

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<sup>48</sup> David Aers writes, "Langland's recapitulations of the stories about Christ is markedly resistant to the dominant representations of Christ's humanity in late medieval culture with their expansive, inventively detailed concentration on the tortured, bleeding, honeycombed body as a focus of devotion and imitation" (Aers, *Visionary Eschatology*, 9). Likewise, Derek Pearsall puts it, Langland "is not interested in the emotional poetry of affective devotion nor in identification with the human suffering of Christ" ("The Idea of Universal Salvation," 272)

wepte water with hise eighen – ther seighen it manye” (16.116). After establishing the human vulnerability of Christ, or at least the paradox of his propensity for warfare and his human defenselessness, the narrative picks up speed, sweeping through miracles, covenants, and betrayals. The life is condensed and fragmented, not to mention a challenge to visualize for the audience and maybe also the Dreamer: is this a product of Will’s liturgical memory, an outgrowth of his swoon upon meeting Piers? A story told by Piers? A series of skits, of mystery plays staged before the Dreamer? Dislodging the life chronologically seems to free the narrative to be at once performed and narrated. The life’s subject himself simulates the role of narrator: countering accusations of witchcraft, Jesus justifies his various activities (16.121-136). As speaker and hagiographer (even autobiographer), Jesus is both in and outside the text, able to narrate his own life but also, given the logic of the *vita*, live it simultaneously. While this double stature undoes to a certain extent the natural and rooted origins of the tale, it also extends to temporal and structural levels the idea of vulnerability, positing new ways of entering into and participating in a life-story, even so exalted a life as that of Christ.

Both these points of contact and the vision of Jesus as vivacious and vulnerable in his living presence develop further in the subsequent retellings of the salvation history. In the second life, in

which Jesus accomplishes both the Harrowing of Hell and the narration of a lengthy biblical history that amounts to a kind of family history in the voice of Jesus, the figure of Christ becomes exceptionally potent – a youthful knight donning spurs and Piers’ armor for the first time, a body in pain whose sensible power renders him untouchable, a redeemer ready to destroy the foundations of hell – but at the same time is attached to Piers and even confused with him in the opening of the third attempt at a *vita*.

I fel eftsoones aslepe – and sodeynly me mette  
That Piers the Plowman was peynted al blody,  
And com in with a cros before the commune peple,  
And right lik in alle lymes to Oure Lord Jesu. (19.5-8)

Has Piers been anointed, or is it Jesus that the Dreamer encounters?

This confusion goes deeper than problems of livery and performance.

Here Will mistakes the resurrected Jesus for his own fiction, which seems to test the limits of dreaming and literary making alike. After Conscience corrects Will’s colossal misreading, it becomes clear that Christ has inherited, or at least borrowed, Piers’s armor, but “he that cometh so blody/Is Crist with his cros, conquerour of Cristene”

(XIX.14-15). Recognizing Christ by his blood, which is not painted or fabricated but quite real and differentiating, Will realizes that Christ has not descended into his murky world to be transformed in any physical or enduring sense, rather Will’s poetic creation seems to have been adopted – albeit in fragments – into the spiritual hierarchy.

While dislocating Piers's earthly genealogy might be understood as an effort to authorize the poem (or dream), it also complicates the notion of the life. Taken a step farther, Christ's appropriation of Piers's armor strips the plowman bare before the reader, exposing his nakedness and perhaps a vitality shared like his protective coverings. Christ seems to be an example of the "strange stranger," a meeting with whom Will's heightening awareness of the mesh makes possible. Morton encapsulates his argument thus: "The ecological thought realizes that the boundaries between, and the identities of, beings are affected by this interconnection. This is the strange stranger. The ecological thought finds itself next to other beings, neither me nor not-me....The more intimately we know them, the stranger they become. The ecological thought is intimacy with the strangeness of the stranger."<sup>49</sup> The exchange of armor and inspection of wounds breeds a tenuous intimacy with the Christ figure whose life story cannot seem to be completed adequately – the more it is repeated, the more schematic it becomes. Mary Davlin argues that the shifting identities of Piers and Christ corresponds to the notion of "the whole Christ," the mystical coincidence of believers in the body of Christ and the body of Christ in the believers<sup>50</sup>. Envisioning this cohabitation reveals the

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<sup>49</sup> Morton, 94.

<sup>50</sup> Mary C. Davlin, O.P. "Petrus, id est, Christus: Piers the Plowman as 'The Whole Christ'." *Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 6.(1972): 280-292.

historical stretch of Morton's strange stranger. The "whole Christ" image, along with the transactions and substitutions in Langland's salvation history, even implies that perhaps in this scenario humans tag along on the body of Christ, we are the microbes in Christ's elbow.

The exchanges of uniform as well as narration emphasize that even in the life of Christ, which reshapes a whole cosmology and the very idea of the living human being, the hero does not pull off his great deeds alone<sup>51</sup>. Jesus's intentions radiate into and emerge out of the commentary of witnesses, the spear of Longinus, the clattering, besmeared metals on loan from a farmer. That salvific acts arrive through Jesus, but depend on causes, intentions, motivations outside even so forceful a figure becomes apparent through the communities assembled in the second and third attempts to tell his story, in which Jesus gallops about as a champion but is also often casually present, an average community man. When the resurrected Jesus visible only as a blinding light knocks on the gates of Hell, an irreverent but petrified Lucifer calls out, in what one must imagine is a nonchalant, sing-song voice, "*Quis est iste?/What lord artow?*" (18.314-315) – that is, "Who iiiiiiissss iiiiiittt?" And earlier, before Jesus does his

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<sup>51</sup> The flipside of this seems to be the possibility of universal salvation that is articulated by Christ himself in the C-text. See Derek Pearsall, "The Idea of Universal Salvation in Piers Plowman B and C." *Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies* 39.2 (2009): 257-281, and Thomas D. Hill, "Universal Salvation and Its Literary Context in Piers Plowman B.18." *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5.(1991): 65-76.

harrowing, Truth and Mercy meet, apparently at the very edge of Lucifer's domain, to discuss the looming event:

Whan this maydenes mette, Mercy and Truthe,  
Either asked oother of this grete wonder –  
Of the dyn and of the derknesse, and how the day rowed...  
(18.121-123)

It is as if Mercy, Truth, and later Righteousness and Peace, the Four Daughters of God, have gathered to discuss local gossip. Can Jesus really do it? Can he unlock hell? There is a closeness and an informality – Pearsall labels this “a mood of celebration”<sup>52</sup> – in the tone and posture of the figures who cluster around the Harrowing that seems to invite participation, to involve the reader – and maybe too Will as a witness – in an event that challenges the imagination.

This welcoming party/witnessing party of allegories that seem more animate than usual presages Piers' agricultural cooperative cultivated from the *vita*'s final instantiation. The third life begins with a debate about Jesus' name -- should he be called Jesus or Christ (19.69) -- and then parallels the experiences and explorations of Will by chronicling Jesus's movement through Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. As the resident expert on these topics, Piers again is the terminus for this third *vita*. Or possibly Christ's life does not end here, but transforms into a life of Piers, who becomes a saint, too, by receiving the holy ghost (19.202), and undertakes to rebuild the fundamentals of

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<sup>52</sup> Pearsall, “The Idea of Universal Salvation,” 272.

the Church, using the blood of Jesus as mortar to construct a living church (19.325). Once Piers takes over this doubled life, doctrinal history merges with an agricultural, a green history:

And yit Grace of his goodness gaf Piers foure stottes –  
Al that hise oxen eriede, thei to harewen after.  
Oon highte Austyn, and Ambrose another,  
Gregori the grete clerk, and Jerom the goode.  
This foure, the geith to teche, folweth Piers teme,  
And harewed in an handwhile al Holy Scripture  
With two [aithes] that hei had, an oold and a new...  
(19.269-275)

With evangelists as a team of oxen and doctors as another, Piers' project seems to insist on the agricultural metaphor as essential to the church and to the new community fostered by Piers. This view of a healthy church puts the most illustrious intellects of church history in touch with a plodding, dirty, demanding work. And although the Barn of Unity deteriorates into a terrifying vision of the poisoned and commodified Church, Will resolves to stick it out. Here environment – nonhuman beings and the ecological materials –, community, and self commingle under the not-too-gentle guidance of Piers.

The fragments and interruptions, the repeated beginnings of the lives of Jesus question intentionality, the teleology of the *vitae Christi*, suggesting that even so crucial a life is moved by bifurcating trajectories and is composed of myriad influences and things<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup>Pearsall describes this Langlandian tendency as “the essentially additive and associational process of Langland’s thinking, which I take to be the antithesis of dialectic” (272).

Further, the representations of the living being in these closing passus as variously attached and produced by ecologies outside a purely spiritual one sketches out ethical obligations. The life is not just about exemplary living, about a contest (without pride) to distinguish oneself in hopes of salvation. Instead, the living being is understood as constituted in a network, as patched together by materials, other beings, ideas, histories, narratives. Langland's ecological thought is not about saving the planet, but about getting close to vital things, about not envisioning the self as outside of environments but as constituted by it, about treating strange bodies ethically. Jane Bennett writes about the idea of "life on man," the realization that microorganisms populate the human body, "The *its* outnumber the *mes*. In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not enough to say that we are 'embodied. We are, rather, *an array of bodies...*"<sup>54</sup> *Piers Plowman* is a poem that takes this outnumbering and this multiplicity seriously. The obligation, then, is not simply to tend to one's own eternal life, but to consider and care for the things that help to make and sustain that life and the lives of other beings and things. Hence the discussion of provided food, but also the warning not to suck too much from the surrounding community a la the friars. It's a delicate balance, a vision of an ecosystem. Not simply because it is right or mandated, but because one's own life, the lived one, depends on it.

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<sup>54</sup> Bennett, 112-113.

### *Afterword*

I know when one is dead, and when one lives;  
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;  
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,  
Why, then she lives.

(King Lear, Act V, Scene iii)

There is quite a lot that could be said, and has been, about these lines from the final scene of *King Lear*. It is a moment of desperation, madness, recognition, and elegiac beauty. In connection with this project, Lear's lament both reveals something I have been trying to say about the problem of life and points to the limits of knowledge about vitality. Though almost nothing else – not family, power, friendship, sensation, or nature – seems certain in the play, Lear knows that his daughter, Cordelia, whom he carries in his arms, is dead and even claims that his perception of this quality extends beyond Cordelia: he knows it about everything he might encounter. Really, it ought to be that simple, and it is our persistent fantasy that the problem of life is no problem at all. Like pornography, we know it when we see it or do not see it, as is the case here.

In the same breath, however, Lear contradicts, or at least complicates, his announced certitude. As soon as Cordelia is pronounced “dead as earth,” Lear doubts his statement and asks for a better test of his daughter's condition. It is as if the association of Cordelia with the earth prompts this possibility, as if Lear realizes his

error (or perhaps the whole host of his errors) in believing the earth itself inert matter. For all the tragedy of this moment, there is a sliver of redemption in Lear's frantic reversal: although Cordelia is gone, there is a permanence in her connections to earth, mist, and stone. Through his desire to bring his child back to life, Lear seems to discover the interrelatedness of human lives – his life and his daughter's, his life and Kent's life – as well as the interrelatedness of human life and the outside, the natural world, the dead earth.

Although this study does not aim to identify how it is that medieval hagiography and its posterities know with certainty “when one lives,” it has, I hope, made the case that that the genre has something to say about vitality, about what makes living beings tick and twitch. Medieval life writing is a flexible genre and a self-reflexive one, too. Rather than the locus of unconsciously reproduced doctrine, legend, or pulp fiction, rather than a reliquary, a monument to a dead letter or to a static mode of worship or history, the medieval saint's life seems to invite experimentation and in particular to attract social, political, ethical, and ontological inquiries. Some of the oddities and the estrangement of hagiographic materials might be understood through this lens. What appears to be a gratuitous fascination with gore or danger or pain might be in part a result of an abiding concern

for a conceptual approach to life as well as the material messiness of it.

Moreover, this interest in animating energies endures in later secular appropriations and revisions of hagiographic narratives, and it endures more than does attention to exemplarity or saintly personality. Walter Daniel's question – where did his mentor and friend's life go? – evolves into Langland's ecological dispersals. While Walter's vital energy is personal, attached not only to Aelred but also to the human being and its experience of grief, later poetic appropriations of the *vita* become increasingly impersonal in their explorations of ontology to include animals, stones, and vegetation. *Pearl*, for example, attempts to convince the dreamer of a more diffuse view of vitality in which landscapes and necklaces reflect and radiate a force that is at the very least reminiscent of something animate.

This progressively inhuman vitality is especially evident in the crucifixion *passus* of *Piers Plowman*. The relatively brief dream – a *passus* contained dream – begins rather dramatically and inexplicably with a half-naked Will: “Wolleward and weetshoed wente I forth after/As a reccheless renk that of no wo reccheth,/And yed forth like a lorel al my life tyme” (18.1-3). Without a shirt or shoes, Will has set out as a vagrant. Where his clothes have gone and what it is he is doing out in the world is left unexplained, but this condition is not, I

think, irrelevant or a passing curiosity. Will has been stripped down, perhaps even broken down, by his aleatory quest, and the image of a bare life, a “reccheles renk” without companion or even the most basic necessities for social survival, introduces the issue of the outer limits of the living being into the *passus*. Indeed, the dream is entirely dedicated to extreme forms of living, moments in a life, and figures of vitality as it not only depicts for Will Christ’s crucifixion and the Harrowing of Hell, but also imagines a battle between Life and Death. Feith first explains this antagonism: “Deeth seith he shal fordo and adoun brynge/Al that lyveth or loketh in londe or in watre./Lif seith that he lieth, and leieth his lif to wedde” (18.29-31). Although the contest never takes place – a pregnant deferral, to say the least – in the *passus*, the enmity between Life and Death becomes a kind of backstory, an offstage subplot that at once adds to the drama of this apex of sacred history and also overcomplicates it, renders it exquisite in its totality and thereby dissolves some of the emotional impact of the scenario. The emergence, or promised emergence, of Life and Death also reminds that lives are multiple in medieval life-writing; even in the original sacred life, the martyrdom of Christ, the narration of this *vita* opens up to other storylines.

It illustrates, too, the reach of the animating force as the coming Life and Death confrontation is announced a second time by dead

bodies that are peeking out of graves that have burst open upon

Christ's dying:

Dede men for that dene come out of depe graves,  
And tolde why that tempeste so longe tyme durede.  
'For a bitter bataille,' the dede body seide;  
'Lif and Deeth in this derknesse, hir oon fofooth hir oother.  
Shal no wight wite witterly who shal have the maistrie  
Er Sonday aboute sonne-risyng' – and sank with that til erthe.  
(18.62-67)

Giving the dead a voice, Langland gestures at the generative potential of this life in literary history, a literary history in which he is participating, but also at the reproductive penchant of the form, the genre itself. Lives are spawned, and in this case, the figure of Life, "Lif" springs up, maybe even from the earth itself, in the throng crowding the base of the cross.

Most importantly, though, Lif is not theological in Langland's scenario. Although it certainly has a relationship with the divine and seems to be on Jesus' side, Lif is not a force that comes from Christ or from a heavenly place or even an earthy mire. Langland here confirms that sacred biographies have the capacity to explore the life force, its shapes, its agency, its effects, and its countereffects and goes so far as to give life a say, albeit secondhand, in its own story.

Lif here is not even especially biological either, if we assume that this figure is like most of the others in the poem which never quite constitute living entities. In the fifteenth-century poem, "Death and

Liffe,” an alliterative sequel to Langland’s never-realized encounter, Liffe looks like a woman, but conspicuously exceeds human vitality. Liffe is bursting with animate radiance: “Shee was brighter of her blee then was the bright sonn,/her rudd redder then the rose that on the rise hangeth...fflowers fflourished in the frith where she fforth stepedd,/ & the grasse that was gray greened beliue”<sup>1</sup>. This is not a person, not a figure who lives a life, but rather an attempt to conceive the life principle itself. Langland’s Lif and the later poem it inspires reveal the medieval tolerance for such ontological configurations and suggest that the matter of life in medieval thought and medieval literary practice is far from settled.

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<sup>1</sup> James Holly Hanford, and John Marcellus Steadman, Jr. “Death and Liffe: An Alliterative Poem,” *Studies in Philology*, 15.3 (1918): 263, ll. 65-66, 72-73.

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